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Duma Masks Internet Crackdown By Citing 'iPhone Pedophiles'

By Victor Davidoff

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How can you spot a pedophile? Just ask Russian Duma Deputy Yelena Mizulina. She knows: a pedophile always has an iPhone.

On July 2 Mizulina surprised many people when she called an iPhone a device used to commit depraved actions against children. Mizulina made the statement at a meeting of the Duma Committee on Family, Women and Children, a committee which she heads.

Mizulina has long been famous for her strange views on pedophilia, homosexuality and the Internet. For example, she said that the phrase "gays are people too" was "potentially extremist." After that statement, more than 100,000 people signed a petition sent to the State Duma requesting that Mizulina undergo a psychiatric examination.

But Duma deputies make so many strange statements that they've lost their ability to shock. Not long ago a group of deputies proposed the idea of a draft law officially banning high-heeled shoes. The authors of this draft law said they were concerned about women's health.

But bloggers circulated the humorous suggestion that they were simply trying to bring Russian legislation in line with fictional Lilliputian legislation, which, according to author Jonathan Swift, banned high-heeled shoes in court. To the relief of Russian women, the proposal did not make it to the stage of draft legislation.

On the other hand, on July 1 in Russia a ban on the sale of lace panties went into effect, which undoubtedly has made even the Iranian clergy writhe with envy.

However, in contrast with the strange ideas of other deputies, Mizulina's proposals have one special characteristic: sooner or later they always turn into laws. Her draft law banning "propaganda of homosexuality" also seemed outrageous at first, especially since it directly violates the Constitution. But, regardless of this fact, her proposal became law last summer, even though it deprives the LGBT community of public protection of their rights.

Given Mizulina's track record, the Russian blogosphere immediately became alarmed when she put forth a new idea for legislation. There's cause for concern. Mizulina's plan is for Internet-users in the Russian Federation to get a filtered version of the Internet by default. Mizulina calls this filtered version "clean Internet." Providers would use filters with automatic program algorithms to block sites.

All sources of public access to Internet — like mobile Internet and public Wi-Fi, as well as access in state organizations, libraries and schools — would only have Internet-lite available.

It's no secret that the "concern for children" that allegedly motivates Mizulina's projects is just a smokescreen for measures that bring state censorship to Internet. If the anti-pedophile language is eliminated from Mizulina's proposal, her idea is quite simple. She is proposing the Russian version of the Great Firewall of China, and the Russian version would be more advanced. The programs that filter Internet content in China only filter foreign sites, but in Russia the firewall would filter local sites, too.

Today in Russia there is already a multi-layered system of censorship on Internet. There is an official list of "extremist" sites which are blocked by court order. Right now there are more than 2,000 of them.

And then there is another list of blocked sites that is hidden from public view. These are sites blocked by the Federal Service for Supervision of Communications, Information Technology and Mass Media, or Roskomnadzor. These sites are banned without any court hearing or even any explanation. The oppositional news sites Grani.ru, Kasparov.ru and EJ.ru were blocked by decision of Roskomnadzor this spring.

Users report that this censorship also has "gray zones," in which a site may not be officially censored but is inaccessible all the same. This apparently depends on the provider. Bloggers and site owners are regularly accused of "extremism," which leads to self-censorship in an attempt to avoid legal action.

Starting on Aug. 1, popular bloggers will have to register with the state. This registration will not give them any new rights, but it will mean that they will have to observe many new requirements, like the obligation to "post only verified information."

And finally, the Duma isn't just concerned about high heels. Last week the legislature had the first reading of a draft law that would make "separatist statements" on the Internet a felony. In practice this will mean that posting the opinion, like "Crimea belongs to Ukraine" could land the poster five years in a prison camp.

It's hard to predict the consequences of Mizulina's proposal to create a "clean Internet." Theoretically, users will be able to submit an application filled out with their passport information to get full access to unfiltered Internet. But many people, especially educators and state officials, will have to think twice before submitting their applications. By showing interest in using unfiltered Internet, they would single themselves out as suspicious. After all, Mizulina and many other officials believe that Runet is dominated by forbidden and dangerous information.



One thing is for sure: if "clean Internet" becomes law, Russia will automatically become the world leader in Internet censorship, leaving both the Islamic countries and China in the dust.

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