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INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

State Censorship of Internet Activity on the Rise

By The Moscow Times

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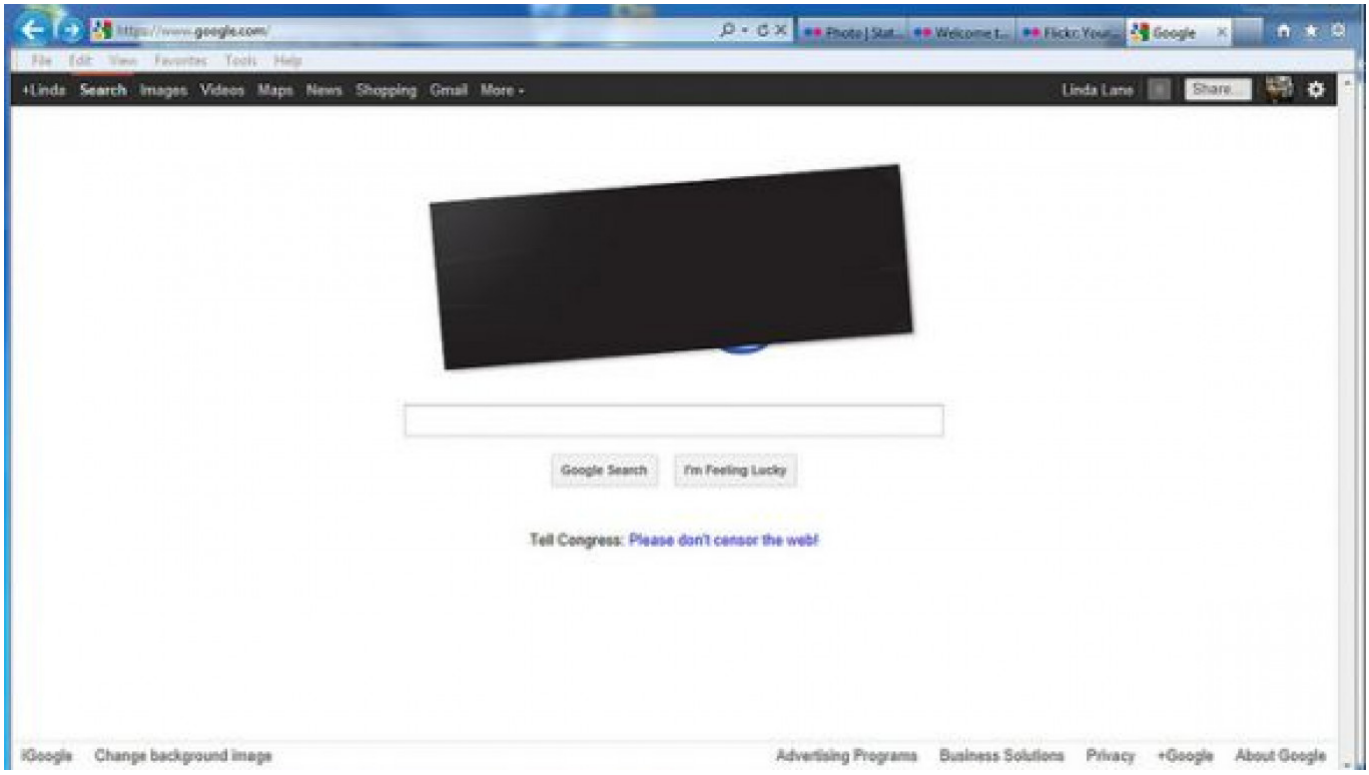

Russians are seeing their freedoms on the Internet increasingly restricted as it becomes more of a political battleground. **wonderlane**

While Russia saw access to the Internet grow and the Web take hold as a platform for political commentary and organization, state censorship of online content and prosecutions for online activity increased between 2012 and 2013, a report published Thursday found.

In its yearly "Freedom of the Net" ranking, independent watchdog Freedom Net concluded that the Russian Internet was "partly free," comparable to a number of Asian, African and South American countries.

Its score worsened by two points over the course of the year from 2012 to 2013, a move that largely reflected judicial reforms that have prompted blocking access to websites and entire IP addresses, which is "the most common means in Russia to restrict user activity on the Internet," the report said.

The number of websites blocked by the Justice Ministry under a 2002 law against "extremist" material rose 60 percent between January 2012 and February 2013, from 1,066 to 1,704.

The definition of "extremism," which has been criticized for its vagueness and includes "xenophobia" and "incitement of hatred towards a social group," has in several cases been used against critics of law enforcement and the ruling United Russia party.

Furthermore, "the Internet blacklist law" that went into effect Nov. 1, 2012 has given the Federal Mass Media Inspection Service the power to unilaterally determine whether online content is legal and block it without judicial oversight.

Extrajudicial pressure has also become more common with police and officials from the General Prosecutor's Office often calling website administrators with demands to remove content. Self-censorship has also risen due to administrators' fear of ending up on the poorly understood "blacklist."

Criminal prosecution for online activities increased as well, from 38 cases in 2011 to 103 cases in 2012, primarily with reference to the anti-extremism law.

The political opposition continued to employ social networking sites Vkontakte, Facebook, and Twitter to organize protests and spread information and opinions but faced constant state surveillance and pressure, especially in the regions beyond Moscow and St. Petersburg, the report said.

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