

European Union to outline Internet freedom strategy

Roberta Cowan, Reuters

The European Union will outline a strategy on Monday to support activists living under repressive governments who are using technology to organise, mobilise and exercise their rights, European Commissioner Neelie Kroes said on Friday.

Echoing remarks made on Thursday by U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton on Internet restrictions in Russia, Syria and China, Kroes said the Arab Spring had been a wake-up call about the relationship between technology and human rights.

The use of social networking websites during this year's uprisings in the Arab world helped bring down authoritarian governments in Egypt and Tunisia and prompted counter attacks by governments against the Internet.

In Russia, prominent anti-corruption blogger Alexei Navalny was jailed this week for 15 days after taking part in anti-government protests over ballot-stuffing and other irregularities in Sunday's parliamentary elections.

Kroes, responsible for the EU's digital policy, told a Dutch conference on Internet freedom she had been inspired by meetings with activists fighting for democracy in their countries.

"I am committed to doing whatever I can to support their cause," Kroes said. "On Monday we will be announcing further details about how we can take this forward."

Kroes and others voiced concerns the internet and telecommunications technology is used to support human rights, both on and offline, and that it not be used against them.

Kroes is expected to present a "No-Disconnect" strategy on Monday in Brussels, which will outline what is needed to help cyber activists bypass restrictions on their freedom to communicate, including the tools and technology needed to shield them from indiscriminate surveillance, according to Kroes' spokesman Ryan Heath.

"I want the EU to help develop and distribute these tools," Kroes told the conference on Friday.

Dutch Foreign Minister Uri Rosenthal, whose government helped sponsor the internet freedom conference, said his government has set up a fund to help provide backup "mesh network" support for online activists when their telecommunications and internet networks go down.

Kroes also urged technology companies to be transparent about equipment they were selling to governments who might use it to repress their citizens.

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"If technology is used by certain repressive governments to identify innocent citizens and put their life or freedom in danger, we ought to know," she said.

"I think it is high time for the industry to decide where they stand, and what they are going to do. If not as a moral issue, then as an issue of corporate reputation. Being known for selling despots the tools of their repression is, to say the least, bad PR."

Fourteen governments agreed in the Hague to form a global internet freedom coalition to share information online and offline on freedom of expression and support in the exercise of human rights and the internet.

They agreed to work together politically and through project aid to support individuals particularly operating in oppressive environments and to encourage businesses to adopt policies and practices which respect human rights on the internet.

Rosenthal also said the coalition, which includes Austria, Canada, the Czech Republic, France, Estonia, Ghana, the Republic of Ireland, Mexico, Mongolia, the Netherlands, the United Kingdom, the United States, and Sweden, will take action including "providing training for internet dissidents and coaching bloggers and civil society on advocacy for internet freedom."

(Reporting By Roberta B. Cowan Editing by Maria Golovnina)

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