

Watchdog Says Internet Freedom Is Declining

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The  Moscow Times

Russia ranked "partly free" on Internet freedom in a new report by a U.S. rights watchdog, which predicted that the situation would deteriorate further in 2011, with bloggers and opposition web sites facing ever more attacks by hackers and authorities.

The report, [Freedom on the Net 2011](#), was released by Freedom House late Monday. This is the second such survey, with the first coming out in 2009.

Russia ranked 22nd among 37 countries examined in the report, behind Rwanda and ahead of Egypt. It went down three places compared with the previous rating.

At least 25 Russian bloggers were named suspects in criminal cases between January 2009 and May 2010, compared with seven between 2006 and 2008, the report said, adding that 11 bloggers were arrested.

Moreover, 16 blogs experienced denial-of-service attacks in the last two years, Freedom House said.

At least three Russian web sites were closed, two of them temporarily, on charges of hosting extremist materials. Several web sites critical of authorities also faced temporary blocking over "technical difficulties."

Regional blocking, where access to a web site is only closed in some regions of the country, remains another popular method of cracking down on Internet freedoms, the report said.

Perhaps the most high profile case of regional blocking was a ban on YouTube ordered last July by a local court in the far eastern city of Komsomolsk-on-Amur, which cited uploaded extremist videos as the reason. The ruling was later overturned on the appeal of an Internet service provider. In a separate case, an Ingush court ordered in July a ban on LiveJournal.com, the country's most popular blogging platform, for "promoting extremism."

The report said a number of Russian opposition web sites had to relocate to foreign hosting providers or transform into groups at social networking sites as a result of pressure from police and prosecutors, who routinely call site owners demanding that they remove unwanted material.

Authorities also hire people to flood online political discussions with pro-government comments, the report said.

"Greater efforts to increase government influence over the Internet are anticipated as the country prepares for parliamentary elections in December 2011 and a presidential election in early 2012," the report said.

Officials did not comment on the report Tuesday, but the ruling United Russia party issued a statement dismissing the report.

Opposition blogger Marina Litvinovich also questioned the findings. "The Internet is the only free [media] platform in Russia at the moment," she [told](#) Gazeta.ru. "I don't see any big changes lately. There's freedom on the net."

Estonia, the United States and Germany ranked as the three countries with the most Internet freedom in the survey, while Cuba, Myanmar and Iran showed the least.

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