

The Kremlin's crackdown on Western social networks

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On 11 March, the Prosecutor General's Office of the Russian Federation ordered the media control agency Roskomnadzor to block access to the Instagram and Facebook in Russia. On 14 March, at midnight, Instagram was blocked in Russia, although Facebook is still available despite these restrictions. The restriction was justified in terms of the decision taken by Meta to temporarily alter its rules for political speech, allowing posts calling for violence against Russian troops invading Ukraine, as well as allegations that it published content inciting mass riots in Russia. At the same time, on 11 March the prosecutor's office sent a motion to a court to recognise Meta Platforms as an extremist organisation; Russia's Investigative Committee also initiated a criminal case of extremism against Meta's employees on charges that it had published content inciting violence against Russians. Since March 4, Roskomnadzor has also been trying to restrict access to YouTube. On 11 March, the management of Alphabet, the website's parent company, announced it had suspended all monetization in Russia and blocked access to Kremlin-backed media channels worldwide, including the state-owned news agencies Rossiya Segodnia, RT, the main public broadcaster VGTRK and its popular TV channels Rossiya & Rossiya 24, as well as Pervy Kanal (Channel One).

Commentary

- The Russian government's decision to block access to Western social networks is another step towards imposing a total information blockade on society, in order to eliminate sources of information and channels of communication which have not been sanctioned by the state. In this way, the authorities are trying to force the citizens to consolidate around the war with Ukraine and prevent the growth and expression of any opposition sentiments towards the Kremlin, which may increase as the conflict continues. The blockade is also intended to prevent information about the war distributed by the Ukrainian side and Western media from spreading through the country. It is noteworthy that Russian propaganda has displayed considerable reactivity to reports from abroad. It is particularly attempting to debunk alleged Ukrainian fake news, and this activity now takes up a significant part of Russian media coverage. This indicates that despite the authorities' best efforts, true information about the war is still seeping into the country, which the Kremlin perceives as a significant threat.
- The Kremlin has also justified its blockade of Western social networks in terms of concern for the views of Russian youth, who actively use the internet and foreign social media. The government became convinced of the importance of taking such action during the anti-Kremlin protests in 2011–12: at that time social media were an important

instrument for mobilising and coordinating protests. As a result, in recent years Moscow has attempted to censor the internet and destroy independent channels of social communication by means of restrictive legislation. According to a MediaScope study from August 2021, 73% of the country's population uses social networks; this percentage is over 90% in the 12–34 age group. Almost half (49%) of Russians use social media every day. According to Brand Analytics, which has studied the activity of social networks in Russia, until recently Instagram had the largest number of active users, over 38 million users per month. In turn, according to the We Are Social agency, YouTube was the most popular among Russians: 85.4% of social media users choose it. It is these two networks that have been the Kremlin's priority targets.

- The Russian government has forced the public to resort to Russian networks and communicator programs such as *vKontakte* and *Odnoklassniki*. According to national regulations, these sites are obliged to cooperate with secret services at the request of the authorities. According to the survey data (as well as the owner of *vKontakte*), *vK* is the most popular network in Russia: its average monthly number of users in Russia averages around 72 million. So far, there has been no confirmation of reports that the Kremlin intends to restrict access to Telegram, which for several years had struggled with the restrictions imposed by Roskomnadzor, and is generally considered to be beyond the government's control. In recent days the Ministry of Digital Development has encouraged state institutions to set up accounts on this messenger platform and take the initiative to promote the official position on the conflict.
- The Kremlin has used its accusations that Meta allowed calls for violence against Russian troops to be published to do more than just block off problematic sources of information. Reports about the company's decision have been interwoven into the Kremlin's broader thesis of Russophobia spreading throughout the world, even including allegations in the propaganda media that the West is trying to exterminate Russians as a nation. By distorting the logic of events and the meaning of terms, Russian propaganda argues that the Russians are 'the Jews of today' in the face of World War III, which is both impending and inevitable (yet not Moscow's fault). The Kremlin has successfully used such propaganda and persuasion techniques in its information warfare with Ukraine and the West in order to mobilise the Russian public around Putin and distract them from Russia's failures on the frontline.