

# Restricting information dissemination: Russia's deepening internet censorship

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**Russia has imposed restrictions on YouTube, WhatsApp and Telegram and may soon block the last remaining foreign platforms entirely. What do these developments mean for Russian independent media working from exile?**

## Summary

After years of increasingly restrictive media and internet policies, Russia further intensified its efforts to control information in 2025. Civic and political rights, including press freedom and freedom of expression, are severely curtailed in the country. Independent media and other critical actors, who have previously been forced into exile, face ever greater challenges. In its efforts to silence dissent and restrict Russian citizens' access to independent information, Russia intensively targets the social media platforms and messaging services that are crucial for disseminating information.

Russia recently imposed restrictions on YouTube, WhatsApp and Telegram – the foreign platforms and messaging apps that remained accessible after Russia blocked others after its full-scale invasion of Ukraine – and may soon block them entirely. By simultaneously throttling foreign services and incentivising their domestic alternatives, such as messenger Max, Russia seeks to move users to an online environment fully under its control. The restrictions suppress information domestically and transnationally: the options available to independent media working from exile to reach audiences in Russia have become slim.

Policy should aim to support the development of censorship circumvention technologies, while simultaneously defending

the principles underlying the global open internet against the threat of fragmentation.

## Context

Russian independent media-in-exile play an important role in providing Russian citizens with reliable journalistic news. They also contribute to informing interested audiences

## Key Messages

- Russia has imposed restrictions on YouTube, WhatsApp and Telegram and signals it may soon block the foreign services entirely.
- Russia previously blocked most foreign social media platforms and messengers after its full-scale invasion of Ukraine.
- Russia seeks to move users to an online environment fully under its control by incentivising domestic alternatives.
- The throttling of YouTube, Telegram and WhatsApp signals a turning point in Russian efforts to silence dissent and restrict access to independent information.
- By targeting key dissemination platforms, Russia suppresses information domestically and transnationally, limiting Russian independent media working from exile from reaching audiences in Russia.
- Policy should prioritise support for internet censorship circumvention technologies, while defending the principles of a global open internet against the threat of fragmentation.



outside of Russia and conduct investigations. This brief addresses how Russia aims to prevent information produced by these journalists-in-exile from reaching audiences in Russia, as well as Russian and other relevant audiences outside of Russia. Russian independent media's forced reliance on social media and other online intermediaries, exacerbated by conditions of exile, exposes them to continuously changing vulnerabilities resulting from platform policies and governance (e.g. algorithmic ranking and moderation). Digital tools and infrastructures are embedded throughout their work: from editorial working processes, data gathering and engaging with sources, to reaching audiences and generating revenue. A better understanding and monitoring of the role of information dissemination infrastructures as targets and means of information suppression, is essential for designing and sustaining effective policy measures to support media-in-exile.

### Russia's deepening internet censorship

After years of increasingly restrictive media and internet policies,<sup>1</sup> Russia has further intensified its efforts to control information in 2025. To silence dissent and restrict Russian citizens' access to independent information, Russia targets the social media platforms and messaging applications that are crucial to disseminating information within Russia's highly restricted information environment, thereby reinforcing the impact of other forms of repression, such as intimidation and prosecution, aimed directly at the producers of information critical of the Putin regime.

Online platforms are central to how news is shared and consumed. As a result, they are targeted to control or censor information. Analysing Russian policy in this domain is of particular importance for developing effective policy responses that support the work of Russian independent journalism, which largely operates from exile since Russia's hardened repression of media after the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 and the outlawing of key media outlets.<sup>2</sup>

Many independent media had come to rely on YouTube and Telegram to reach audiences in Russia after their websites, along with Western social media platforms Twitter, Facebook and Instagram, had been blocked. A study based on interviews conducted between 2021 and 2023, for example, found that media-in-exile "use Telegram bots, email subscriptions, and direct messages on social media to avoid state censorship mechanisms, interacting with audiences to secure financial support, fact-check, or gather additional details for ongoing projects."<sup>3</sup>

The vulnerabilities resulting from this forced reliance on a limited number of online platforms have been clear for some time. In July 2024, Russia began throttling<sup>4</sup> YouTube, which severely impacted its usability. In August 2024, Russia also blocked access to messaging app Signal, followed by Discord and Viber. In 2025, Russian efforts accelerated to curtail the use of the few remaining foreign messaging apps and, instead, promote the use of government-controlled

<sup>1</sup> Asmolov, G. (2025). The history of Russian media regulation. In W. Sloane & A. Raspopina (Eds.), *Kremlin Media Wars: Censorship and Control Since the Invasion of Ukraine*, pp. 33-44; Burkhardt, F., & Wijermars, M. (2022). Digital Authoritarianism and Russia's War Against Ukraine: How Sanctions-induced Infrastructural Disruptions are Reshaping Russia's Repressive Capacities. *SAIS Review of International Affairs*, 42(2), 21-43; Daucé, F., Loveluck, B., & Musiani, F. (Eds.). (2025). *Digital Authoritarianism in the Making: Repression and Resistance on the Russian Internet*. MIT Press; Wijermars, M. (2021). Russia's law 'On news aggregators': Control the news feed, control the news? *Journalism*, 22(12), 2938-2954.

<sup>2</sup> By the end of 2023, Russian media operations in exile totalled 93. Yablokov, I., & Gatov, V. (2025). Broadcasting through the (new) Iron Curtain: practices, challenges, and legacies of Russia's independent media in exile. *Journalism Studies*, 1-18.

<sup>3</sup> Yablokov, I., & Gatov, V. (2025). Broadcasting through the (new) Iron Curtain: practices, challenges, and legacies of Russia's independent media in exile. *Journalism Studies*, 1-18.

<sup>4</sup> Throttling concerns the intentional restriction of bandwidth, limiting communication speed.

alternatives, particularly Max, the messaging app developed by Russian technology company VK.<sup>5</sup> The latter, imagined to function as a 'super app' similar to China's WeChat, was launched in spring 2025.

### From platform restrictions to systemic digital control

After first restricting voice and video calls through WhatsApp and Telegram,<sup>6</sup> Russia began restricting the full functionality of messaging apps in autumn 2025.<sup>7</sup> On 28 November, Russian state media regulator Roskomnadzor warned WhatsApp could be blocked entirely if it would continue to act in violation of Russian law. According to Roskomnadzor, "the messenger is used to organise and carry out terrorist activities on [Russian] territory, to recruit their perpetrators, [and] for fraudulent and other crimes against our citizens."<sup>8</sup>

In early February 2026, users again noted mass disruptions in the availability of Telegram and WhatsApp.<sup>9</sup> On 24 February, it was discovered that Russia has launched a criminal investigation against Pavel Durov, the founder of Telegram, on suspicion of "abetting terrorist activities."<sup>10</sup> A complete block of the app now appears imminent.

In parallel, Russia encourages users to transition to Max. From 1 September 2025, Max was added to the list of apps that need to be pre-installed on mobile and other devices sold in Russia. Russia also limits the use of SMS for identification purposes to log in to Gosuslugi, the online portal for governmental services.<sup>11</sup> In December 2025, the Russian State Duma passed amendments to the Russian Federation Housing Code requiring utility companies and house management companies to communicate with owners and tenants exclusively through Max.<sup>12</sup> Phasing out SMS identification and replacing it with identification through the Max messenger is also under discussion for banking services.<sup>13</sup> Combined, these measures make it increasingly difficult for Russians to avoid use of the app and normalise its use for everyday communications.

The prohibition of any form of advertisement on online resources that are designated "undesirable" or "extremist," which came into force on 1 September 2025, should also be understood in the context of incentivising Russian internet users to fully transition to domestic platforms. It is

<sup>5</sup> VK is also the owner of the popular social media platform of the same name (previously known as VKontakte).

<sup>6</sup> D Meduza (2025, August 13). Roskomnadzor ofitsial'no ob"iavil o "chastichnom ogranichenii" zvonkov v Telegram i WhatsApp. [meduza.io/news/2025/08/13/roskomnadzor-ob-yavil-o-chastichnom-ogranichenii-zvonkov-v-telegram-i-whatsapp](https://meduza.io/news/2025/08/13/roskomnadzor-ob-yavil-o-chastichnom-ogranichenii-zvonkov-v-telegram-i-whatsapp).

<sup>7</sup> Meduza (2025, October 22). Roskomnadzor "chastichno ogranichil" WhatsApp i Telegram. [meduza.io/feature/2025/10/22/roskomnadzor-chastichno-ogranichil-whatsapp-i-telegram-v-34-regionah-rossii-messendzhery-rabotayut-so-sboyami-ili-vovse-ne-otkryvayutsya](https://meduza.io/feature/2025/10/22/roskomnadzor-chastichno-ogranichil-whatsapp-i-telegram-v-34-regionah-rossii-messendzhery-rabotayut-so-sboyami-ili-vovse-ne-otkryvayutsya).

<sup>8</sup> Meduza (2025, November 28). Roskomnadzor predupredil o polnoi blokirovke WhatsApp. [meduza.io/news/2025/11/28/roskomnadzor-predupredil-o-polnoy-blokirovke-whatsapp-v-rossii](https://meduza.io/news/2025/11/28/roskomnadzor-predupredil-o-polnoy-blokirovke-whatsapp-v-rossii).

<sup>9</sup> Meduza (2026, February 14). Rossiiskie vlasti prodolzhat' lomoat' telegram i votsap. [meduza.io/feature/2026/02/14/rossiiskie-vlasti-prodolzhat-lomat-telegram-i-votsap](https://meduza.io/feature/2026/02/14/rossiiskie-vlasti-prodolzhat-lomat-telegram-i-votsap)

<sup>10</sup> Sauer, P. (2026, February 24). Russia opens criminal case into Telegram founder Pavel Durov. The Guardian. [www.theguardian.com/world/2026/feb/24/russia-criminal-case-telegram-founder-pavel-durov](https://www.theguardian.com/world/2026/feb/24/russia-criminal-case-telegram-founder-pavel-durov).

<sup>11</sup> When using the service on a mobile device. Roskomnadzor claimed the measure was necessitated by the vulnerability of SMS-verification in identity fraud. Meduza (2025, December 5). Pol'zovateli pozhalovalis', chto ne mozhet zajti na Gosuslugi bez ustanovki messendzhera Max. [meduza.io/news/2025/12/05/polzovateli-pozhalovalis-chto-ne-mogut-zayti-na-gosuslugi-bez-ustanovki-messendzhera-max](https://meduza.io/news/2025/12/05/polzovateli-pozhalovalis-chto-ne-mogut-zayti-na-gosuslugi-bez-ustanovki-messendzhera-max).

<sup>12</sup> Meduza (2025, December 16). Gosduma priniala zakon o perevode domovykh chatov v messendzher Max. [meduza.io/news/2025/12/16/gosduma-prinyala-zakon-o-perevode-domovykh-chatov-v-messendzher-max](https://meduza.io/news/2025/12/16/gosduma-prinyala-zakon-o-perevode-domovykh-chatov-v-messendzher-max).

<sup>13</sup> Kommersant. (2025, December 17). Soobshcheniia po minimumu. Dlia uvedomleniia klientov bankam planiruetsia predlozhit' Max. [www.kommersant.ru/doc/8293526?from=top\\_main\\_1](https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/8293526?from=top_main_1).

clear the measure aims to curtail advertisement activities on Instagram and Facebook,<sup>14</sup> which has continued (e.g., through product placement) despite the blocking of both services in Russia. Redirecting advertisement revenues to state-controlled platforms and thereby incentivising content producers to transition their activities to these platforms is crucial for their appeal and financial viability.

While the journalists, activists and experts whose information Russia seeks to suppress, domestically and transnationally, have been quite successful in developing (technical) means for circumventing internet restrictions, this requires continuous resources and resourcefulness as Russia's censoring capacities continue to develop. Russia's efforts to restrict VPN services that enable users to circumvent internet restrictions expanded in 2025 from blocking particular VPN services to blocking widely used VPN protocols.<sup>15</sup> The removal of many VPN apps from Apple's Russia App Store, some 20% of which without public acknowledgement, raises concern about the role of foreign tech companies in facilitating internet censorship in Russia.<sup>16</sup>

The scenario that Russia would block the remaining foreign platforms is therefore realistic. This prospect requires action on two fronts. Policy should, first, aim to support Russian independent media outlets as they adapt their information distribution strategies to recent and anticipated restrictions, including the development of specialised distribution tools and mirroring solutions. Continuous adaptation requires resources, while Russia's repressive measures have severely impacted media's ability to generate revenue. Assistance in developing viable business models will therefore remain important.

Russia's increased ability to block VPN protocols also stresses the urgency of investing in the development of censorship circumvention technologies to defend against digital authoritarianism. Whereas the United States, previously, actively supported initiatives in this domain and advocated for internet freedom, the Trump administration has defunded these efforts and has withdrawn from the Freedom Online Coalition.<sup>17</sup>

The case of Russia does not stand in isolation. Worldwide, the number of social media and internet shutdowns continues to increase and digital authoritarianism is on the rise.<sup>18</sup> In global policy fora, such as the United Nations and the International Telecommunications Union, authoritarian states, including Russia, advocate for full state control over the Internet and seek to undermine the principles underlying the global open internet, including the protection of human rights online. The European Union should continue to build coalitions with like-minded states to safeguard the future of the global open internet against the threat of fragmentation and defend the continued and meaningful involvement of all stakeholders in Internet Governance.

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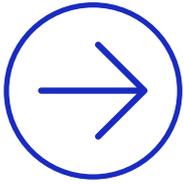
<sup>14</sup> Parent company Meta was designated an extremist organisation in 2022.

<sup>15</sup> Epifanova, A. (2025, February 25). Rubezh YouTube. Kak prodvigaetsia bor'ba Kremliia za kontrol' nad internetom. Carnegie Politika. [carnegieendowment.org/russia-eurasia/politika/2025/02/russia-youtube-block-attempt?lang=en](https://carnegieendowment.org/russia-eurasia/politika/2025/02/russia-youtube-block-attempt?lang=en).

<sup>16</sup> AppleCensorship (2024, September 24). Apple is Silently Removing VPN Apps from Russia's App Store. [appcensorship.com/news/apple-is-silently-removing-vpn-apps-from-russias-app-store](https://appcensorship.com/news/apple-is-silently-removing-vpn-apps-from-russias-app-store).

<sup>17</sup> Down, A. (2026, 19 February). US funding for global internet freedom 'effectively gutted'. The Guardian. [www.theguardian.com/world/2026/feb/19/us-funding-for-global-internet-freedom-effectively-gutted](https://www.theguardian.com/world/2026/feb/19/us-funding-for-global-internet-freedom-effectively-gutted)

<sup>18</sup> Freedom House (2025). Freedom on the Net 2025: An uncertain future for the global Internet. [freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2025/uncertain-future-global-internet#tracking-the-global-decline](https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2025/uncertain-future-global-internet#tracking-the-global-decline).



## Policy Recommendations

- **Anticipate further escalation of Russian internet censorship**, including the blocking of all remaining foreign platforms and messaging apps – most notably, YouTube, Telegram and WhatsApp.
- **Provide sustained financial and technical support to Russian independent media in exile**, supporting them as they adapt their distribution strategies to these recent and anticipated restrictions, including the development of specialised distribution tools and mirroring solutions.
- **Support the development of sustainable business models for independent media**, recognising the need to adapt in the face of evolving repression requires resources, while Russia's restrictions impact media's capacity to generate revenue.
- **Invest in and scale up internet censorship circumvention technologies**, ensuring secure access to independent information, and defend against rising digital authoritarianism.
- **Strengthen coalitions with like-minded states and stakeholders** to safeguard the future of the global open internet and defend the continued, meaningful involvement of all stakeholders in Internet Governance.

### Disclaimer

Views and opinions expressed are those of the author(s) only and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union or REA. Neither the European Union nor the granting authority can be held responsible for them.

## About the ARM Project

Coordinated by the Chr. Michelsen Institute (CMI), the ARM project delves into authoritarian strategies for information control beyond borders. While foreign disinformation receives ample scrutiny, other forms of foreign information manipulation and intervention (FIMI) remain overlooked.

Analysing Russia, China, Ethiopia, and Rwanda, ARM conceptualises and addresses different forms of FIMI. The project will explore the extent that major global players like China and Russia, alongside Ethiopia and Rwanda, engage in transnational information suppression, particularly targeting European diaspora communities.

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