

Rostelecom to Launch Search Engine as Kremlin Expands its Clout on the Web

By [The Moscow Times](#)

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A state-run online search engine will finally be realized, though it is unlikely to pose any competition to established players. **Igor Tabakov**

State-controlled telecom operator Rostelecom plans to launch a new Internet search engine in what critics see as an effort to put a pro-Kremlin spin on search results, but experts doubt the \$20 million invested in the project so far will help it beat Google or Yandex.

The report comes as some observers accuse the Kremlin of introducing censorship on the Web by using a 2012 law ostensibly aimed at protecting children and an anti-piracy law passed in 2013.

The Sputnik search engine, to be hosted at the sputnik.ru domain, has been in active development for at least a year and a half and is expected to take off in early 2014, Vedomosti reported Friday, citing employees of several Internet companies.

The engine was named after the world's first artificial satellite, which was launched by the Soviet Union in 1957. It will be promoted by the government and installed as a default tool at government agencies, the Internet firm employees said.

But Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev's spokeswoman Natalya Timakova said Thursday that the use of the search engine would be optional, and a source at Rostelecom insisted the engine would not filter out news reports that fail to toe the Kremlin's line.

Rostelecom is headhunting developers from Google and Russia's leading search engines, Yandex and Mail.ru, but Mail.ru Group vice president and technical director Vladimir Gabrielyan said he doubted it could compete with major market players.

"Rostelecom has no previous experience in Internet projects, and [a search engine] is a product that is very difficult to promote," he told Vedomosti.

The government, which already controls the major television channels and much of the printed press, has been nurturing plans for a state-run online search engine ever since 2008, when critical news reports on the war with Georgia featured prominently in search results.

In 2008 Kremlin-linked tycoon Alisher Usmanov was in talks on buying a stake in Yandex but the negotiations failed. However, in 2009 state-controlled Sberbank received a "golden share" in the search engine that gave it a right to block a sale of more than 25 percent in the company.

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