

Russia Tests Global Internet Rules

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The ITU's Dubai conference comes at a time when Internet governance and freedom of speech are being widely discussed in the media.

Although [Russian proposals](#) on Internet regulation ahead of Monday's opening of the International Telecommunication Union conference in Dubai have worried anti-censorship watchdogs around the globe, some local experts aren't expecting any significant changes to the U.S.-centric system that administers the technical aspects of the World Wide Web.

"There won't be anything earth-shattering," said Andrei Kolesnikov, director of the Coordination Center for National Domain Names, the organization that administers Russian domain endings .ru and *****.рф*****.

For months, proponents of the current system for developing and managing the parts of website addresses that come after the dot have waged a campaign against what they view as attempts by Russia, Middle Eastern countries and others to diminish the control of the U.S.-based Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers, or [ICANN](#), and hand more powers to the [ITU](#), a United Nations agency.

Worries have been fueled by leaked proposals suggesting that the Russian delegation wants new ITU regulations to enshrine domestic control of Internet content and challenge ICANN influence. In a Nov. 13 document, for example, the delegation suggested that "member states shall have equal rights in the international allocation of Internet addressing and identification resources" — a model that could conflict with ICANN's public-private partnerships.

The control of website addresses, or domain names, is critical to Internet communications. Despite the seriousness of the matter, however, some Russian experts are not anticipating any changes to Internet governance to come out of the Dec. 3-14 [conference](#).

Instead, they believe that officials will leave the session in Dubai without making major alterations because of U.S. clout given the Americans' historical role in developing the Internet, intransigence on the part of the United States, European countries and other developed nations, or just plain old red tape.

The absence of changes will be "due to the organizational and bureaucratic processes" at the ITU, Kolesnikov said. His nonprofit group is both an administrator under the ICANN umbrella and a member of Geneva-based ITU.

He compared the ITU to its parent organization. "It's like the United Nations. ... In reality, it has no impact on real life, but it's good that the people get together," he said in a telephone interview.

Because the ITU makes decisions by consensus of all members — and because nearly 200 countries will be sending delegations of officials and technical experts to Dubai — Kolesnikov foresees little movement in Internet regulations. The ITU's top management "will try to avoid as much as possible" any form of conflict, he said.

In fact, the head of the ITU has touted the agency's consensus approach in interviews ahead of the conference.

"We never vote because voting means winners and losers and you can't afford that," ITU Secretary-General Hamadoun Toure told the BBC this summer. He repeated that comment in a recent interview with Reuters.

Toure — a Mali national who earned his master's and Ph.D. degrees at Russian universities and worked at satellite giant Intelsat — [told the BBC](#) that "whatever one single country does not accept will not pass."

What's more, because the oversight documents up for revision at the conference — known as the International Telecommunications Regulations or ITRs — contain treaty-level provisions, any changes to the current ITRs could require country-level approval before entering into force.

That is another reason that observers doubt that the United States would accede to any major changes to the Internet regulations currently handled by ICANN, which operates under the aegis of the U.S. Department of Commerce.

Karen Kazaryan, chief analyst for the nonprofit technology partnership Russian Electronic

Communications Association, said the Dubai conference wouldn't yield any significant changes in Internet governance. This will be due to the influence of the European Union, the United States and various Internet companies that also oppose changes to the current Web environment, he said.

Yet, Russian officials and companies have serious gripes about ICANN. One is the "influence of American authorities on" ICANN, which is set up as a global umbrella group for government officials, nonprofits, registries, companies and other Internet players in what is called a "multi-stakeholder" approach.

"There have been plenty of uproars" over the involvement of U.S. officials in ICANN affairs, Kazaryan said.

"This isn't just a Russian position," he added, noting that Internet observers in other countries have also disagreed with instances of what they call U.S. over-involvement.

In one of the most infamous examples, [in 2005](#), as ICANN was close to launching the .xxx domain name for pornography providers, the U.S. Department of Commerce sent a letter to top officials at ICANN, which in turn delayed the rollout.

Some Internet industry players have raised concerns about ICANN's large-scale increase in website endings through its initiative earlier this year to provide, at cost, [tailored domain names](#) such as .music.

Yet concerns that Russian and other delegations will use the conference to introduce Web censorship worldwide are unfounded, said Kolesnikov, whose organization is sending two people to Dubai and will be part of the Russian delegation there.

"ITU has nothing to do with blocking Internet resources," he said. Individual countries already are capable of blocking, shutting down and censoring Internet resources, Kolesnikov added. "Governments are fully empowered to do it right now," he said.

Since Nov. 1, when an Internet restriction law went into effect, Russia's Communications and Press Ministry has been empowered to force website owners, website-hosting companies and Internet service providers to remove and block content for domestic users. A court order isn't required; various government agencies can blacklist Web pages and websites if they violate child protection measures in the law or otherwise violate laws on illicit material.

In spite of the predictions, proposals and hype, the conference's outcome is still a question mark. Critical to issues of Internet censorship will be the debates on Article 7 in the ITRs, which governs the suspension of telecommunications services when they become "dangerous for national security, or contrary to national laws, public order or decency."

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