

Top Cop Calls for Limits on Internet

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Interior Minister Rashid Nurgaliyev on Tuesday called for limits on the Internet to prevent a slide in traditional cultural values among young people, raising fears of controls over the vibrant Russian-language web.

Many of the country's 53 million web users fear that hard-liners around Prime Minister Vladimir Putin would like to impose Chinese-style limits on the Internet to stave off any potential Arab Spring-like unrest ahead of the presidential election.

Russia's iPad-wielding president, Dmitry Medvedev, has ruled out draconian controls while suggesting a discussion of how to deal with clearly illegal content such as child pornography.

Nurgaliyev is the most senior official to publicly propose limits for cultural reasons.

"It is necessary to work out a set of measures for limiting the activities of certain Internet resources without encroaching on the free exchange of information," Itar-Tass quoted him as telling an interministerial meeting on fighting extremism.

Nurgaliyev, who did not indicate which sites he felt should be curbed, said Russia's youth

needed looking after to prevent them from being corrupted by "lopsided" ideas, especially in music, that may undermine traditional values.

"It seems to me that the time has long been ripe to carry out monitoring in the country to find out what they are listening to, what they are reading, what they are watching," he was quoted as saying of Russia's youth.

"They have forgotten the love songs of old, the waltzes, everything that united us, our background and our roots," the 54-year-old former KGB officer said.

Nurgaliyev's lament echoes a wider perception among older Russians that morals have slipped in the two decades since the 1991 fall of the Soviet Union, but his call provoked ridicule and concern in the vibrant Russian blogosphere.

"Well, what can I say? I am not even going to say this is completely absurd," prominent blogger Alexei Nikitin wrote on LiveJournal. "Sirs, idiocy is taking over the country."

Andrei Makarevich, leader of the soft-rock legends Mashina Vremeni, or Time Machine, told NTV television that Nurgaliyev's comments were so confusing he could not find words to describe them.

But intelligence expert Andrei Soldatov said Nurgaliyev's comments camouflaged a wider drive by law enforcement forces to establish intrusive monitoring of the Internet.

"Nurgaliyev ... wants to use budget funds to set up a system to monitor the Internet," said Soldatov, head of the think tank Agentura.ru. "The fact that Russian law enforcement forces have begun actively working with companies to exchange information in this sphere is turning the concept of 'privacy' into a complete illusion."

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 without fear of censorship.

The Internet has played a crucial role in the unrest that has rocked North Africa and the Middle East, prompting some governments to tighten controls over access.

Such turmoil is unlikely in the near future in Russia, but some hard-liners appear keen to ensure that they could limit content on the Internet in the event of unrest.

A senior officer in Russia's Federal Security Service, the main successor to the Soviet-era KGB, said in April that uncontrolled use of Gmail, Hotmail and Skype was "a major threat to national security" and called for access to the encrypted communication providers.

Western diplomats told Reuters that a series of cyber attacks on prominent hosting web sites in recent months — including Medvedev's own blog — had all the hallmarks of a highly organized, well-financed hacker attack.

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