Turkish Internet restrictions raise more concerns (Update)

February 6 2014, by Suzan Fraser

In this picture taken late Wednesday, Feb. 5, 2014, Oktay Vural, a leading deputy from the opposition Nationalist Action Party, MHP, holds up a placard during a parliamentary debate in Ankara, Turkey, shortly before Turkey's Parliament approved legislation that would tighten government controls over the Internet. Legislators approved measures which would allow Turkey's telecommunications authority to block websites or remove content that is deemed to be in violation of privacy, without first seeking a court decision. Under the new law, Internet providers would also be forced to keep data on peoples' online activities and make them available to authorities when requested. (AP Photo)

New Internet restrictions approved by parliament are raising concerns the government is trying to control the flow of information amid a corruption scandal, and a senior European official on Thursday called the measures "a step back" for media freedom.

Under the legislation approved Wednesday, the country's telecommunications authority would be allowed to block websites or remove content that is deemed to be in violation of privacy without seeking court approval. Internet providers would also be forced to keep data on peoples' online activities and make them available to authorities when requested.

The bill, which still needs to be signed by the president, would extend the government's already tight grip on the Internet. Turkey, which hopes to become a member of the European Union, has already come under criticism for censorship and restriction on media freedoms.

In a tweet, European Parliament President Martin Schulz called the legislation "a step back in an already suffocating environment for media freedom."

The government has rejected accusations of censorship and says the legislation will protect privacy.

Yusuf Halacoglu, a deputy from the opposition Nationalist Action Party, MHP, plays a recording of a wiretapped conversation allegedly between Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan and a manager of a television station that reportedly was leaked onto the Internet, during a parliamentary debate late Wednesday, Feb. 5, 2014, shortly before legislators approved measures that would tighten government controls over the Internet. With a show of hands, the legislators late Wednesday endorsed allowing Turkey's telecommunications authority to block websites for a privacy violation without a prior court decision.(AP Photo)

The measure comes at a time when Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan's government has been trying to contain a corruption and bribery scandal that led him to dismiss four government ministers. Erdogan's government has replaced hundreds of police officials and prosecutors since the scandal erupted in December, including many involved in the investigation. Turkish news reports say those moves have

thwarted a second probe that sought to question his son and others.

Erdogan insists the probe is a conspiracy to discredit his government before local elections in March.

In recent days, some recordings of wiretapped telephone conversations allegedly involving Erdogan or businessmen have been leaked onto the Internet.

Riot police stand at the entrance to the Justice Ministry as members of Turkey's main opposition Republican People's Party, CHP, walk to the ministry building in Ankara, Turkey, Thursday, Feb. 6, 2014, demanding that the ministry sends to Parliament a summary of proceedings into four cabinet ministers who were dismissed after being implicated in a corruption and bribery scandal in December. The opposition parties accuse Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan's government of trying to cover up the scandal. (AP Photo/Burhan Ozbilici)

"The aim is to drown the allegations instead of investigating them," said Riza Turmen, a legislator from the main opposition People's Party, during the debate in parliament.

More than 40,000 websites, many of them pornographic, are blocked in Turkey, according to Engelli Web, a site which monitors banned websites.