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Russia's social media battleground

Since invading Ukraine, Russia has tightened restrictions around social media. But, not all is lost — there are regime-critical Russian actors at work

Even before Russia's invasion of Ukraine, its internet and particularly its social media had been subject to ever-increasing constraints for years. Since 2022, the already severe restrictions on online activity have dramatically tightened, as Freedom House outlines in its report covering the period from 2021 to 2022. The authorities' aim is to ensure that loyal, pro-war voices completely dominate any outlets used by a sizable proportion of Russia's domestic audience.

Right from the onset of the war, we saw headline-grabbing moves to blockWestern-based social media networks such as Twitter, Facebook and Instagram. The likes of Facebook and Twitter, however, played only a very minor role in the dissemination of news in Russia, with the key battle for public opinion, particularly among younger Russians, are being fought on other platforms. For the government to prevail in this battle, it requires more than just crude blocking measures, needing to also establish an alternative, pro-regime offering with sufficient reach; after all, Russians are not going to stop using online media, despite the enforced focus on a reactionary 'Russian world'.

Online content under increasing totalitarian tendencies

Beyond dedicated messaging apps such as WhatsApp, the platforms with the highest audience shares in Russia are YouTube, VK.com, Telegram and Instagram, each of which reaches between 40 and 70 per cent of the Russian population. Of these, only the Russian-based VK.com was largely government-controlled at the time war broke out. For the authorities, there was, therefore, still much to do if they were to silence unwanted dissenting voices on domestic social media channels and replace them with ideologically conformist content.

Online video content is just as popular in Russia as it is in Central

Europe. With regard to more technical and in-depth internet videos, Russia has undergone a remarkably similar evolution to Germany over the past two decades. Initially, domestic competitors such as Russian-based Rutube sprung up alongside Google-owned YouTube. These, however, soon dwindled into insignificance due to the US tech giant's growing market dominance.

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Ultimately – and very reluctantly – Russia's official channels and pro-regime vloggers were forced to use YouTube in order to exploit its huge reach. In a June 2022 survey, 74 per cent of Russians reported watching YouTube content in the past few days, with political news programmes being the most frequently watched category. YouTube is therefore indispensable for anyone wanting to address Russians via online video. In politics, and especially amongst the opposition, YouTube has for years played a far greater role in Russia than in Central Europe. The Russian government's demands for YouTube to block certain videos, because they reveal 'state secrets', for instance, have often not been acted upon.

With the outbreak of war and the accompanying intensification of totalitarian tendencies, it became clear that the Russian government was intent on crushing domestic opposition voices once and for all. In January of this year, the pro-Kremlin oligarch Yevgeny Prigozhin expressed what many in the Russian leadership were thinking, stating that 'YouTube will soon be shut down. Those who nevertheless continue to actively use YouTube will be identified and duly punished'. And yet, more than a year after the invasion of Ukraine, YouTube is still available in Russia. So why is Russia's war on the US network proving so difficult?

Doing more harm than good

That YouTube became the foremost video platform in the Russian-speaking world is no coincidence. In terms of technology and the possibilities it offers, YouTube is far superior to its Russian rivals. Even Alexander Zharov, CEO of Gazprom Media, which owns YouTube rival Rutube, admitted to the RBC media groupin January that Rutube could not replace YouTube. He highlighted Google's constantly optimising recommendations, which precisely reflect users' viewing habits, and the vast, global breadth of its content.

Nonetheless, analysts believe Russian officials are holding firm in their objective of displacing YouTube from the Russian market. According to the Russian-language edition of Forbes, the successful VK.com network, where online videos have hitherto been just a side-line, is already preparing an increase in its video bandwidth for when YouTube gets shut down in Russia. In addition, it is also attempting to attract well-known video bloggers away from its US rival.

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Instead of drawing the logical conclusion from the failed expansion of Rutube and giving up, the Russian regime is simply backing a new horse. What may particularly help the Kremlin in these endeavours is that Russian YouTubers can no longer monetise their videos, i.e. generate advertising revenue. Such monetisation is key when it comes to generating income for independent channels.

Latvian-based online newspaper Meduza, citing sources close to the Putin administration, says that views on the practicability of a shutdown still differ greatly. Putin, Meduza claims, was informed that 'a shutdown was currently inadvisable'. Given YouTube's very strong pull, this would only succeed in driving more Russians to evade blocking measures, thus benefiting rather than harming blocked content.

Given that YouTube itself is increasingly blocking Russian government channels, including those of the Federation Council or of well-known TV propagandists, it is, however, likely that we haven't yet heard the last of this.

The case of Telegram

In Russia, unlike in the German-speaking world, for instance, the Telegram Messenger service originally had a largely liberal and independent reputation. It used to host high-reach political channels primarily featuring opposition voices. In 2020, attempts by the authorities to completely block access to Telegram in Russia were foiled by the network's decentralised structure.

Around the time of Russia's initial invasion of Ukraine, a development began that prevented Telegram from ending up on the Kremlin's block list again. After early anti-war protests, there were reports that the Russian state had either infiltrated opposition structures on Telegram or that the now Dubai-based network was passing data from opposition groups to Russian officials.

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For the Russian authorities, however, the chief means of achieving dominance on Telegram was not shutting down rival opposition voices. Instead, they have, since the start of military operations, allowed the rise of a counter-movement of war-supporting 'Z-fluencers' and 'military correspondents'. These have provided a pro-Russian commentary on military operations in Ukraine and, in some cases, even been embedded within Russian combat units. A prominent example was the military blogger Vladlen Tatarsky (real name Maxim Fomin), who, by the time of his purported assassination in St Petersburg, had gained more than 560,000 followers on Telegram.

These Z-fluencers are surprisingly free to report on frontline action, and even to express criticism of the military leadership's tactics – and this in an environment in which even the most trivial anti-war comments can result in lengthy jail sentences. In addition to these new 'military correspondents', we also find officials such as ex-Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev or the Chechen leader Ramzan Kadyrov gaining sizeable followings on Telegram with hard-line pronouncements and threats — followings that are further boosted via dubious means, such as bots and fake groups, by companies loyal to the regime.

The Russian state is positively luring loyal citizens to Telegram, via personal channels for various prominent politicians, for instance. Such efforts are drawing large numbers of new, non-opposition users to Telegram, thus tipping the balance of opinions among the Russian-speaking audience. Whereas in February 2022, nine per cent of Russians claimed to use Telegram as their preferred news source according to polling institute FOM, by January 2023, this had risen to 20 per cent — despite the fact that opposition figures are coming under increasing pressure on the network. In 2022, Telegram's messenger service even overtook the mighty WhatsApp in terms of transmitted data volume.

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In addition, many other, smaller examples show how the Russian regime is now set on – and, sadly succeeding in – clamping down hard on any remaining online freedoms. These include developing the acquiescent Instagram rival Rossgramm and levying draconian fines on the independent and thus undesirable Russian Wikipedia site. Pressure from the state also

means the Western-based dating network Tinder is quitting the country in June.

That the Russian authorities have been able to use mechanisms to restrict online freedoms as effectively as they have previously limited offline freedoms is alarming. On the other hand, we shouldn't be entirely pessimistic about the state of play in Russia's information war. There are, after all, still regime-critical Russian actors at work, be it from abroad in the case of those who have fled or in secret. Meduza has talked about the creation of a 'second RuNET' that will be free from state censorship. Telegram and YouTube, meanwhile, continue to provide a bridge to the homeland for expat influencers and online news outlets that have re-formed abroad. What's more, they are likely to remain available to Russian-based users even without circumvention tools, either indefinitely or at least for some time to come, allowing continued access to content published by those media outlets that have risen from the ruins of Russia's liberal press.

For European legislatures and societies, it's essential to support these actors in their fight against an overmighty opponent – via work and entry permits for dissenting Russians as well as via organisational and financial support for their operations. Only then might these voices be able to hold their own against powerful state structures and their well-funded 'community'. After all, anything they have built up offline within Russia is now gone.



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