

Russia's Top Cop Wants Internet Censorship to Fight U.S. 'Info War'

By [Anastasia Bazenkova](#)

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Investigative Committee head Alexander Bastrykin

The head of Russia's Investigative Committee Alexander Bastrykin has proposed a range of measures to give a “strong, appropriate and balanced response” to the information war that he claims the U.S. and its allies are waging against Russia.

The measures — revealed by Bastrykin in his article published Monday in the *Kommersant Vlast* weekly — include imposing restrictions on the Internet as well as treating the non-recognition of a 2014 referendum in Crimea as extremism.

The proposals come as the hybrid war waged by the U.S. against Russia and a number of other countries, has turned into an open confrontation in recent years, according to Bastrykin.

Part of this war, according to Bastrykin, includes sanctions imposed on Russia by a number of Western countries, as well as some decisions made by international courts. He cited as an

example rulings concerning the ex-shareholders of the defunct oil firm Yukos and the killing of former Russian spy Alexander Litvinenko.

However, the most devastating aspect of this war has been the information war waged by the U.S., the head of the Investigative Committee said.

This, according to Bastrykin, has resulted in the growth of extremism in Russia.

Bastrykin said it would be useful for Russia to follow the example of China when it comes to Internet censorship, where there is a ban on the work of electronic media that are fully or partially owned by foreign residents.

Karen Kazaryan, chief analyst for the Russian Association of Electronic Communications is skeptical that Bastrykin's recommendations will ever be implemented.

Chinese-style Internet censorship is banned in Russia, so the introduction of a similar system would require large-scale changes to the country's legal system, which is very unlikely to happen, according to Kazaryan.

However, some experts believe that changing legislation has never been an obstacle for the Russian authorities.

If Bastrykin's recommendations are accepted, legislative changes can be made before the parliamentary elections in September, according to human rights lawyer Ivan Pavlov.

Pavlov considers Bastrykin's statements a direct attack on citizens' constitutional rights.

The fact that such statements are made by the head of the agency whose mission is to defend the law says a lot about the current state of the legal system in Russia, he said.

Meanwhile, foreign owners of media have already had their rights limited in Russia. Legislation that came into effect on Jan. 1, 2016 barred foreign investors from owning more than a 20 percent stake in Russian media outlets. The move caused the withdrawal of a number of prominent publishers from the Russian market.

Bastrykin's proposals would lead to a number of electronic news outlets being closed in Russia if implemented, according to prominent blogger Anton Nosik.

Nosik believes that Bastrykin's proposals have two possible aims. His statements may be intended to check how Russian society reacts to such suggestions or may be the beginning of a campaign to implement these restrictions.

Bastrykin also recommended that the law "on countering extremist activity" be expanded to consider extremist the non-recognition of a referendum held in Crimea in early 2014.

A referendum on the disputed peninsula showed that more than 95 percent of Crimeans supported the annexation of the region by Russia, but the results have not been recognized by the majority of the international community.

According to the head of the Investigative Committee, denial of the results of the referendum

is a “falsification of Russian history” and the introduction of criminal responsibility will help undermine any attempts to form anti-Russian sentiments on the peninsula.

However, according to Pavel Chikov, head of the Russian human rights group Agora, Bastrykin's initiative will not affect the number of extremism cases in Russia.

The number of such cases has been growing over the past 7-8 years and this trend will remain stable with or without Bastrykin's proposals, he said.

Non-recognition of the Crimean referendum is considered a call for separatism, which was already made a punishable offense in 2014, he said.

Contact the author at a.bazenkova@imedia.ru

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