Global Internet censorship

Which countries censor the Internet, and to what extent?

July 19, 2017

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Key trends in global Internet censorship

Geopolitical Internet filtering
In Middle Eastern and North African (MENA) countries, filtering of content relating to geopolitical conflict has increased. Tensions that have caused this include regional rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran, armed conflict in Syria and Yemen, and conflict involving Hezbollah and the Muslim Brotherhood.

Censorship of social media
Content providers who are targeted by censors tend to move to – and depend on – social media, instead of specialized websites. Hence, social media censorship peaked globally in 2016, with 24 governments censoring or cutting off access to social media.

Increased faith-based filtering
MENA countries have increased faith-based Internet filtering, particularly as a tactic to suppress certain sectarian groups. Given the overlap between political and religious sectarianism in the region, faith-based filtering often overlaps with political filtering.

Internet filtering increasing globally
Egypt, Russia and Malaysia have begun Internet filtering since 2012, and other countries and regions – including MENA – have increased the depth and scope of their filtering tactics.

Growing government influence on online public discourse
State actors are increasingly engaging in discussion online, promoting their own contributions or agreeable content, but blocking disagreeable content. Some states achieve this by threatening citizens who generate oppositional information.

Commercialization of surveillance tools
Globally, the use of surveillance malware to track activists, dissidents and journalists has risen. Additionally, experts argue that 'lawful' spyware – now used in many countries with human rights violations – has a high potential for misuse.

Increased use of HTTPS
Websites' use of HTTPS, a secure version of HTTP that encrypts communication between a browser and a website, has been on the rise. Because HTTPS can make selective filtering impossible, censors must either block an entire website or allow all content on said website.

Diverse means of censorship
Beyond filtering, many methods are used to control information flows, including law enforcement, court orders for Internet information removal and Internet shutdowns/disruptions.

Major categories of censorship

Social content
Social content filtering/blocking usually focuses on topics that challenge a country's societal norms, such as pornography, gambling, alcohol, LGBTQ content and online dating. Pornography and gambling sites have been blocked by the most countries.
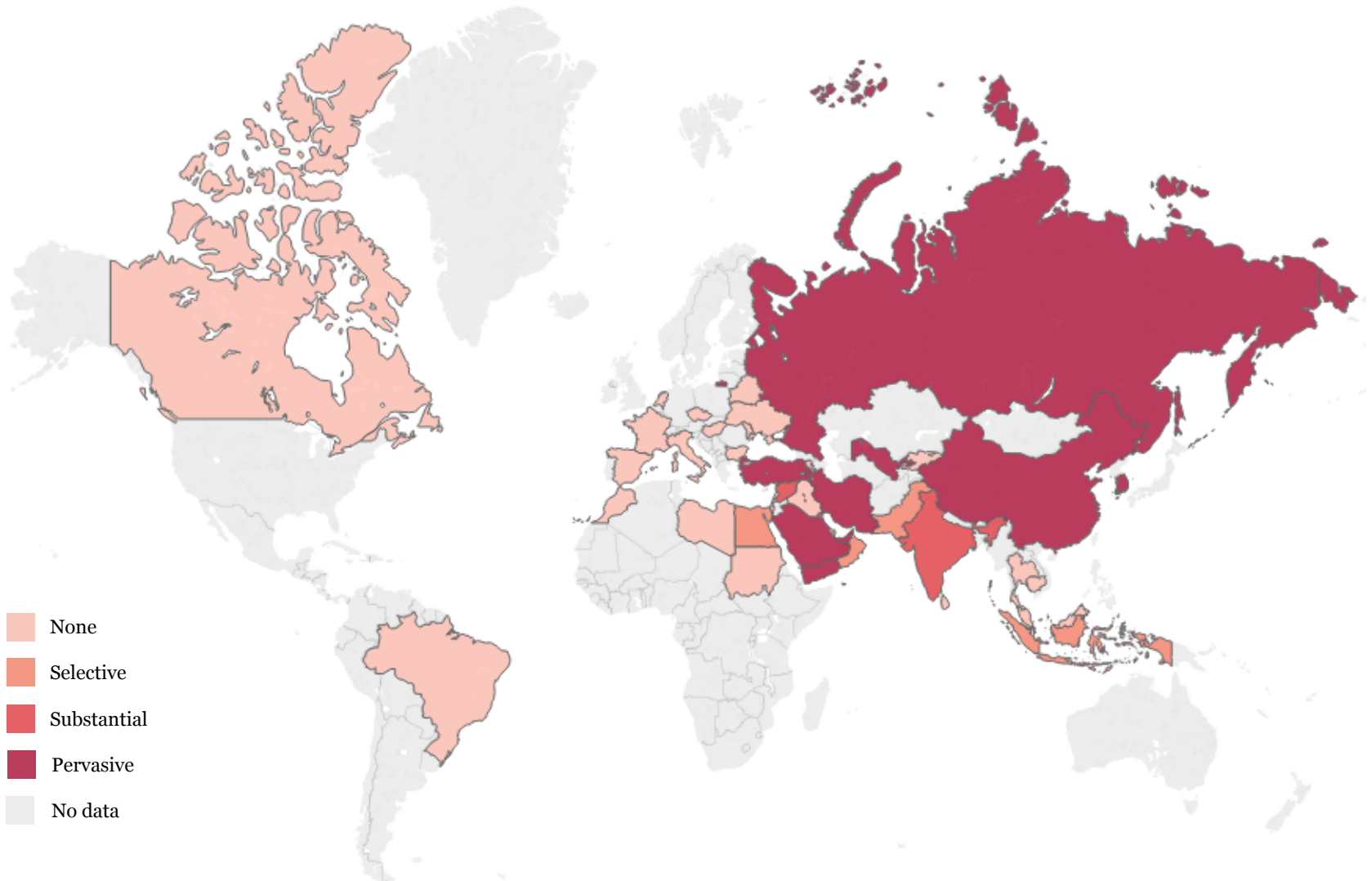
Political content
Political content includes categories like news, human rights, religion, freedom of expression and environmental controversy. With only two exceptions, all countries that exhibited Internet censorship "[blocked] political content to some degree."

Conflict and security
This content includes websites that cover armed conflicts, insurgent activity and extremist content. Iran pervasively blocks content in this category relating to Iranian Kurds, for example.
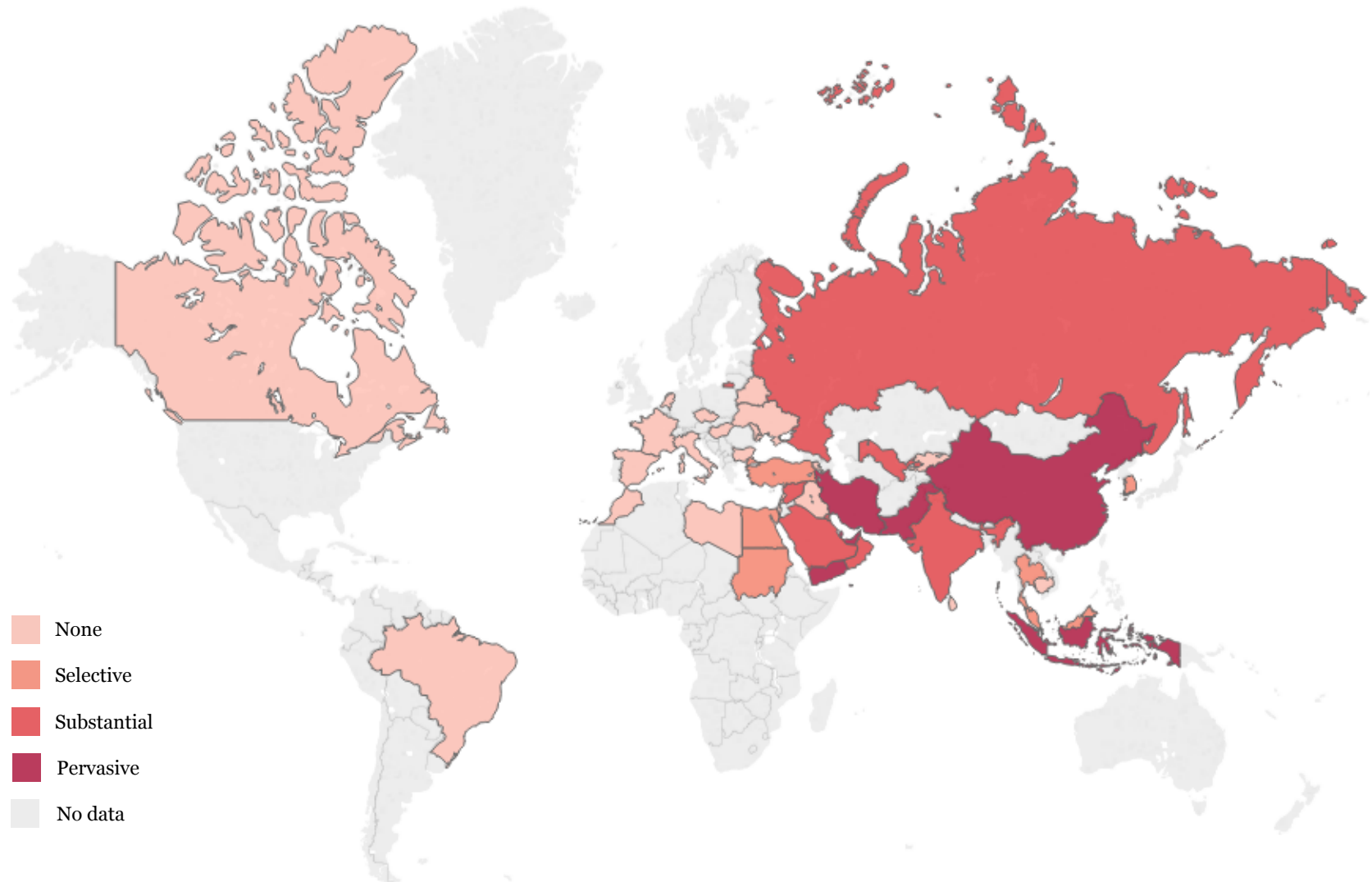
Internet tools
Internet tools include anonymizing software, censorship intervention software, social media platforms, and streaming/P2P file-sharing websites. Government filtering of this content has increased in the last several years.

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Censorship of conflict and security content

None

Selective

Substantial

Pervasive

No data

Censorship of Internet tools
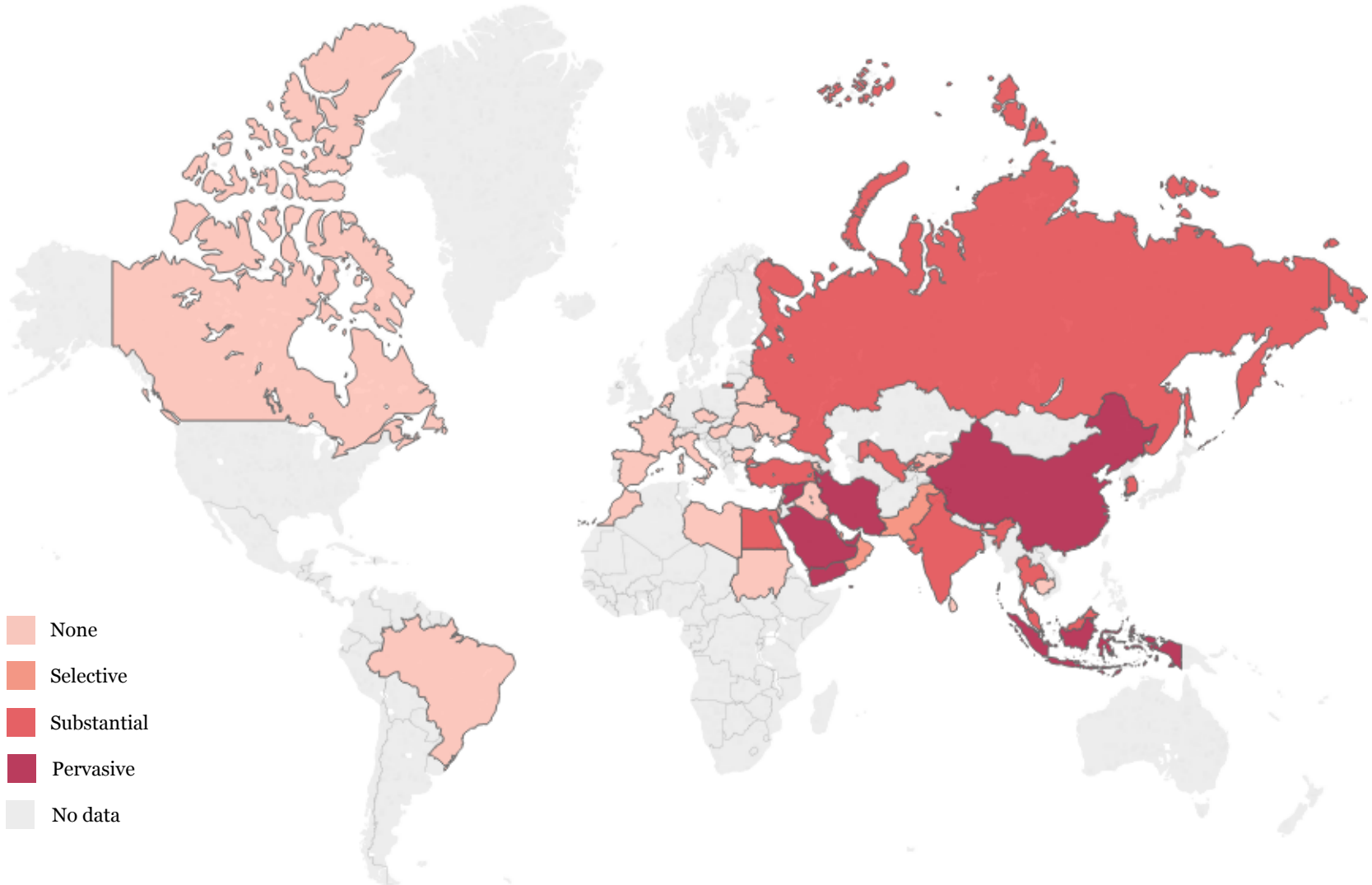

None

Selective

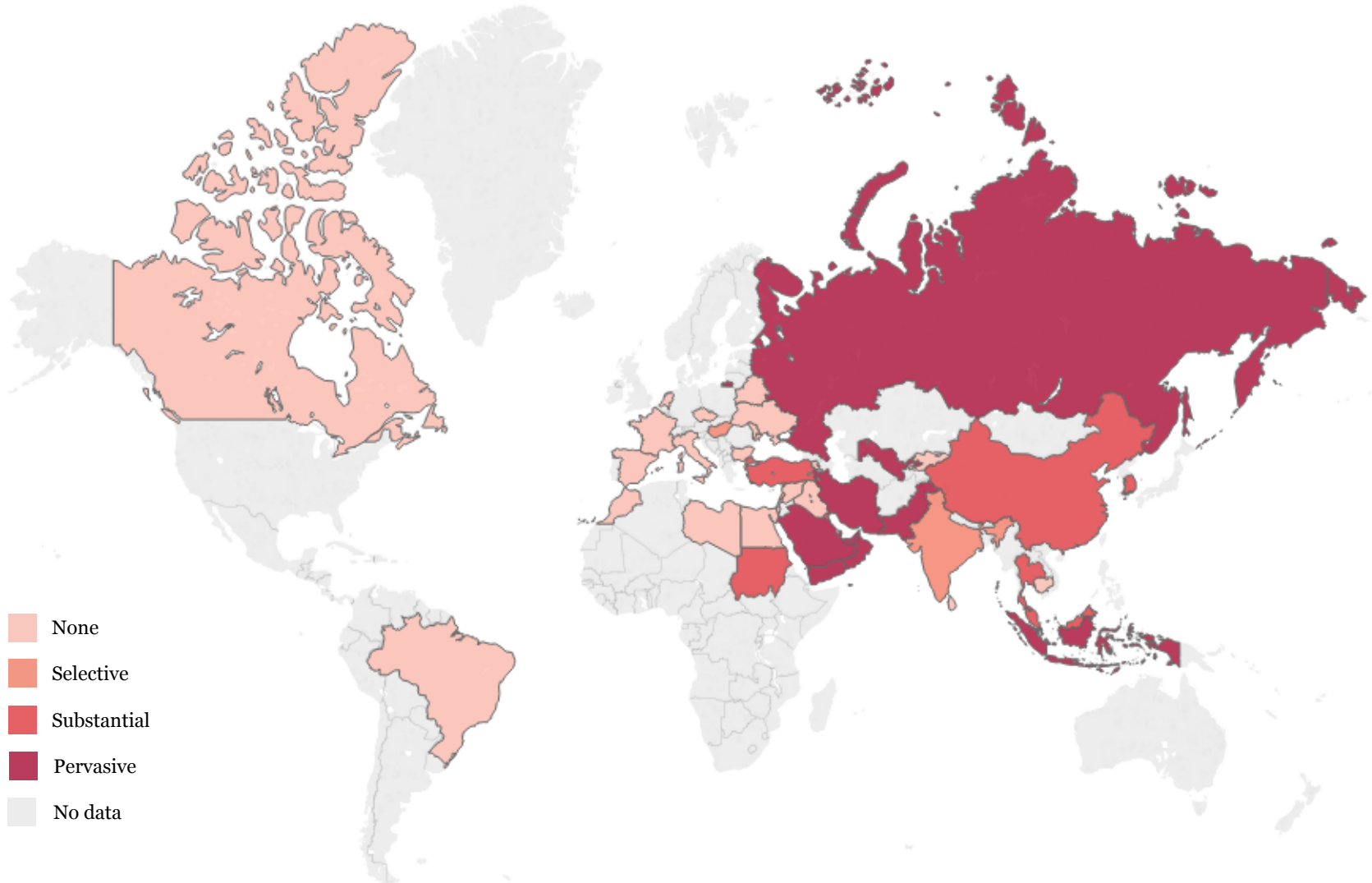Substantial

Pervasive

No data

Sources: Justin Clark et al., "The Shifting Landscape of Global Internet Censorship, Harvard Berkman Klein Center, June 29, 2017.

Censorship of political content

None

Selective

Substantial

Pervasive

No data

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Censorship of social content

None

Selective

Substantial

Pervasive

No data

Sources: Justin Clark et al., "The Shifting Landscape of Global Internet Censorship, Harvard Berkman Klein Center, June 29, 2017.