

Russia Leads Battle for Internet Control at ITU Conference

By [The Moscow Times](#)

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A Russia-led proposal calling for sweeping new governmental powers to regulate cyberspace could enable countries to block Web content and wrest control of allotment of Internet addresses from a U.S.-based body.

The proposal, co-signed by China, Saudi Arabia, Algeria, Sudan and the United Arab Emirates, added to fears in some Western countries of a stalemate midway through a 12-day conference in Dubai to rewrite a long-standing treaty on international communications.

Russia and its supporters, which include many African and Arab states, seek to formally extend the purview of the International Telecommunication Union to govern many aspects of the Internet.

The United States, Europe and other allies, including Japan, insist that the treaty should continue to apply only to traditional telecommunications, such as international landline

and wireless calls.

Countries can opt out of parts of the revised treaty when it emerges or refuse to sign it altogether.

"If we have no agreement, it will create political tension around the Internet," said Markus Kummer, vice president for public policy at industry think tank The Internet Society.

A leaked draft of the Russia-led proposals would give countries "equal rights to manage the Internet including in regard to the allotment, assignment and reclamation of Internet numbering."

This could allow governments to render websites within their borders inaccessible, even via proxy servers or other countries. It also could allow for multinational pacts in which countries could terminate access to websites at one another's request.

Such moves would undermine ICANN, a self-governing nonprofit organization under contract with the U.S. Department of Commerce, which is ultimately responsible for making sure that people trying to reach a given website actually get there.

"The reason some countries want to create national control over addresses is so they can have another point of control," said Rod Beckstrom, until recently chief executive of ICANN, which runs the addressing system now.

Decentralizing the process could prove chaotic if many countries demand that companies use only their national system, he said.

Beyond Web locations and addresses, the Russia-led coalition's document says ITU member states should be able to control other elements of the Internet's infrastructure within their borders, as Russia has sought for months.

The revision would give countries the explicit right to "implement policy" on Internet governance and "regulate the national Internet segment," the draft says.

"If you throw in addressing and naming, that puts the entire ecosystem in play, which is what the U.S. and EU said they would never agree to," said a Western participant at the conference who asked not to be named to maintain his ability to negotiate.

"You're almost guaranteeing lock-up in certain areas that might prevent the other areas from easily going forward," he said.

The coalition wants the new treaty to include measures to combat spam e-mail, but its definition of spam is so broad that it could be applied to almost any e-mailed message.

That would provide a pretext for authoritarian regimes to suppress opponents, critics warn, while also doing little to solve what is a technical problem.

Egypt was named as a co-author of the Russia-led submission, but on Sunday, it disavowed the document. That may be a sign of cracks emerging in the loose anti-U.S. coalition.

"Our name was associated to this proposal by mere misunderstanding," Nashwa Gad, a department manager at Egypt's Ministry of Communications and Information Technology, said in an e-mailed statement. "Egypt has always been supporting the basic Internet principles that ... the Internet should remain free, open, liberal. We do not see that the ITU mandate deals with the Internet."

The United States made a counterproposal, co-signed by Canada, that says increasing the treaty's scope could provide a platform for governments to stifle free speech, reduce online anonymity and censor Internet content.

But Russia and its supporters argue that they need new powers to be able to fight cybercrime and protect networks.

After six days of largely private talks, very little seems to have been settled. The main plenary committee meeting starts Monday, and the committee will reconsider the U.S.-Canada proposal, among others.

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