

Blockage of Major News Websites Raises Censorship Fears

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June 26, 2013

The  Moscow Times

A ruling by a court in the central Russian town of Ulyanovsk ordering a state-run Internet provider to block access to 15 websites, including those of two prominent national newspapers, has sparked fears of a broader campaign of Internet censorship in the country.

Two of the blocked websites, Gazeta.ru and Komsomolskaya Pravda, are among the top 10 news websites in Russia. The two media outlets said they had not been notified of the court hearings or the verdict — they learned about it from their readers — and therefore were unable to defend themselves.

Local prosecutors said in a statement Wednesday that the ruling was based on the presence on the websites of articles explaining the intricacies of giving a bribe in Russia and how to escape prosecution afterward.

Prosecutors emphasized that the court ruling had not ordered whole websites to be blocked

but only specific pages containing the illicit information. Internet provider Rostelecom made the decision to block the sites themselves, going beyond the court's instructions, they said.

Rostelecom, which is one of four Internet providers in Ulyanovsk, told Vedomosti that it blocked the entire websites because it did not have the technical capability to block specific pages and that the court ruling did not specify particular pages to target anyway.

Federal Mass Media Inspection Service spokesman Vladimir Pikov told the newspaper that his agency was surprised that the websites were blocked, since according to a recently enacted Internet censorship law, media outlets cannot be blocked.

In July of last year, President Vladimir Putin signed the censorship bill, which allows the federal government to set up a registry of blacklisted websites containing child pornography, content promoting drug use and extremism, and other resources ruled illegal in Russia.

While bribery is a criminal offense in Russia, it is not specifically mentioned in the bill.

"We expected this to happen," said Galina Arapova, director of the Center for Protection of Media Rights. "The legislation is so vague and lacks any technical regulation."

In their statement, prosecutors did not identify the web pages that they wanted blocked. Komsomolskaya Pravda said it found a sarcastic article titled "On How to Give and Receive Bribes in the Right Way" published more than a decade ago, while Gazeta.ru was unable to find the likely culprit.

"In my view, these prosecutors just wanted to show that they are working with the new legislation," Arapova said. "They were too lazy to do anything else but make a search for keywords, such as 'bribe' or 'corruption' and just block all the websites that the search yielded," she said.

The Internet censorship bill prompted fears from critics that it could be used to block opposition websites, and many analysts pointed out that criminals could easily transfer their content while bona fide resources could suffer due to subjective assessments by officials.

"This is just the beginning. We will soon see how many regions will start applying all instruments of the law while the government in Moscow asks them to report on the results," Arapova said.

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Original url:

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