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Opinion | Russia hasn't stopped maneuvering for a role in internet oversight

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António Guterres, secretary general of the United Nations, speaks in Geneva on July 6. (Johannes Simon/Getty Images)

Russia might be reeling from an "armed mutiny" at home and a botched invasion of Ukraine, but that hasn't stopped it from pushing a plan for centralized United Nations oversight of the internet. An unfortunate new wrinkle is that Moscow's approach appears to be getting some support from U.N. Secretary General António Guterres.

"We're concerned about the Russians … pushing their authoritarian digital agenda in every forum around the world," explained a senior Biden administration official in an email. "It's global and relentless, and when we step back even a little bit, they fill that void." He said the State Department has conveyed its "legitimate concern" about a U.N. "takeover" of internet governance to U.N. officials in New York.

Russia's latest bid for top-down internet control came in a resolution submitted for next week's meeting in Geneva of the ruling council of the U.N.'s International Telecommunication Union. Moscow's proposal seeks changes in governance "to prevent fragmentation of the Internet," according to a document posted on the ITU website.

What "fragmentation" is Russia talking about? The internet has been functioning pretty smoothly for decades. If there are any blockages, they're the ones introduced by

authoritarian governments such as Russia and China. But as you read Moscow's proposal, it becomes clear that Russia is doubling down on its past demands for global political regulation as an alternative to what it claims is U.S. control of cyberspace.

"There is currently no platform for practical interstate dialogue to discuss the possibility of coordinating the activities of states in regulating the Internet of potential threats to the integrity and reliability of the network and preventing regulatory fragmentation," the Russian document argues in an English translation.

A reader of this bland bureaucratic language might forget that it was Russia that has used the internet to subvert elections in the United States, as well as balloting in many European countries. Or that it's Russia that has refused to sign the 2001 Budapest Convention on Cybercrime, which was ratified by 68 countries. This fox, it seems, never tires of attacking the henhouse.

The surprise is that Russia's ideas about global political regulation appear to have gained some support from Guterres. In a May policy brief to advance his plan for a "Global Digital Compact," the secretary general supported the existing "multistakeholder" governance approach. But he also expressed some of the same regulatory themes as Moscow.

There "must be a collective effort to ensure that regional, national or industry initiatives, however well-meaning, do not further fragment the Internet," Guterres wrote, without documenting any existing fragmentation. He went on to argue that "we need a networked multilateral arrangement" to handle such problems.

"The United Nations is only one actor in this firmament, but it is the only global entity that can convene and facilitate the collaboration needed," Guterres argued. His solution appears to be his compact, which the Biden administration official said could be adopted at the U.N.'s planned "Summit for the Future" in September 2024.

The Biden administration is working with allies to make sure internet governance remains broadly based and bottom-up. Explains the senior official: "Many non-governmental stakeholders and some governments are worried that political processes based in New York will lack expertise and competence to address these issues appropriately and will just open the door for intergovernmental, top-down controls and/or get bogged down in proxy political debates. To many, the secretary-general's Policy Brief confirmed this suspicion about a New York takeover."

One skeptical review of Guterres's proposals comes from **Konstantinos Komaitis, an internet policy expert at the Lisbon Council, a think tank based in Brussels. In a recent article, he argued: "The fact that the secretary general aims to channel Internet policy issues through the UN's multilateral system is alarming. When looking at the issues the 'Global Digital Compact' will seek to address, one cannot help but wonder whether the ultimate goal is to create a centralized system where the UN sits at the top."**

Russia itself has actually been a beneficiary of the current system of decentralized governance, which is supervised by an organization known as ICANN. Fiona Alexander, a distinguished fellow at American University's Internet Governance Lab, noted at a recent U.N. gathering that ICANN rebuffed proposals to cut off Russia's internet access after the Ukraine invasion, because it wanted to protect a single global internet.

"Ironically, Russia's internet users were better protected in the internet governance ecosystem than they would have been if decisions were made in this building," Alexander told the U.N. audience.

These arcane policy debates are the trench warfare of the modern technology world, but they get little attention outside government bureaucracies. "I don't see any visible, public pushback to Guterres's Global Digital Compact, and I'm worried, because the United Nations is all politics," says Alexander.

It would be an appalling mistake if Russia, having muzzled its citizens and invaded its neighbor, got a U.N. platform to write the rules of the road for the digital technology that will shape the 21st century.