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# Internet Censorship Is Getting Worse

By Victor Davidoff

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Schoolchildren in the city of Krasnodar will not be able to watch a puppet theater performance of Mozart's opera "The Magic Flute" this year. Bureaucrats at the Federal Mass Media Inspection Service put an 18+ label on the show. The reason: In the opera, one of the heroines wants to kill herself.

Age restrictions on access to information, including Internet sites, have been in place for more than a year in the country. But until now they had not been applied to classical works of literature and art. Soon this might change. On Dec. 4, the Federal Mass Media Inspection Service presented a project called "The Concept of Informational Security for Children." Among its stipulations is a ban that would keep minors from watching on the Internet classical works of art that include images of the nude body in any form, and anything that might be considered erotic.

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ban list, from "Mein Kampf" to unregistered political parties and opposition blogs.

Censorship would also extend to works of literature in which the characters use alcohol and drugs or commit crimes, or in works where there are "statements destructive to the social institution of the family."

A more radical proposal in the project forbids "the depiction or description of mishaps, accidents or catastrophes" in television and radio news shows before 9 p.m. If this becomes law, daytime news shows will revert to the Soviet standard of "all day, all good news."

Teenage morality has become the idee fixe of lawmakers and bureaucrats for the last year or so. They passed a homophobic law forbidding "homosexual propaganda" supposedly to "protect children" and are using the same argument to step up censorship on the Internet.

Censorship on the Russian Internet has existed for a long time and is handled by several agencies: the Interior Ministry, the Federal Security Service, the Federal Drug Control Service and even the Federal Consumer Protection Service. These agencies draw up a list of sites to be blocked by the providers. These lists contain thousands of sites and pages.

A glance at the list of "extremist" materials on the Justice Ministry site shows that "care for children" is a smokescreen for politics. You can find just about anything on the list, from "Mein Kampf" and videos of Islamic fundamentalists to sites of the Jehovah's Witnesses, unregistered political parties and opposition blogs.

Among the banned blogs is a site that has a flyer written by Alexei Navalny calling the United Russia party "the party of crooks and thieves." The worsening relations with Ukraine also found reflection on the list. A number of books and historical sites documenting Ukrainians' battle for independence from Russia are now banned.

Various invented pretexts are used to block the sites of opposition bloggers. For example, in January, access was blocked to the posts of one of the country's most popular bloggers, Rustem Adagamov. The pretext was that he had reposted a Reuters' photograph of a Tibetan fighter for independence trying to set himself on fire. The censors classified the photo as "suicide propaganda."

St. Petersburg prosecutors tried to block access to the independent news site Gazeta.ru this summer. The pretext was an article in which the author described how bureaucrats extorted bribes. This was considered "propagandizing extortion." There has been a number of cases in the regions where, instead of blocking access to one page or video, the entire platform of YouTube or LiveJournal is blocked.

The State Duma is considering a draft law that would allow more sites to be blocked without a court order. This would be applied to Internet sites "calling for mass unrest or participation

in mass events conducted in violation of the established order." In normal language, this means that announcements of unsanctioned opposition rallies on social networks would be blocked.

All this shows that by method of trial and error, the authorities are trying to find a way to limit access on the Internet. But unfortunately for them, their attempts to block sites have not been particularly effective. Any schoolchild with just a basic knowledge of computers knows how to get around the bans using proxy servers or anonymizer Internet tools.

The only method that would truly close down access to sites the authorities don't like is to close down the Internet altogether. That's what Egypt under then-President Hosni Mubarak tried to do during the Arab Spring. The results were economic disaster.

As the blogger Arseny Bobrovsky wrote in the Russian Forbes: "You cannot solve the problem of protests by dropping a nuclear bomb on Moscow. Of course, you would destroy 65 percent of the city's inhabitants who were unhappy with Putin and United Russia. But at the same time you'd wipe out the 'beneficiaries' of the bombing. The same goes for controlling Internet content."

But in the Kremlin — like in Beijing, Bahrain and other places where authorities are trying to censor the Internet — they still don't understand that simple truth. The actions of Internet censors were best described by one of its founding fathers, Google vice president Vint Cerf: "These persistent attempts are just evidence that this breed of dinosaurs, with their pea-sized brains, hasn't figured out that they are dead yet because the signal hasn't traveled up their long necks."

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