

Bowing to Protests, Government Mulls Delaying Internet Bill

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After an outcry from Wikipedia, opposition leaders and even state-controlled NTV television, the government on Tuesday mulled delaying a vote on a bill that would restrict access to information on the Internet.

On Tuesday morning, Wikipedia's Russian-language page shut down for 24 hours to protest the bill, which had been scheduled to go before the State Duma for a key second reading later in the day.

Visitors to the Russian website of the free encyclopedia were greeted by a statement warning that the bill would lead to a Russian analogue of the "great Chinese firewall," a reference to Chinese authorities' practice of filtering online content, including international search engines.

"These amendments could become the basis for real censorship on the Internet, as well as the formation of a list of banned sites and IP addresses with filtered information," the statement said.

The United Russia authors of the bill, a copy of which is accessible on the Duma website, say it aims to block sites that promote pornography, drug use and self-harm among minors.

But opposition leaders and media outlets, including NTV and private station Ren-TV, voiced concern Tuesday that the bill's prescriptions could have wider implications.

"The bill contains a large number of contradictions and extremely subjective statements," Eduard Sagalayev, president of the National Association of TV and Radio Broadcasters, wrote in an open letter to Duma Speaker Sergei Naryshkin, which NTV, Ren-TV and others helped draft.

Sagalayev said in the letter, published on Ekho Moskvy's website, that the bill could prohibit children from watching patriotic movies, including films set in wartime.

Opposition figure Alexei Navalny praised Wikipedia on his LiveJournal blog, calling the bill the latest Kremlin move in its "ideological warfare on the Internet."

Government officials responded to the criticism by announcing that they would consider postponing hearings on the bill until the Duma's fall session — and that only slight corrections were necessary.

"I'm sure that this bill will be passed, that by the second reading it will be possible to eliminate the few controversial elements," Press and Communications Minister Nikolai Nikoforov said on Twitter, adding that the bill would be approved by Nov. 1.

"I don't support Wiki. ... But this step is an important reaction from society, a sign that we must perfect the bill," he said.

Tuesday's blackout is not the first time Wikipedia has staged strikes over legislation that threatened to block or restrict online content.

In January, founder Jimmy Wales took the U.S. version of the site offline to demonstrate against the Stop Online Piracy Act, which sought to expand law enforcement's powers to combat copyright piracy and the sale of counterfeit goods.

The same month, the House Judiciary Committee suspended all hearings on the bill.

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