

Telecoms Band Together to Sponsor Online 'Cybermilitia'

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Four telecom giants have banded together with the government's support to sponsor a "cybermilitia" seeking to combat child pornography and promotion of extremism, violence and drugs.

The group declared no political goals, but vague wording about fighting "negative content" has prompted skeptics to warn that the new project can result in the establishment of a system of censorship similar to the one existing in China.

The League for Safe Internet is formed by Mobile TeleSystems, VimpelCom, MegaFon and Rostelecom, chairman of the group's management board, Konstantin Malofeyev, told The Moscow Times on Monday.

The companies want to fulfill their "social responsibility," Malofeyev, who also sits on Rostelecom's board, said by telephone.

Communications and Press Minister Igor Shchyogolev will head the league's board of trustees, which will oversee how nongovernmental organizations manage grants they receive from the group.

Speaking at a news conference in Moscow on Monday, Shchyogolev called on volunteers to monitor and report illegal online content, state television Vesti [reported](#).

Another member of the trustees' board, children's ombudsman Pavel Astakhov, said at the conference that Internet users should exercise self-censorship by not posting "negative," "disgusting," "extremist" or "dangerous" information online.

"Children draw on [such content] from the Internet uncontrollably and can use it to harm themselves and other people," he said.

Child pornography will be the sole focus of the league this year, but it plans to take on other issues later, Malofeyev said.

"If we succeed in this, we can move on," he said, without elaborating.

Malofeyev refused to specify the group's budget, but said nongovernmental organizations and law enforcement agencies fighting Internet crime are often underfunded.

Prominent journalist and blogger Maxim Kononenko [said](#) on his show on Vesti FM radio Monday that Malofeyev may create a "mechanism to declare some content extremist, or promoting violence or drugs."

The mechanism may later be sold to "someone who might want to buy it ahead of [December] parliamentary elections," Kononenko said, without identifying possible purchasers.

Internet guru Anton Nosik said a "cybermilitia" is already active in China, where volunteers screen web sites for content to report to police, Gazeta.ru [reported](#) Friday.

But representatives of existing online watchdogs welcomed the new group.

"All our projects are rather costly," Yevgeny Beshpalov, head of the Friendly Runet Foundation, told The Moscow Times by telephone.

He said he has accepted an offer to sit on the league's supervisory board, though the appointment was not confirmed as of late Monday.

"Our organization, which has little funding, can't inform many people about threats of the Internet," said Mark Tverdnyin, who chairs the board at the Russian Public Center for Internet Technology.

The Friendly Runet Foundation has on its web [site](#) a telephone hotline for reporting crimes on the Internet and it forwards the information to the Interior Ministry.

The service is in demand, as independent watchdogs received 14,000 complaints about illegal

online content last year, said the head of the Safer Internet Center, Urvan Parvfentyev, Gazeta.ru reported.

An unidentified police representative said only a small portion of calls results in criminal cases being opened, the report said.

The League for Safe Internet's supervisory board, which will distribute the grants, is headed by Alexei Soldatov, an ex-communications and press minister and a founding father of the Russian segment of the Internet.

The board of trustees also includes chief of the Mail.ru service and president of the business lobby group Delovaya Rossia, as well as representatives of the four sponsor companies, federal legislators and senior government officials.

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