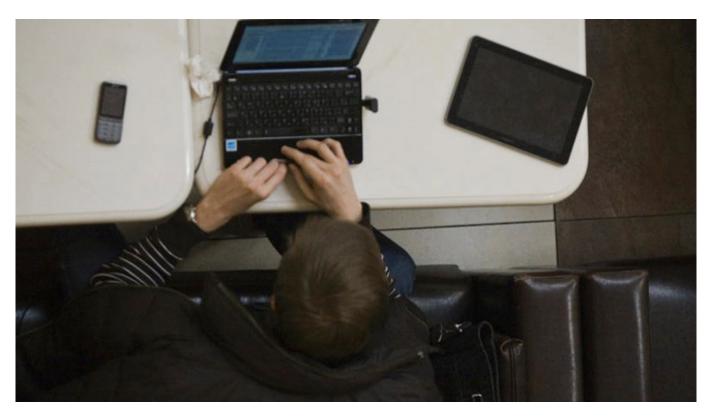# Russia Wants State Control of Root Internet Infrastructure

By [Alexey Eremenko](#)

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The state now has the power to blacklist websites without court order for a variety of reasons, including political ones.

Russia has mounted an effort in recent weeks to bring the root infrastructure of the Internet under control of state-affiliated bureaucracies, both internationally and at home.

The global push is likely to fizzle out, industry experts said — but at home, the plan has every chance of succeeding.

Backers of the Kremlin line say bigger state control of the Internet is mandatory for national security, hinting that the U.S. could disconnect Russia from the Web.

But critics say that Russia, which already censors the Internet, simply wants to expand its means of political censorship.

"Russia wants state control of the global network ... instead of public control," said Artem

Kozlyuk, a freedom of information activist with Rublacklist.net, an independent Internet freedom watchdog.

The latest wave-generating proposal came from Russian Communications and Mass Media Minister Nikolai Nikiforov, who urged the launch of a reform at the United Nations to give control of the Internet to national governments.

The move would prevent deliberate disconnections of national segments of the Internet, Nikiforov said earlier this week in South Korea at a session of the International Telecommunications Union, a UN body.

He identified the United States as a possible threat to other nations' Internet access, according to a transcript on the ministry's website.

## Government Domain

Nikiforov's proposal comes hot on the heels of the Kremlin's attempt to take over the domestic system of domain name assignment, currently overseen by the non-profit organization Coordination Center for TLD RU.

The government wants the Coordination Center's job transferred to a state agency, several prominent media outlets, including business daily Vedomosti, said last month.

The issue was discussed at the now-famous Security Council meeting of Oct. 1, when top Russian officials reportedly gathered to discuss the possibility of Russia's disconnection from the Internet.

Nikiforov said last month that it was only contingency planning in case Russia's Western opponents pull the plug, possibly as further sanctions for Moscow's annexation of Ukraine's Crimean Peninsula in March.

However, Kozlyuk of Rublacklist.net said that so far, most cases of a country going off the grid were the work of domestic governments trying to suppress dissent, such as — most famously — Egypt in 2011 during the Arab Spring.

The proposal for a takeover of the Coordination Center has been stalled, but the government could follow through with it at any time simply by pushing the group to amend its charter to recognize state superiority, said Ilya Massukh, head of the state-affiliated Information Democracy Foundation.

## ICANN vs. Autocrats

The key role in managing the global Internet is currently played by the Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers (ICANN), which oversees domain name assignment throughout the world.

ICANN is a California-based non-profit organization that operates under an agreement with the U.S. Department of Commerce.

The U.S. role in Internet policing has caused much grumbling in recent years as the Internet

has spread across the globe, and prompted calls to move to a so-called "multi-stakeholder governance model" that would give other players a greater say in managing the World Wide Web.

Russia had previously staged a campaign to give root control of the Internet to the UN at an earlier International Telecommunications Union conference in Dubai in 2012.

Its proposal gathered a handful of backers at the time — mostly authoritarian countries such as China, Iran, Sudan and Saudi Arabia — but was torpedoed by Western powers.

But this time, China withdrew its support, which makes Nikiforov's initiative even less likely to succeed, said Karen Kazaryan, chief analyst for the lobby group the Russian Association of Electronic Communications.

"China has a working censorship system, and it is not going to antagonize the world, and the other backers don't have enough geopolitical clout to push it through," Kazaryan said by telephone Wednesday.

Kozlyuk of Rublacklist.net claimed that Russia was courting European Parliament members for lobbying support. The claim could not be independently verified.

## RuNet Regulated

President Vladimir Putin famously pledged to leave the Internet alone at a meeting with industry representatives at his ascension to the Kremlin in 2000.

Free from state intervention, the Russian segment of the Internet — the RuNet — blossomed, now counting 58 million daily users in Russia, according to the state-run Public Opinion Foundation, and spawning highly successful companies such as Yandex and Mail.ru.

But things began to change in late 2011, when Russian netizens, many of them educated young urbanites, became the driving force of record anti-Putin protests.

Since then, the government has been so busy imposing new regulations that it is now routinely accused of building the "Great Russian Firewall" of censorship.

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Separate legislation ramps up state control over popular blogs and online news aggregators, making it easier to shut down any of them.

And another Kremlin-penned law under review in the State Duma would oblige most organizations handling the personal data of Russians — including the likes of Facebook, Twitter and Booking.com — to store them solely on Russia-based servers, easily accessible to secret services.

## Bureaucrats and Utopias

Russia is not unique in its push to give control of the Internet to traditional bureaucratic

structures, said Massukh, a former deputy communications minister.

The Internet is finally big enough for governments to take it seriously and consider possible online threats to national security, such as disruption of domestic banking systems, Massukh said.

He compared the push for state control of national segments of the Internet to the introduction of country calling codes, each of which is unique and sovereign to a specific country.

But Kozlyuk of Rublacklist.net argued that UN or state takeover of the Internet would really just boost information access restrictions by governments dominating fragmented shards of the World Wide Web.

"We need total decentralization of the Internet instead," he said.

"It's almost a utopia, but it is a bit more real with public rather than state control of the Net."

"There are a lot of problems with [the current structure of] the Internet, but handing it over to UN bureaucrats is definitely not a good solution," agreed analyst Kazaryan.

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