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YouTube Banned by a Far East Court

By Alexandra Odynova

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A Far East court has banned YouTube and four other web sites for “extremist” content in a ruling that promises to raise new worries about free speech.

The Internet is widely recognized as the last uncensored media in Russia, and the ruling nudges the country toward the likes of Iran and Pakistan, which have blocked YouTube.

Incidentally, the court's decision also bans videos by President Dmitry Medvedev.

The Komsomolsk-on-Amur City Court said Rosnet, a Khabarovsk region Internet provider, must block three online libraries — Lib.rus.ec, Thelib.ru and Zhurnal.ru — as well as YouTube.com and Web.archive.org, which stores archived copies of old and deleted web pages.

YouTube.com was banned for the nationalist video "Russia to Russians," which was ruled extremist by a Samara court in November and subsequently placed on the Justice Ministry's federal list of banned extremist materials.

The other four sites contained Adolf Hitler's "Mein Kampf," blacklisted by an Ufa court in March.

Once added to a list of extremist materials, a book or video can only be removed by another court ruling. The list, first published in July 2007, has since swelled from an initial 14 items to 686.

Judge Anna Aizenberg passed her verdict on YouTube on July 16, but the decision was only made public on Wednesday, when Rosnet filed an appeal.

The provider said it has proposed several ways to filter the illegal content without blocking access to the entire web sites, but the court has ignored all alternatives.

"Not a single one of our employees supports or condones extremism," Rosnet said in a statement that also pointed out inconsistencies in the ruling.

YouTube's parent company, Google, denounced the ruling as unconstitutional. "In our opinion, the court's decision ... to limit access of Rosnet users to the whole YouTube.com site, not to a particular video, breaches the right for freedom of information, guaranteed by Article 29 of Russia's Constitution," Google spokeswoman Alla Zabrovskaya said in an e-mailed statement.

YouTube can remove illegal videos after a simple request is submitted to its moderator, she added.

The company is not going to appeal but will follow the case, Zabrovskaya said.

Russia's courts have banned web sites in the past, but this is the first time that a prominent foreign site such as YouTube has come under fire.

In April 2009, a Cherepovets city court in the Volgograd region banned the Samizdat online magazine, which hosts oeuvres by thousands of authors, including Alexander Pushkin, because writings by one of them were ruled extremist for criticizing the city's main employer, Severstal.

Earlier this year, YouTube was blocked in Pakistan because some users tried to upload Facebook images of the Prophet Mohammed.

Other countries that have blocked YouTube are China, Libya, Morocco, Turkey and Iran, with only the latter two retaining the ban at present.

Russians are increasingly using YouTube to post video appeals to Medvedev and Prime Minister Vladimir Putin about official corruption.

Medvedev is no stranger to YouTube himself, having launched his own channel on the site. The Komsomolsk-on-Amur's court ruling did not comment on the fact that its decision puts a ban on the president's videos along with the nationalist one.

The Kremlin had no immediate comment about the ruling.

Despite a campaign by Medvedev to promote Internet literacy among officials, many of them remain unfamiliar with the workings of the World Wide Web.

At the same time, extremism charges are frequently seen as a tool used by authorities to limit freedom of speech in Russia.

On July 12, two prominent Moscow art curators were sentenced to heavy fines for staging an art exhibit that angered radical Orthodox groups and the Russian Orthodox Church.

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