

Resolution on freedom of expression on the Internet

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The European Parliament adopted a joint resolution on freedom of expression on the internet by 65 votes in favour, none against and two abstentions.

It pointed out that, according to Reporters Without Borders, authoritarian regimes and governments have been working on ever more far-reaching methods of controlling the Internet, chiefly using more and more sophisticated filtering technology and surveillance of electronic communications and setting-up cyber-police. A large number of cyber-dissidents are detained in prison - most of them in China. A number of countries can be seen as enemies of freedom of expression on-line as stated in the last Reporters Without Borders report, including China, Belarus, Burma, Cuba, Iran, Libya, Maldives, Nepal, North Korea, Uzbekistan, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Tunisia, Turkmenistan and Vietnam. The Chinese government has successfully persuaded companies such as Yahoo, Google and Microsoft to facilitate the censorship of their services in the Chinese internet market. Furthermore, equipment and technologies supplied by Western companies such as CISCO Systems, Telecom Italia, Wanadoo, a subsidiary of France Telecom have been used by governments for the purpose of censoring the Internet preventing freedom of expression. Parliament also pointed out that US legislators introduced a bill in February 2006, the Global On-line Freedom Act, aimed at regulating the activities of Internet businesses when they operate in repressive countries.

In the face of this, Parliament reaffirmed the fact that freedom of expression is a key value shared by all EU countries and that they have to take concrete steps to defend it. It called on the Council and the EU Member States to agree on a joint statement confirming their commitment in favour of the protection of the rights of internet users and of the promotion of free expression on the internet world-wide. It reiterated its commitment to the principles which were confirmed at the World Summit in Tunis of 16-18 November 2005 on the primary importance of the information society for democracy and respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms:

- building the information society on the basis of human rights and fundamental freedoms;
- combating the digital divide and seeking resources for action plans to foster development,
- developing Internet governance arrangements which are more balanced, pluralist and representative of the States involved, to meet the new technological challenges (spamming, data protection, etc.).

Parliament strongly condemned restrictions on Internet content, whether they apply to the dissemination or to the receipt of information that are imposed by Governments and are not in strict conformity with the guarantee of freedom of expression. It also strongly condemned the harassment and imprisonment of journalists and others who are expressing their opinions on the Internet. It called on the Council and the Commission to do the following:

- take all necessary measures vis-à-vis the authorities of the concerned countries for the immediate release of all detained Internet users.
- draw up a voluntary code of conduct that would put limits on the activities of companies in repressive countries;
- maintain the presence and active participation of the EU and the presentation of common positions especially with ECOSOC, ITU, UNESCO and UNDP;
- take into account the need for unrestricted Internet access by their citizens, when considering its assistance programmes to third countries.

Finally, Parliament welcomed the Joint Investor Statement on Freedom of Expression and the Internet at the initiative of Reporters Without Borders. It stressed that corporations which provide Internet searching, chat, publishing or other services should have a responsibility to ensure that the rights of users are respected.