

# US commerce secretary warns of 'digital protectionism'

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US Commerce Secretary Penny Pritzker, pictured on July 13, 2015, expressed concern about measures that restrict digital content at a gathering of global leaders on the digital economy

A top US official warned Wednesday against a rise of "digital protectionism," which she said threatens access to information and ideas and can hurt economic growth.

Commerce Secretary Penny Pritzker, who addressed a gathering of global leaders on the digital economy, expressed concern about measures that restrict content, limit data flows or impose standards that keep out foreign competition.

"This 'digital protectionism' threatens access to the technologies and information that people want and need to succeed," Pritzker told a ministerial meeting in Mexico of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD).

"We expect such policies from authoritarian regimes that want to isolate their people—not from nations that welcome the global exchange of ideas and commerce," she said.

In a phone interview after the speech, Pritzker told AFP that "when governments engage in digital protectionism they leave their populations and others disenfranchised and disconnected."

She added: "We're committed to the model of an open and free Internet and what we are seeing around the world is policies that threaten that."

Pritzker declined to offer specific examples of countries adopting protectionist policies, but said in her speech she was concerned about "data localization laws that constrict cross-border data flows; content controls that limit access to information; and onerous technical standards that keep foreign competitors out of new markets."

She told AFP that some of the measures are "well-intentioned" but have unintended consequences" that restrict online access.

Pritzker said the ministerial meeting, the first by the organization of advanced economies on the topic in five years, should reaffirm the principles of an open Internet which is not controlled by governments or

intergovernmental organizations.

## **Confidence in Internet**

She said the US decision to privatize the technical administration of the Internet's domain name system, on track for this year, should boost confidence in the so-called "multistakeholder" model that steers clear of government regulation.

The plan will leave the nonprofit group that manages the system—the Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers (ICANN)—as a self-governing entity with checks and balances that limit any single group or government from asserting control.

She said Washington agreed to cede this "symbolic" role "to blunt the arguments of Russia and China and other authoritarian regimes that do not want to see a free and open Internet."

US officials earlier this month endorsed the transition crafted by ICANN, which is set to go into effect when the contract with the US Commerce Department expires September 30.

Pritzker acknowledged that some members of Congress have balked at the plan but that the US administration remains committed to it.

"The goal is to proceed to this transition, and it's increasingly important that we do so," she said in the interview.

"There's a lot of politics around this but it's important that we get this done now."

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