

‘Fake News’? Putin Blocks Facebook, Twitter, Criminalizes Negative War Reports

Russian President Vladimir Putin on Friday intensified a crackdown on media outlets and individuals who fail to hew to the Kremlin line on the war in Ukraine, blocking Facebook and Twitter and signing into law a bill that criminalizes the intentional spreading of what Moscow deems to be “fake” reports.

The moves against the social media giants follow blocks imposed on the BBC, the U.S. government-funded Voice of America and Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, German broadcaster Deutsche Welle and Latvia-based website Meduza. The government’s sweeping action against the foreign outlets that publish news in Russian seeks to establish even tighter controls over what information the domestic audience sees about the invasion of Ukraine.

The state communications watchdog Roskomnadzor said it cut access to Twitter and Facebook in line with a decision by the prosecutor general’s office. The watchdog has previously accused Twitter of failing to delete the content banned by Russian authorities and slowed down access to it.

The bill, quickly rubber-stamped by both houses of the Kremlin-controlled parliament and signed by Putin, imposes prison sentences of up to 15 years for those spreading information that goes against the Russian government’s narrative on the war.

Russian authorities have repeatedly decried reports of Russian military setbacks or civilian deaths in Ukraine as “fake”

news. State media outlets refer to Russia's invasion of Ukraine as a "special military operation" rather than a "war" or an "invasion."

Vyacheslav Volodin, the speaker of the lower house of parliament, said the measure "will force those who lied and made statements discrediting our armed forces to bear very grave punishment."

"I want everyone to understand, and for society to understand, that we are doing this to protect our soldiers and officers, and to protect the truth," he added.

The law envisages sentences of up to three years or fines for spreading what authorities deem to be false news about the military, but the maximum punishment rises to 15 years for cases deemed to have led to "severe consequences."

In blocking Facebook, Roskomnadzor cited its alleged "discrimination" of the Russian media and state information resources. The agency said in a statement that the restrictions introduced by Facebook owner Meta on the Russian news channel RT and other state-controlled media violate Russian law.

Nick Clegg, Meta's president of global affairs, tweeted in response to Russia's action that "millions of ordinary Russians will find themselves cut off from reliable information, deprived of their everyday ways of connecting with family and friends and silenced from speaking out."

"We will continue to do everything we can to restore our services so they remain available to people to safely and securely express themselves and organize for action," Clegg added.

The Russian media blocks on the five foreign media organizations are among the most influential and often critical foreign media publishing in Russian.

Roskomnadzor said those media had published “false information” on subjects including “the methods of carrying out combat activities (attacks on civilians, strikes on civil infrastructure), the numbers of losses of the Russian Federation Armed Forces and victims among the civilian population.”

The BBC said it was temporarily stopping the work of all its journalists and support staff in Russia while it assessed the implications of the new law. BBC Director-General Tim Davie said the legislation “appears to criminalize the process of independent journalism.”

“The safety of our staff is paramount and we are not prepared to expose them to the risk of criminal prosecution simply for doing their jobs,” he said.

Davie said the BBC’s Russian-language news service would continue to operate from outside Russia.

Earlier in the day, the BBC posted instructions on Twitter about how Russian readers could work around the block by using apps or the “dark web.”

“Access to accurate, independent information is a fundamental human right which should not be denied to the people of Russia, millions of whom rely on BBC News every week. We will continue our efforts to make BBC News available in Russia, and across the rest of the world,” the BBC said.

Earlier this week the BBC said it was bringing back shortwave radio transmission to Ukraine and parts of Russia so people can listen to its programs with basic equipment.

Some well-known media outlets within Russia have chosen to close rather than face heavy restrictions on what they can report. News website Znak said it was closing Friday morning, shortly after the parliament approved the draft bill. On Thursday, Russia’s top independent radio station Ekho Moskvyy

was closed and independent TV station Dozhdh suspended operations after receiving a threat of closure from the authorities.

The authorities also pressed ahead with a sweeping effort to target human rights organizations.

Authorities raided the offices of Memorial, one of Russia's oldest and most prominent human rights organizations. According to Memorial members, police didn't provide any explanation and there were no warnings.

"The police refused to let me and the lawyer in without explanation, and when I tried not to let in the reinforcement officers who arrived in bulletproof vests and masks, they threatened to use force if I did not let them in," the chairman of International Memorial Yan Rachinsky said. "This is the level of justice today in the capital of Russia."

Another leading human rights group, the Civic Assistance, also saw its Moscow office raided. {eo}

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