



FRIEDRICH NAUMANN
FOUNDATION For Freedom.

RUSSIA – YOUTUBE AND GLOBAL PLATFORMS

A new battleground for Russian journalists
and bloggers

Andrei Soldatov und Irina Borogan

ANALYSIS

Imprint

Publisher

Friedrich-Naumann-Stiftung für die Freiheit
Truman-Haus
Karl-Marx-Straße 2
14482 Potsdam-Babelsberg

/freiheit.org

/FriedrichNaumannStiftungFreiheit

/FNFreiheit

/stiftungfuerdiefreiheit

Authors

Andrei Soldatov und Irina Borogan

Editors

Global Themes Unit
International Journalists and Media Dialogue Program
International Department

Contact

Telefon +49 30 220126-34
Telefax +49 30 690881-02
E-Mail service@freiheit.org

Date

June 2022

Notes on using this publication

This publication is an information offer of the Friedrich Naumann Foundation for Freedom. It is available free of charge and not intended for sale. It may not be used by parties or election workers for the purpose of election advertising during election campaigns (federal, state or local government elections, or European Parliament elections).

License

Creative Commons (CC BY-NC-ND 4.0)

Table of contents

SUMMARY.....	4
1. BACKGROUND.....	4
2. THE KREMLIN STRATEGY.....	6
3. CHRONICLES OF THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE KREMLIN'S APPROACH: 2018–2021	6
4. CREATING THE ALTERNATIVE SPACE	9
5. THE IMPACT OF THE WAR.....	10
6. RESURRECTION ON YOUTUBE AND TELEGRAM	11
7. CONCLUSION	12
BIBLIOGRAPHY UND LITERATURE	12

Summary

Since the early 2000s, the Kremlin strongly believed that television was not mass media but a powerful weapon, so it should be kept under the control of the government; hence, it was so for all the years with Putin in power.

In the late 2010s, the Internet overtook television as the most popular media format in Russia. It was also the time when Russian-speaking YouTube went political: well-known bloggers started producing political content, opposition politicians became the most popular YouTubers, and finally mainstream journalists migrated to the platform, a move precipitated by Covid-19 isolation when the demand for Russian-speaking content on YouTube skyrocketed.

1. Background

In the spring 2017, protests hit many Russian cities, at least in part sparked by a YouTube video about the alleged corruption of Russian Prime Minister Dmitri Medvedev, produced by opposition leader Alexey Navalny. Navalny's video has been viewed more than 22 million times.¹ A new generation of protesters hit the streets, including teenagers.

The Kremlin responded by accusing Navalny of politicizing the Russian youth. This was not true. In fact, politicization of the Russian youth and the Russian YouTube was provoked by two factors:

- The omnipresence of smartphones in Russian schools, and the popularity of video sharing and social media platforms among schoolchildren, via YouTube and TikTok in particular,
- The new brainwashing instructions for teachers issued by the Kremlin in response to the protests.

On April 6, 2017, in the Samara school No. 114, Anton, a 15-year-old 8th grade student had a nasty conversation with his teacher in a classroom. It started with a presentation of a documentary, „No to Extremism“, produced by a local state TV company after a protest rally that took place in the city in March. The teacher, Irina Gorbatenko, then made a passionate speech to the class, attacking those who had attended the protest rally. When Anton smiled at her diatribe, she shouted at him, „Stand up! Do you like extremism? Aggression? Get up, go see the Director!”²

The aggressiveness of the teacher was unprecedented. However, the reaction of Anton was also something Russian

Therefore, it came as no surprise that when the war started it was YouTube that became the main battlefield for independent Russian journalists, including those who had moved out of the country. However, YouTube was also used by Russian propaganda for years with great effect. For that reason, the Russian government was hesitant to block YouTube, unlike other global platforms that Kremlin censors blocked immediately after the war started. That provided time for Russian users to adapt and install censorship circumvention tools. The other platform that was not immediately blocked was Telegram, and Russian journalists didn't miss that opportunity to talk to their audience either.

schools were not prepared for – he secretly recorded the video of his exchange with the teacher and posted it online.

Similar stories took place in many schools in Russian regions. At the end of March, Sergei, a student at the Tomsk school No. 2 recorded a video of his teacher lashing out at children, called them fascists and “slaves of the Anglo-Saxons.”³ That video was also posted online. These videos and similar ones have been shared on TikTok by thousands of children and have provoked more politicization among youth.

Navalny's team seized an opportunity. In September 2017, Semen Golubovsky, a student in Vladivostok, covertly recorded his teacher attacking him for his political views. “Do you want to go to jail?” he was asked. His only crime was that he had brought a Navalny pin to school. He was also told that his activities on VK were being monitored by the FSB (the Federal Security Service of the Russian Federation). The video was published on Navalny's YouTube Channel with the header “Headmistress intimidates a student because of his „Navalny 2018” pin’ and went viral on YouTube – it has received more than 6 million views.⁴

Attacks on young people and the brutality of antiriot police has prompted many Russian YouTube bloggers respond to the political events. Russian YouTube was mostly non-political prior to 2017: it was about entertainment, children and comedians. The protests and the brutal response to them prompted comedians such as Danila Poperechny (950,000 subscribers) and bloggers such as Nikolai Sobolev (3 million subscribers) and Kamikadzedead (1.02 million subscribers) to post political commentaries on YouTube.⁵

¹ <https://www.rferl.org/a/navalny-video-medvedev-corruption-posted-government-websites/28541102.html>

² <https://www.currenttime.tv/a/28413389.html>

³ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eSMYgczoiu4>

⁴ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9aZ0jqtMwcc>

⁵ <https://actualcomment.ru/blogery-idut-v-politiku-1704281119.html>

Since then, Navalny's organization have started to produce anti-corruption videos on YouTube on an industrial scale. They have become far more popular than the content created by Radio Free Europe, Voice of America and BBC combined.

The Kremlin responded with more repressions. The Kremlin also tried to court the popular bloggers on YouTube – On May 22, 2017, the State Duma invited Sasha Spilberg to give a talk before the Russian MPs.⁶ Sasha Spilberg claimed to have an audience of 10 million people in her social media. She said that she wanted to be “an intermediary between the state and the society.”⁷

However, the biggest breakthrough for Russian journalism was the emergence of Yuri Dud, the most popular interviewer on Russian YouTube. He launched his channel on February 7, 2017. Dud was a professional journalist, editor-in-chief of Sports.ru website, and his example inspired other journalists to believe that the migration from the media to YouTube was indeed possible.

In May 2017, a news bombshell dropped: a sociological survey by the state-run polling agency VTsIOM showed that Russian television has continued losing its hold on the public. For the two years, the percentage of Russians who stated they got their news from the TV dropped 10 percent – and the percentage of Russians who relied primarily on the Internet for news grew by the same amount. 32% of respondents said they use the internet to search for news, compared to 22% in 2015.⁸

According to polls by the independent Levada Center conducted in December 2016 and June 2017, 20–25% of the country's adult population watched YouTube bloggers' channels.⁹

Over the next two years, the trend was the same: then, in 2019, for the very first time in Russian history, advertising online overtook advertising on television: advertisers spending on television increased by 9% to 187 billion rubles, and on the Internet by 22% to 203 billion rubles.¹⁰

The fastest growing media format was the Internet, where advertising revenues grew by 22% to 187 billion rubles. Thus, the Internet overtook TV by 16 billion rubles, while at the end of 2017, the difference was 4 billion rubles in favor of television.

This was the serious threat to the information monopoly the Kremlin was seeking.

⁶ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=V2AqNYPhFhw>

⁷ <https://novayagazeta.ru/articles/2017/05/22/72529-soprotivlyatsya-zarubezhnym-fabrikam-mysli-v-internete-imet-po-3-rebenka-prizyvayt-k-ob-edineniyu-korey-i-pomnit-ostvoih-tsennostyah>

⁸ <https://www.calvertjournal.com/articles/show/8225/russians-losing-faith-in-tv-news>

⁹ <https://www.levada.ru/2017/07/17/televizor-budushhego-kak-videoblogery-menyayut-medialandshaft/>

¹⁰ <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/3907952>

2. The Kremlin strategy

In 2018, the Kremlin understood that Russian censors needed a new approach to deal with the challenge posed by YouTube. As early as in November 2017, the Russian Security Council instructed the Ministry of Communications to submit “proposals for the creation and implementation of a state information system to ensure the integrity, stability and security of the Russian segment of the Internet, as well as replacement root servers for national domain names at top level.” The Security Council warned: “A serious threat to the security of the Russian Federation is posed by the increased capabilities of Western countries to conduct offensive operations in the information space and readiness to use them.”¹¹

On the surface, the Security Council wanted to make the Russian Internet more sustainable and self-sufficient. In reality, the Kremlin wanted a more advanced system of controlling the Internet in the country.

In 2018, the Kremlin came up with an entirely new concept of how to achieve this aim. The idea was developed by the Administration of the President (Department for the Application of Information Technologies and the Development of Electronic Democracy of the Presidential Administration, headed by Andrei Lipov).

Andrei Lipov’s Department suggested providing all Russian Internet service providers with special equipment that could allow censors to suppress and redirect traffic, including the traffic of global platforms such as YouTube, across the coun-

¹¹ <https://meduza.io/feature/2019/11/27/ohrannik-suverennogo-runeta>

ry from a central point in Moscow, all supplied by and paid for by the state. The plan became known as the system of *The Sovereign Internet*. It was adopted as law in May 2019. The second part of the plan was to make Russian users migrate from foreign Internet services to Russian ones. That approach became known as the *import substitution of information technologies*.

The plan was multifaceted: it included an introduction of special legislation – the pre-installation apps law (requires smartphones manufacturers to have Russian-made apps pre-installed for smartphones sold in Russia), which was adopted in November 2019 but came into effect in December 2020. It also included the Kremlin-sponsored campaign to support and promote Russian alternatives to global platforms.

There were two other important elements of the new approach:

1. An increasing pressure on global platforms – including the introduction of huge fines, intimidation of employees, direct pressure and threats.
2. Work with prominent YouTube bloggers to prompt them to move to the Russian platforms, combined with direct pressure on popular bloggers with opposition views to force them leave the country.

3. Chronicles of the implementation of the Kremlin’s approach: 2018–2021

Google LLC received the first fine from Russian censors in December 2018 – for refusing to remove websites blocked in Russia from Google search results. At the time, the fine amounted to just half a million rubles.

Roskomnadzor (the Federal Service for Supervision of Communications, Information Technology and Mass Media) was hesitant to attack YouTube directly with huge fines because the Kremlin was aware that Russian propaganda media, most importantly RT, was hugely dependent on the presence on YouTube.

In 2007, RT was the first Russian TV network to begin posting its content on YouTube, and in 2013 it became the world’s first network to reach one billion views. “To establish such a connection with the audience and attract viewers so that

they come back to you again and again, so as to hit one billion views – that’s a remarkable achievement,” said Robert Kyncl, Google VP and Head of Content for YouTube at the time.¹²

In 2020, RT claimed to have become the #1 most-watched TV news network on YouTube, with a record-setting 10 billion views as well as more than 16 million subscribers. The total number of views from across RT’s channels on YouTube “put the network ahead of all the news channels of the BBC, CNN, Al Jazeera, Euronews, Fox News and others.”¹³

The Kremlin was also hesitant to use the option of blocking YouTube as a threat following the debacle with an attempt

¹² <https://advanced-television.com/2020/01/29/rt-hits-10bn-views-on-youtube/>

¹³ <https://www.rapidtvnews.com/2020013058012/rt-claims-global-tv-news-network-first-with-over-10bn-youtube-views.html>

to block Telegram in March 2018; the service had remained largely accessible for Russian users while Russian censors accidentally disrupted access to many other online services in the country in their attempt to block Telegram.¹⁴

The following year, 2019, Russian censors were busy building and testing a new, more sophisticated filtering system (the Sovereign Internet). Not all of the tests went well; on December 23, 2019, the day the Digital Development Ministry conducted a series of tests on the Sovereign Internet, users in Moscow, St. Petersburg, Kolomna, Samara and Novorossiysk experienced temporary shutdowns or difficulties accessing the Internet.¹⁵

Meanwhile, well-established YouTube celebrities, such as Yuri Dud, moved to a new level of professionalism and popularity when they started producing full-scale documentaries. In April 2019, Dud made a documentary titled “Kolyma: the motherland of our fear” about repressions under GULAG and Stalin.¹⁶ It was 2 hours 16 minutes long, was viewed close to 27 million times and became the most discussed Russian documentary apart from those produced by Navalny’s team. In September 2019, Dud created a documentary about the Beslan hostage taking in 2004, and that documentary has been viewed 24 million times.¹⁷

Here is how the September the ranking of the Top 20 Russian-speaking YouTube bloggers by engagement (the number of user reactions) looked that year, according to Brand Analytics:

first position was taken by the most popular gadget blogger Wylsacom. Half of the rating was captured by gaming channels, while the remaining places were divided among other entertainment genres, allowing two political bloggers to enter this realm of fun: Alexei Navalny’ channel got 6th place and 2.1 million reactions (in June he could not get into the top 20, and in February, he was not even in the top 50). The second political blogger in the top-ten was Anatoly Shariy, in 4th place with 2.9 million reactions.¹⁸ Anatoly Shariy is a Ukrainian journalist and blogger, and he became widely popular in Russian-speaking YouTube space as a voice critical of the Ukrainian authorities (In May 2022, Shariy was briefly detained on treason charges by Spanish authorities at the request of the Ukrainian counterintelligence agency).¹⁹

In the spring of 2020, Andrei Lipov moved from the Administration of the President to the Head of Roskomnadzor. Russian censors planned to run several new tests of the Sovereign Internet system, but all tests were canceled due to Covid-19.²⁰ In August 2020, Navalny was poisoned with the Novichok nerve agent in Tomsk. In critical condition, he was transferred to Germany, where he recovered. In December 2020, Navalny posted a video on his YouTube channel: “I called my assassin. He admitted.” On video, Navalny called FSB officer Konstan-

tin Kudryavtsev, pretending to be a Russian security official. Kudryavtsev admitted that the Novichok had been placed in Navalny’s underwear, and that Navalny would have died if not for the plane’s emergency landing and the quick response from an ambulance crew on the runway. The video has been viewed 29 million times.²¹

The big moment came in the spring of 2021. In January 2021, Navalny had returned to Moscow and was immediately arrested and jailed. Two days later, Navalny’s Anti-Corruption Foundation (FBK) released a video exposé: “Putin’s palace. History of the world’s largest bribe.”²² In the documentary, Navalny alleged that a grand property in the southern Russian region of Krasnodar was built for Russian President Vladimir Putin using illicit funds totaling \$1.35 billion. The documentary has been viewed a record 123 million times around the world.

In January and February 2021, Russia’s Anti-Corruption Foundation organized protests in dozens of cities via Facebook and the social network VKontakte, fighting the arrest of its head, Alexey Navalny. Tens of thousands of people protested in more than 100 cities across the country, demanding the release of the opposition figure.²³

On March 10, 2021, Lipov’s Roskomnadzor issued a statement “Roskomnadzor took measures to protect Russian citizens from the influence of illegal content.” **It stated:**

“In order to protect Russian citizens and force the Internet service to comply with the law on the territory of the Russian Federation in relation to Twitter, since March 10, 2021, centralized response measures have been taken, namely, the initial slowdown in the speed of the service (according to the regulations). The slowdown will be implemented on 100% of mobile devices and 50% of stationary devices.”²⁴

The Sovereign Internet system was activated to identify Twitter traffic, specifically its video and picture content. Indeed, Twitter’s traffic was slowed significantly. The operation did not go without problems, however; it appeared to have accidentally shut down the Kremlin’s website, Kremlin.ru, as well as the site of other government agencies. Still, it was considered a success when Twitter rushed to report to Roskomnadzor that the service came to take down “illegal content”. On March 17, Roskomnadzor proudly announced that Twitter had taken down 91% of the content that Russian censors wanted it to remove within just one week.²⁵

The relative success of the operation against Twitter provoked Russian authorities to adopt a more aggressive stance against YouTube. On April 16, 2021, Google representatives were summoned to the State Duma to be questioned before the Commission on the Investigation of Foreign Interference in Russia’s Internal Affairs. Marco Pancini, Director of Public Policy and Government Relations in European, Middle

¹⁴ <https://www.vice.com/en/article/9kg4a3/the-kremlins-war-on-telegram-is-wrecking-russias-internet>

¹⁵ <https://www.bbc.com/news/technology-50902496>

¹⁶ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oo1Wou138rQ>

¹⁷ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vF1UGmi5m8s>

¹⁸ <https://br-analytics.ru/blog/top-20-youtube-bloggers-september-2019/>

¹⁹ <https://kyivindependent.com/uncategorized/associated-press-pro-russian-blogger-anatoly-shariy-released-by-spanish-court/>

²⁰ <https://www.reuters.com/article/health-coronavirus-russia-internet/russia-postpones-sovereign-internet-test-over-coronavirus-idINKBN2171J2>

²¹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ibqjet6Bg38>

²² <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ipAnwilMncl>

²³ <https://time.com/5932550/russia-protests-navalny/>

²⁴ <https://rkn.gov.ru/news/rsoc/news73464.htm>

²⁵ <https://rkn.gov.ru/news/rsoc/news73632.htm>

Eastern and African states for Google and Marina Zhunich, Director for Government Relations Google Russia, took part in the meeting. According to a statement by the State Duma, participants “discussed examples of repeated violations of Russian legislation by Google and YouTube; in particular, they addressed the procedure for restricting access to prohibited content.”²⁶

On May 25, 2021, Andrei Lipov gave an interview to *Kommersant*, in which he commented on the new policy. At the end of 2020, Russia had introduced higher penalties for failure to delete illegal content. Lipov said, „This motivates the platforms. We haven’t yet resorted to fines, but we will.”²⁷ Lipov’s agency increased pressure by demanding that Google lift restrictions that limit the availability of some content from Sputnik and Russia Today outside Russia.

At that time, Russia’s antitrust regulator also investigated Google over YouTube’s policies for blocking videos. Google tried to use the Russian courts to fight back. Google sued Roskomnadzor to fight an order to remove 12 YouTube videos related to opposition protests but the American company lost. In another case, the company appealed a ruling ordering YouTube to reinstate videos from Tsargrad, a nationalist ultraconservative online TV channel, which Google had taken down in July 2020 over what it said were violations of American sanctions. Again, it lost. After that, Google was hammered by fines that grew exponentially. By December 2021, a Moscow court had fined Google 7.2 billion rubles (\$98 million USD) for repeated failure to delete content deemed illegal in Russia.²⁸

More pressure came in the fall of 2021. On September 3, 2021, a Moscow court ordered Google and Yandex to stop displaying Navalny-related results on their websites. A week later, U.S. Ambassador John Sullivan was summoned to the Kremlin. “There is one reason – interference in Russian elections,” said foreign ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova in a posting on the messaging service Telegram. When Google and Apple resisted removing the app, the Kremlin’s tactics became more aggressive. According to a report in the *Washington Post*, on September 14, armed Russian police entered Google’s offices in Moscow. This was a frightening show of force staged under the pretext of collecting fines for alleged content and other violations.²⁹ The FSB officers also went to the home of Google’s top executive in Moscow to deliver an ultimatum: take down an app that had drawn the ire of Russian President Vladimir Putin within 24 hours or be taken to prison. Google quickly moved the woman to a hotel where she checked in under an assumed name and hoped to be protected by the presence of other guests and hotel security, according to people with knowledge of the matter. The same agents then showed up at her room to tell her the clock was still ticking. Within hours, a Navalny app (Smart voting) designed to help Russians register protest votes against Putin could no longer be downloaded from Google.³⁰ (Google got it back much later).

²⁶ <http://duma.gov.ru/en/news/51272/>

²⁷ <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/4826455>

²⁸ <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-59784118>

²⁹ <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2022/03/12/russia-putin-google-apple-navalny/>

³⁰ <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2022/03/12/russia-putin-google-apple-navalny/>

4. Creating the alternative space

In the meantime, the Kremlin encouraged Russian Internet corporations to develop Russian alternatives to global platforms.

As result, several projects were launched in Russia.

The list includes:

Three attempts to create an alternative to TikTok:

- Klipi – an initiative developed by VK (part of Mail.Ru), launched in June 2020. VK claims the daily audience of Klipi reached 20 million.³¹
- Ya Molodets – a social media platform developed by a team with the financial support of the foundation Inno-praktika (headed by Katerina Tikhonova, Putin's daughter). In December 2020, the Ya Molodets project was acquired by Gazprom-Media.³²
- Yappy – another project by Gazprom-Media, launched in November 2021.³³

Three attempts to replace WhatsApp:

- Kuku-Au, a project by Dispraic, a company based in Novosibirsk, and launched in 2015.³⁴
- Klichat, another project developed in Novosibirsk in 2016.³⁵
- IVA AVES-S, a project by Rostec, the leading company of the Russian military industrial complex, launched for government use in 2018.³⁶

Four attempts to develop a Russian alternative to YouTube:

- RuTube – a project which had been launched in 2006, but was acquired by Gazprom-Media in December 2020 to give it a boost.³⁷
- Yandex. Video – a project developed by Yandex, now part of Yandex.Zen, and in operation since 2019.³⁸
- VK Video – a service provided on the platform of VK (part of Mail.ru), launched in 2021.³⁹
- Video Mail.Ru – another service of Mail.Ru.⁴⁰

The greatest efforts were focused on the objective of producing a working alternative to YouTube. Of the three projects under development, the Kremlin is placing its hopes on RuTube, a project funded by the Gazprom-Media group, which is controlled by Putin's close friends.

This effort should not be mistaken as an attempt to give Russians more options by developing local platforms. The real intent of the campaign comes through clearly from the man who was chosen to lead the RuTube project: Alexander Zharov, the former head of Roskomnadzor and predecessor to Lipov, who was made CEO of Gazprom-Media in March 2020.⁴¹ At a meeting with Russian editors in February 2021, Putin hinted that he was willing to consider banning some global platforms – but that he would do so only once the country had domestic equivalents.⁴²

Prominent bloggers were offered financial incentives to migrate to RuTube.⁴³ Not many followed suit. However, some bloggers opened accounts on Yandex.Video out of the fear that someday YouTube might get blocked. One blogger, Yuri Dud, opened his account on Yandex but did not use it very much – his account got only 1642 subscribers versus 10 million on YouTube. Yandex did not insist on using its hosting service and it was possible just to post the links to YouTube videos on their pages. Many bloggers complained about the quality of the Russian services, making disparaging remarks about RuTube in particular. Censorship was another reason many bloggers were wary of moving to the Russian platforms.

Starting in the summer of 2021, prominent bloggers began an exodus from Russia. The instigating factor was clear: on June 8, 2021, the apartment of prominent videoblogger Yuri Khovansky (4.4 million subscribers) was raided by police in St. Petersburg. Lying face down on the floor, he was forced to respond to police questioning, all recorded on video and published by pro-Kremlin media. He was arrested on the spot and charged with extremism.⁴⁴ Khovansky spent several months in prison until he was released in December 2021.

³¹ <https://vk.com/blog/q2-2021-results>

³² <https://gadgets360.com/social-networking/news/russia-tiktok-ya-modelets-social-network-video-sharing-app-vladimir-putin-daughter-katerina-tikhonova-gazprom-media-ceo-alexander-zharov-kommersant-2342864>

³³ <https://www.gamingdeputy.com/gazprom-media-launches-yappy-domestic-alogue-of-tiktok/>

³⁴ <https://hi-tech.mail.ru/news/kuku-au-messenger/>

³⁵ <http://igeek.ru/novosti/41518-klichat-rossijskij-analog-whatsapp-i-viber.html>

³⁶ https://www.tadviser.ru/index.php/Продукт:Масштаб:_IVA_AVES-S_

³⁷ [Защищенная_система_для_удаленных_конференций](https://www.gazprom-media.com/ru/media/holding-gazprom-media-priobrel-video-servis-rutube)

³⁸ [https://www.gazprom-media.com/ru/media/holding-gazprom-media-priobrel-video-servis-rutube](https://zen.yandex.ru/video)

³⁹ <https://zen.yandex.ru/video>

⁴⁰ <https://vk.com/video/culture>

⁴¹ <https://my.mail.ru/video>

⁴² <https://meduza.io/en/news/2020/03/24/russia-s-former-top-censor-is-appointed-ceo-of-gazprom-media>

⁴³ <https://iz.ru/1124531/2021-02-14/putin-dopustil-otkliuchenie-zarubezhnykh-inter-net-platform-v-rossii>

⁴⁴ <https://stories.media/investigations/2022/02/09/seks-lozh-i-video/>

⁴⁵ https://www.dp.ru/a/2021/06/09/Bloger_JUrij_Hovanskij_zad

Michael Naki, a radio host at Echo Moskvy and a popular blogger on YouTube (647,000 subscribers), left Russia in June 2021. A week later Ruslan Usachev (2.7 million subscribers) left the country. "I look at the injustice, obscurantism, hypocrisy, crackdowns, manipulation of facts and just plain shameless behavior. Now you need to wash the floors in your apartment more often – because you might suddenly have to lie face down on them. It is such a heavy atmosphere, it hurts to look at what is happening in Russia. At some point, it just clicked: it's time to get out of Russia," he said.⁴⁵ In November, Dmitri Larin (2.14 million subscribers) left Russia. He explained his departure was spurred by the criminal

⁴⁵ https://www.gazeta.ru/culture/news/2021/06/30/n_16176884.shtml

case against blogger Yuri Khovansky, the same reason Ruslan Usachev cited.⁴⁶

In the meantime, Covid-19 had an unexpected positive effect on the Russian YouTube community. Many Russian journalists had channels on YouTube that were largely dormant. The pandemic prompted them to activate or re-start them, as, for instance, did Tatyana Felgengauer, a prominent host on the Echo Moskvy radio (she started her channel in June 2020). As in the rest of the world, Russians were locked up in their apartments, but the liberal part of society turned to YouTube instead of television.

⁴⁶ https://lenta.ru/news/2021/11/26/larin_iz_rossii/

5. The impact of the war

On February 24, on the first day of the war, Roskomnadzor instructed Russian media to use only official information about the war in Ukraine and banned words such as "invasion," "war" and "offensive" in favor of Russia's preferred "special military operation."⁴⁷

On March 4, the legislation on fake news about the war in Ukraine was adopted by the Russian Parliament. According to the law, a person could face a prison sentence of up to 15 years for spreading information that goes against the Russian government's position on the war in Ukraine.⁴⁸

Soon after the beginning of the war in Ukraine, the two most popular liberal media on YouTube – Radio Echo Moskvy and TV channel Dozhd (TV Rain) were closed. Russian censors also blocked international media including the BBC, Deutsche Welle, as well as independent Russian media including Meduza, Mediazona, Doxa, Echo Moskvy and TV Rain. Our own website, Agentura.ru, was blocked on March 18. Russian censors also blocked Facebook, Twitter and Instagram. On March 21, Meta was designated "an organization that conducts extremist activities." This designation came at the request of the Russian Prosecutor General's Office and was granted in a hearing of the Tversky Court of Moscow.⁴⁹

Roskomnadzor took the Echo Moskvy radio station off the air on March 1; this was in response to them broadcasting what authorities called information „calling for extremist activities, violence, and premeditated false information" about Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Roskomnadzor implemented the order of the Prosecutor General's Office. The station's website was also blocked.⁵⁰ Two days later, the Board of Directors of Echo Moskvy voted to close the station down. (Echo Moskvy is owned by Gazprom-Media, which holds 66% of its shares).

⁴⁷ <https://www.interfax.ru/russia/824177>

⁴⁸ <https://www.bbc.com/russian/news-60615902>

⁴⁹ <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/russian-war-report-meta-officially-declared-extremist-organization-in-russia/>

⁵⁰ <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2022/03/03/russian-liberal-radio-mainstay-echo-moskvy-closes-after-pulled-off-the-air-a76730>

Founded in 1990, Echo Moskvy was a favorite among liberal-minded people in Russia. It had been taken off air only once before and not for long, during the hardline communist August Coup in 1991. Echo Moskvy also had a huge presence on YouTube, but their channels were deleted, along with the archives of videos from several years. In April, the Justice Ministry added former Echo Moskvy editor-in-chief Aleksei Venediktov to a list of foreign agents.

Another popular liberal media outlet, TV channel Dozhd (TV Rain), announced that it was temporarily halting its operations on March 3, two days after radio Echo Moskvy was taken off air. TV Rain also previously had a massive presence on YouTube; the channel with 3.2 million subscribers was not deleted completely but all content was removed. The only video available on the channel is a statement from Natalya Sindeeva, CEO of TV Rain: „We need strength to ... understand how we can work from here. We really hope that we will return to broadcasting and continue our work."⁵¹ The decision came after TV Rain was blocked by Roskomnadzor along with Echo Moskvy for broadcasting false information about the "special operation" in Ukraine. TV Rain had 6.2 million active monthly users.⁵²

In the meantime, video bloggers and journalists have continued to leave the country: Poperechny and Yuri Dud moved out of Russia in March–April 2022. Ekaterina Shulman, a popular intellectual (her channel on YouTube has 995,000 subscribers) also left the country, moving to Germany where she has kept her YouTube channel active and popular.

⁵¹ <https://www.reuters.com/business/retail-consumer/russian-tv-channel-says-it-is-temporarily-halting-work-2022-03-03/>

⁵² <https://www.niemanlab.org/2022/03/russia-blocks-tv-rain-its-last-independent-tv-channel-and-tv-rain-airs-its-last-broadcast/>

6. Resurrection on YouTube and Telegram

The disappearance of the two most popular liberal media outlets left an irreplaceable gap in the Russian media landscape, but fortunately the situation did not last long. Hosts and reporters did not stop their activities and increasingly moved to YouTube. Some journalists launched new channels, but many journalists simply activated personal YouTube channels they already had but did not use much. Many started using their personal YouTube channels more energetically already in 2020 during the Covid-19 lockdown and by the time of the war had a sizeable audience on YouTube. Many had channels on Telegram. Telegram was not blocked by Roskomnadzor, and it became an essential source of information and gossip for the Russian people. The demand for information is apparently huge: we launched our Telegram channel just a month before the war started, and one week after February 24 our channel (agenturaru – with news about Russia’s secret services) had 58,000 subscribers.

Soon after the closing, Echo Moskvyy relaunched many of its programs on the YouTube channel “Zhivoi Gvozd” (A Living Nail), which was registered in 2019.

As of April 2022, the channel had 514,000 subscribers and 47,950,054 views. Echo Moskvyy also opened an eponymous channel on Telegram, which had 37,996 subscribers, where users can find links to the programs on YouTube. All podcasts of the programs are available on SoundsCloud, GooglePodcasts, ApplePodcasts and Yandex.Music.

Some well-known Echo Moskvyy journalists got back to audiences via their personal YouTube channels and on their channels on Telegram. Alexandr Plushev, an experienced Russian host at Echo Moskvyy, is a household name for middle class Muscovites, and he has had his YouTube channel Alexandr Plushev since 2006. When the war in Ukraine started, he moved to Lithuania, but despite a dramatic change in his life, he did not stop broadcasting his programs on YouTube, including Tochka (the Point) and his Breakfast show. In April, Tochka, a political talk show, had 163,000 subscribers and the program usually had from 50 to 100 thousand views. His telegram channel has 94,611 subscribers.

Sergey Parkhomenko, a veteran journalist and liberal commentator at Echo Moskvyy, known for his anti-Kremlin views, had his channel since 2009 but did not use it very much. He started regularly streaming his political show “Meaning of events” (Суть событий) in September of 2021, and now he has had his shows on YouTube several times per week. The channel has 94,100 subscribers and every show is viewed by more than 100,000 people.

Like Plushev, Parkhomenko left Russia, but he continues to produce his show for the Russian audience quite successfully and remains very popular with the Russian public.

When Michael Naki emigrated to Georgia in June, the popularity of his channel in Russia did not fall: his channel on YouTube had 103,464,762 views by the end of April. Naki also joined the *Popular Politics* show, Navalny’s anti-corruption foundation (FBC) channel on YouTube; he contributes to that channel on regular basis.

Popular Politics is a YouTube channel with 1.17 million subscribers that has become a flagship show of independent Russian broadcasting on YouTube, competing with the news channel produced by an oligarch in exile from Mikhail Khordorkovsky’s team. Since the beginning of the war in Ukraine, the channel focused on what was going on in that country. “A channel that is broadcasting the truth about the Putin-led war against Ukraine”, says its slogan. The host team includes well-known FBK activists such as Leonid Volkov, Navalny’s deputy, Kira Yarmysh, Navalny’s spokesperson and Maria Pevchikh, a chief of the investigations unit at FBK.

For many Russians, *Popular Politics* became an alternative to television news. They watch it live in the way they used to watch television, starting in the morning. After TV Rain stopped broadcasting, many of its journalists left Russia but keep going on YouTube. Two leading hosts, wife-husband team Ekaterina Kotrikadze and Tikhon Dzyadko, launched a channel on YouTube where they produce according to television standards, and started streaming from Tbilisi at the end of March 2022. As Kotrikadze explained then, it was “an attempt to fill a vacuum” for them and to analyze “the hell around.”⁵³ The channel had 183,000 subscribers by the end of April.⁵⁴

Unlike most independent media, YouTube was not blocked in Russia after the war started. During the first two months of the war, Russian censors attacked YouTube repeatedly, threatening to block the service completely, but refrained from doing that. During these first months, many Russians had important time to learn how to get their news on YouTube. They also used that time to install VPNs to bypass blocking of independent media and social media such as Facebook, Twitter and Instagram. This knowledge might come at handy if YouTube and Telegram eventually get blocked.

⁵³ https://www.wonderzine.com/wonderzine/life/news/262463-kotrikadze-dzyadko?from=readmore&fbclid=IwAR3TDQ5q_TE40dDs1TCIpcUwCU0iQ1jHGCB6rB-ce0b-HubefyAkzmn-qZM

⁵⁴ <https://www.youtube.com/user/tdzyadko>

7. Conclusions

The first months of the war became a clear indication that access to global platforms for the Russian people is absolutely crucial. Independent Russian journalists rely primarily on global platforms in their efforts to reach out to domestic audiences – whether it is YouTube, Telegram or blocked Facebook and Twitter. So far, they have succeeded. The Kremlin failed or simply did not have enough time to make Russian users get used to domestic platforms for getting their news and it backfired spectacularly when the war started.

In Russia, the climate of total censorship prompted many citizens seeking uncensored news to install censorship circumvention tools and rely on global platforms, primarily YouTube and Telegram, in their daily news consumption. It is of paramount importance for the West to keep that connection alive.

Bibliography and Literature

Bibliography

The Washington Post, Putin's pre-war moves against U.S. tech giants laid groundwork for crackdown on free expression, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2022/03/12/russia-putin-google-apple-navalny/>

Bloomberg, YouTube at Risk of Russia Ban After Facebook Deemed Illegal, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2022-03-22/youtube-at-risk-of-russia-ban-after-facebook-is-deemed-illegal>

The Wall Street Journal, From YouTube to RuTube. Inside Russia's Influence Campaign, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/from-youtube-to-rutube-inside-russias-influence-campaign-11650447002>

Calvert Journal, The top Russian Youtubers you need to know, <https://www.calvertjournal.com/features/show/3776/Russian-youtubers-Clapp-Usachev-Krygina-Egorov-Jelud>

Coda, Russia is determined to make RuTube happen, <https://www.codastory.com/newsletters/russia-rutube/>

Literature

Arkady Ostrovsky, *The Invention of Russia*

Ken Auletta, *Googled*

Andrei Soldatov, Irina Borogan, *The Red Web*

