

International censorship mounted against Russian state-affiliated media outlets

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In recent days, censorship measures have been taken by the European Union (EU), tech and social media platforms and streaming services internationally against media sources with connections to the Russian government.

On Wednesday, the EU put into effect a ban on the Russian state media outlets RT and Sputnik that had been announced on Sunday. The sanctions impact both the traditional broadcast signals and all affiliated online platforms and mobile apps.

EU media regulators will be monitoring compliance with the ban across all 28 countries with the risk of fines being imposed on any providers found to be continuing to distribute the media content.

RT is an international television network funded by the Russian government. It operates pay television or free-to-air channels directed to audiences outside of Russia, including content on the internet in English, Spanish, French, German, Arabic and Russian. Sputnik, formerly called Voice of Russia, is a state-run news agency and radio broadcast service.

On Sunday, European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen said, “We will ban the Kremlin’s media machine in the EU. The state-owned Russia Today and Sputnik, and their subsidiaries, will no longer be able to spread their lies to justify Putin’s war.”

On Tuesday, the satellite TV and streaming service DirecTV announced it was dropping RT from its roster of television programs “effective immediately.” The TV provider, which is owned by the media conglomerate AT&T, said that the decision was an acceleration of “this year’s contract expiration timeline” which was already under review and set to expire later this year.

On Thursday, a report on CNN Business said RT America was shutting down operations and laying off

most of its staff. According to a memo obtained by the cable news network, the production company behind RT America was ceasing production at its locations in New York, Miami, Los Angeles and Washington D.C., “as a result of unforeseen business interruption events.”

Misha Solodovnikov, the general manager of T&R Productions, told staff members that the layoffs were permanent. CNN Business said that DirecTV dropping the channel, one of two major TV providers that carried RT, dealt “a major financial blow to the network.”

Additionally, the streaming video content hardware provider Roku announced on Wednesday that it banned RT and Sputnik from its channel store worldwide, after initially removing them in Europe only.

A report on RT included a statement from deputy editor-in-chief Anna Belkina who condemned the decision and said critics of the outlet had not “pointed to a single example, a single grain of evidence that what RT has reported over these days, and continues to report, is not true.”

The EU decision came after a statement issued by Mykhailo Fedorov, vice prime minister of Ukraine, who tweeted on February 26 that he had contacted YouTube “to block the propagandist Russian channels—such as Russia 24, TASS, RIA Novosti” and claiming they were full of “poisonous lies.”

On Tuesday the most popular social media platforms YouTube, Facebook and TikTok also banned RT and Sputnik in Europe. A statement from Google Europe (owner of YouTube) on Twitter, said, “Due to the ongoing war in Ukraine, we’re blocking YouTube channels connected to RT and Sputnik across Europe, effective immediately.”

Facebook’s Nick Clegg, president of global affairs, tweeted on Monday, “We have received requests from a number of Governments and the EU to take further

steps in relation to Russian state-controlled media. Given the exceptional nature of the current situation, we will be restricting access to RT and Sputnik across the EU at this time.”

According to a report in the Washington Post, Facebook had reported late Sunday that it had “disrupted a Russian disinformation operation targeting Ukraine, one of the first official confirmations of such a campaign since the invasion of Ukraine last week” and that it blocked a hacking group that “attempted to compromise the accounts of prominent Ukrainians.”

On Tuesday, Apple announced that it was removing RT and Sputnik from its app store around the world except for Russia. The censorship measures were taken along with Apple stopping the sales of its products through the Apple Store in Russia, as well as limiting its Apple Pay and other services.

An Apple representative told CNBC, “We have taken a number of actions in response to the invasion. ... [we] have disabled both traffic and live incidents in Apple Maps in Ukraine as a safety and precautionary measure for Ukrainian citizens.”

TikTok confirmed to the Post on Monday its decision to ban the Russian outlets in the EU. Twitter announced on Monday that it was adding labels and reducing visibility for tweets containing content from the RT and Sputnik sites.

A label on a link from RT posted on Twitter displayed a message that said, “Stay Informed: This tweet links to a Russia state-affiliated media website” and includes a link to “Find out more.” Clicking on the link goes to a Twitter Help Center page that explains its “government and state-affiliated media account labels” policy.

Twitter said the labels would be applied automatically to tweets with a URL from a designated state-affiliated media website and will reduce visibility of these tweets by not recommending them to users and taking them out of the “Top Search” function. Twitter also said it would be adding additional state-backed media outlets from other countries in the coming weeks.

On Tuesday the Russian government-backed documentary film company Redfish said its pages had been banned in Europe. In a tweet, the anti-capitalist media company posted, “YouTube just banned our page within Europe. IG (Instagram) has also shadow-

banned our account, and we expect a full ban on all platforms soon. But remember how it ended last time for totalitarianism in Europe.” Shadow-banning is the practice of an online or social media platform of partially blocking user content from some areas of the community.

There have been other recent acts of online censorship of left-wing and anti-war views, such as Spotify’s removal of a “Moment of Clarity” podcast by Lee Camp. Camp, who has noted the correspondence of the invasion of Ukraine by the Putin regime and the numerous aggressive wars by US imperialism over recent decades, tweeted, “My podcast ‘Moment of Clarity’ has been removed from @Spotify. Let it be known—you can do anti-women, anti-trans or racist content on Spotify but you can’t be anti-war. That’s not allowed.”

Camp also tweeted, “So once everything except US pro-war propaganda has been banned from TV & internet, will you feel safe then? Will everything be better then?”

The banning of Russian media sources has also won the approval of Senator Mark R. Warner (Democrat, Virginia), who has long pressured the tech industry to restrict Russian government-backed publishers as a means of increasing censorship across the Internet.

During a Post Live event on Monday, Warner, who is the chair of the Senate Intelligence Committee, praised the steps taken to demonetize Russian state media but said the war in Ukraine underscored the need for more regulation of social media in the United States. “We need some rules of the road going forward. Whether it’s in peace or war, these companies have unparalleled power,” he said.



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