The internet’s name regulator says it’s ‘uncomfortable’ with the .org deal

Remember when the organization in charge of .org domain names traditionally used by non-profits decided to sell itself to a for-profit company? It surprised everyone because up to that point, there was little indication that the Internet Society (ISOC) was shopping the Public Interest Registry (PIR) for sale. Among those surprised, it appears, was ICANN, the organization that oversees the internet’s top-level domains, which now says it is “uncomfortable” with the lack of transparency around the deal and wants ISOC to pump the brakes.

“ICANN’s role is to ensure that the .org top-level domain remains secure, reliable, and stable under the proposed acquisition of Public Interest Registry (PIR) by Ethos Capital,” Göran Marby, ICANN President and CEO, said in a statement to *The Verge*. “We also urge transparency, which is why we sent the 9 December correspondence to PIR and the Internet Society (ISOC).”

ICANN can’t kill the deal but might slow it down
What Marby’s referring to with “the 9 December correspondence” is a letter that’s caused its share of confusion on the internet, with some inferring that ICANN could kill the Ethos acquisition of PIR altogether. In the letter, ICANN refers to a December 5th webcast where ISOC CEO Andrew Sullivan says he was “uncomfortable with the lack of transparency” around the announcement. “Many of us watching the communications on this transaction are also uncomfortable,” wrote ICANN secretary and

general counsel John Jeffrey.

However, ICANN may not have the authority to stop the acquisition. It isn't a regulatory agency, but rather, according to its website, "a private, non-profit technical coordination body for the Internet's name and numbering systems." ICANN's job is to vet and give official status to domain registrars (like GoDaddy and Bluehost), and make sure registries and registrars comply with policies surrounding domain ownership.

But PIR *is* required to get prior approval from ICANN "before any transaction that would result in a change of control of the registry operator," which the Ethos deal would certainly do.

And ICANN is alleging that PIR, ISOC and Ethos didn't initially share some key details about how this takeover would work. ICANN wants to know how its relationship with PIR might change, since it would affect "the .org community with more than 10 million domain name registrations."

For its part, Ethos set up a microsite that details its plans, including expanding registry services to "implement privacy regulations," and to "clamp down on spam and DNS abuse."

"What guarantees are in place to retain the unique character of the dot org"

Those wary of Ethos' plans include Mark Surman, executive director of the Mozilla Foundation, who penned a blog post with a list of questions his organization wants ICANN to ask Ethos and PIR, including "What guarantees are in place to retain the unique character of the dot org as a home for non-commercial organizations, one of the important stewardship promises made by PIR when it was granted the registry?"

In a Monday blog post in response to Surman, Ethos Capital CEO Erik Brooks wrote that the company is "committed to limit increases for .org domain registration prices to no more than

10 percent per year, on average” which he notes would be around $1 a year at current prices.

But what happens if ICANN ultimately determines that under its criteria, Ethos is not a suitable entity to operate the .org domain? That’s not clear, and it’s uncharted territory for ICANN, which is still awaiting the response to its December 9th request for information.

https://www.theverge.com/2019/12/17/21026939/icann-ethos-capital-dot-org-domain-name-deal