

State Looks to China for Tips on Internet

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The government is looking to the experience of other countries, including China, to "regulate" Internet use, though Moscow has no plans to broaden web censorship, a government spokesman said Saturday.

Weeks after hacker attacks temporarily closed down LiveJournal, the country's most popular blog site, a state tender calling for research into "foreign experience in regulating" the Internet has revived fears that authorities plan to clamp down on Internet freedoms ahead of the 2012 presidential election.

Dmitry Peskov, a spokesman for Prime Minister Vladimir Putin, said the tender was in no way an indication that Moscow wanted insight into Internet censorship.

"It is enough to look at those resources that exist in the Russian Internet to see that there is no censorship there," he said.

Peskov said researchers would study best practices in Internet regulation of other countries, including China.

In a country where much media is state-run, the Internet is one of the last bastions of free speech. Bloggers freely criticize authorities, often scathingly, question high-level corruption and swap information.

After a senior official with the Federal Security Service said earlier this month that uncontrolled use of Skype, Gmail and Hotmail was a "security threat," Internet users feared that "regulation" may lead to tightening of freedoms on the web.

"They're trying in their own way, of course boneheadedly, to tighten the screws," an Internet user under the name Alekc75 wrote about the government tender.

Security analysts say cyber attacks this month on LiveJournal could be a test drive for closing down web sites, in particular social networking sites, in case of demonstrations ahead of next year's presidential election.

The Internet has played a crucial role in the unrest that has rocked the Arab world, prompting some governments to shut it down.

In an interview with the Wall Street Journal in February, Deputy Prime Minister Igor Sechin said Google was responsible for uprisings that helped unseat Egyptian leader Hosni Mubarak.

Ilya Ponomaryov, a member of the State Duma's Information Committee, said Russia was in a very early stage in developing Internet regulation.

"Our Internet regulation is currently the most liberal in the world because we have none," Ponomaryov said.

He said lawmakers were now working on amending a series of laws to take into account the rapidly developing Internet.

The LiveJournal site was brought down by a denial of service attack — a tried and tested method of disrupting web sites by flooding their servers with requests.

Chechen separatists and the Georgian and Estonian governments have been high-profile victims of similar attacks in the past. Supporters of WikiLeaks also used this method to attack organizations that blocked support for WikiLeaks.

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