

Kremlin expands internet censorship amid NATO escalation of the war against Russia

Maxim Zотов**16 August 2024**

In late July and early August, Russian users of the video sharing platform YouTube began complaining *en masse* about service disruptions. Earlier, there had already been talk of the blocking or slowing down of service on YouTube. Thus, in April, Alexei Pushkov, the chairman of the commission on information security of the Federation Council's (the upper house of the Russian parliament), suggested that YouTube be temporarily slowed down for the national holidays in May, including May Day. He justified this proposed measure by arguing that the company does not want to cooperate with the Russian authorities and continues to block channels and videos of state media.

On July 12, Rostelecom (a telecommunications company) warned about a possible deterioration of access to YouTube due to technical problems in the company's operation. On the same day, the Russian newspaper *Gazeta.Ru* reported that the service would likely be slowed down in late July and early August, and blocked entirely in the fall.

The press secretary of President Vladimir Putin, Dmitry Peskov, denied that the authorities intended to block YouTube and claimed that all the problems were the result of the obsolescence of equipment, which Google has not updated for more than two years due to sanctions. Google said that there are no technical problems on the part of the company.

Already on July 25, Alexander Khinshtein, a member of the State Duma (the lower house of Parliament), reported that the download speed of YouTube on computers may drop by 40 percent by the end of that week and up to 70 percent next week. According to him, this is due "not only to the actions of the authorities, but also to the company's disregard for its

basic infrastructure" and is directed not against users, "but against the administration of a foreign resource," which "still believes it can violate and ignore" Russian laws with impunity.

On August 3, the news agency TASS announced that YouTube stopped uploading videos in high quality, and in the morning of August 8, many users were unable to access the service both on smartphones and computers, with more than 32,000 recorded complaints. However, five days later, YouTube resumed normal service and only some 2,000 complaints were received.

In a clear indication that the authorities are indeed seeking to limit access to YouTube by all means, Roskomnadzor began sending e-mails to the owners of sites distributing ways to bypass YouTube's slowdown, demanding that they remove this information from the internet.

Then, on July 30, Roskomnadzor proposed to block the distribution of all information about VPN [Virtual Private Network] services online. VPN services are popular in Russia among many internet users because they allow them to avoid surveillance by the authorities and to access sites that are otherwise banned.

Previously, an order prohibiting the advertisements and information seeking to popularize VPNs had been in effect since March 1. At that time, this ban did not extend to scientific and technical information about VPNs. Now any information, including scientific information, about VPNs is prohibited. It is assumed that the order will be in effect from March 1, 2025 to September 1, 2029. As of April this year, Roskomnadzor had already blocked about 150 VPN services. Beginning next year, the number of blocked

VPN providers is likely to increase significantly.

And on August 2, the Federation Council passed a law on the “de-anonymization” of the owners of public groups and pages on social media networks and messenger apps with more than 10,000 subscribers. According to this law, the owners of such groups can no longer retain anonymity online but must report their identities to Roskomnadzor. According to *Gazeta.Ru*, “There is no talk of blocking channels without identification, but they will not be able to place advertising, collect donations, and other channels will not be allowed to repost from their accounts.”

Eventually, on August 9, Roskomnadzor blocked Signal, a messenger known for its security and safety, which provides end-to-end encryption, and is widely used especially in Europe and North America. The justification provided by the Russian authorities were unspecified violations of Russian law by Signal.

In Russia, various websites, social networks and messengers have already been actively blocked since the beginning of the war in 2022. Thus, many social media platforms owned by the company Meta, which is banned as “extremist” in Russia, were blocked, including Instagram and Facebook, which are banned entirely. The social network X (Twitter) was also blocked. And in March 2022, because of a law banning “fake news” websites and social media platforms, the company that owns Tik Tok suspended uploading new videos and broadcasting airings. The law providing for the ban of websites and blogs that allegedly spread “fake news” had been introduced in 2019 by the Kremlin amid a strike of 12,000 truckers in southern Russia in which social media played a central role.

The new wave of far-reaching restrictions of internet freedom comes amid a significant escalation of NATO’s war against Russia. Last week, the Ukrainian armed forces, backed by NATO, for the first time launched a large-scale attack on Russian territory, the political goal of which is to provoke Russia into a response that could be used as a pretext to fully draw NATO into the conflict. Just prior to this incursion, NATO began delivering F-16 fighter jets to Ukraine.

US and European imperialism are recklessly escalating

the conflict, seeking to subjugate Russia and turn the entire region into a raw material appendage of imperialism.

For its part, the oligarchic Putin regime, which has emerged as a Bonapartist regime of the oligarchy out of the Stalinist bureaucracy’s restoration of capitalism in the Soviet Union, is unable to respond in a progressive manner to the escalating pressures of imperialism. The new censorship measures underscore that the oligarchy’s main concern is not the danger posed by imperialism, but a movement within the working class against war and capitalism. The Putin regime is particularly concerned about the ability of workers and youth in Russia to learn about and link up with the struggles of their counterparts internationally through the internet and social media.

At the same time, democratic rights and freedoms are also under attack in the imperialist countries and their allies. In the United States, the ruling class is working systematically to limit the access of third party candidates on the ballot to the 2024 presidential elections, while student protesters against the Gaza genocide have been subject to police state violence. And in Ukraine, access to the *World Socialist Web Site* (WSWS) was banned on June 3, following the arrest of Bogdan Syrotiuk, an anti-war socialist and leader of the Young Guard of Bolshevik-Leninists.

The continuing attacks on the democratic rights of the working class and increasing internet censorship underscore that amidst an expanding war and growing social inequality, the capitalist elites, be it in Russia or the imperialist countries, are unable to maintain even the pretense of democratic freedoms. For the Russian and international working class, this means that it alone can defend democracy, through socialist measures, and build a truly free, egalitarian and socialist society.



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