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Russian Social Network VK Gains Carte Blanche Following the Closure of Instagram and Facebook in the Country

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Abstract

As the Russian invasion of Ukraine erupted, the country's authorities declared a war on Western social media as well. In March, such social media giants as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram were blocked in Russia, giving their local competitor—named VK—a virtual monopoly in the country. Millions of Russian Facebook and Instagram users have flocked to this social network. Though VK may seem similar to Facebook, it is drastically different due to its proximity to the Russian government. The article examines the core peculiarities of VK and the risks its users may face, especially, in the context of war.

Capture of VK by the Russian Government

VK is a popular Russian social network that has more than 100 million visitors per month. It was created in 2006 by Russian software developer Pavel Durov, who later gained fame as the architect of Telegram. In 2014 Durov was forced to leave Russia due to his refusal to disclose users' personal data at the request of Russian intelligence (the FSB). On March 7, 2022, Durov wrote on Telegram: "Nine years ago I was the CEO of VK, which was the largest social network in Russia and Ukraine. In 2013, the Russian security agency, the FSB, demanded that I provide them with the private data of the Ukrainian users of VK who were protesting against a pro-Russian president. I refused to comply with these demands, because it would have meant a betrayal of our Ukrainian users. After that, I was fired from the company I founded and was forced to leave Russia."

Following Durov's dismissal, VK became closely connected to the Russian government. In 2021 Vladimir Kirienko, an official linked to the Presidential Administration, was appointed CEO of VK. Simultaneously, Alisher Usmanov, who held the controlling stake in VK, sold it to Sogaz. The latter is owned by Yury Kovalchuk, a businessman closely allied with Vladimir Putin.

VK thus became a social network that—unlike Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter—easily and instantly cooperates with the government and is controlled by pro-Putin parties. What are its core peculiarities?

War vs. "Special Military Operation"

If foreign social networks are guided by their policies and international law, VK relies on Russian law. And Russian law changes rapidly, especially in the context of war. On March 4, the Russian authorities hastily passed a law that imposes serious criminal penalties on media, public figures, and private individuals alike for spreading "fakes" about the Russian armed forces. The definition of fakes and the application of the law is still

quite vague, but it has become clear that publicly using such common terminology as "war" or "intervention" to describe Russia's actions in Ukraine amounts to a violation thereof. According to a letter from the Federal Service for Supervision of Communications, Information Technology, and Mass Media (Roskomnadzor) received by multiple media and public actors, only official Russian sources can be cited and only the term "special military operation" can be used to describe Russia's actions.

Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter faced the same demands from Russian regulatory bodies and were de facto instructed to censor all content that referred to a "war" in Ukraine instead of a "special military operation." Facebook not only refused to do so, but also banned Russian state media pages from advertising on the site. Following hundreds of thousands of Euro of fines issued by the Russian government, Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram were ultimately blocked in the country.

VK, unlike its Western counterparts, instantly implemented the demands of Roskomnadzor and rapidly deleted any content violating the new Russian law about fakes. It blocked the pages of a range of media—such as the BBC, Radio Free Europe, and Deutsche Welle—for not complying with the new law. The same procedure has been applied to many other pages and private VK users that post content at odds with the new law.

Moreover, VK has blocked a range of groups opposing war, the biggest of which is called "No War." The site reported on March 9 that by order of the public prosecutor's office, the group's page is no longer available to Russian users.

Cooperation with Russian Law Enforcement

VK is notorious for disclosing users' personal data at the request of Russian law enforcement. As the founder of VK, Pavel Durov, stated, this was the main stumbling block that forced him to leave Russia in 2014. Since the

ousting of Durov and the installation of pro-Kremlin management, VK has disclosed hundreds of users' personal data to the government. Many of them are allies of Alexey Navalny.

Since the adoption of the law "on spreading fakes about the Russian armed forces," VK has been transferring the data of any users who post comments that are not in line with the current legislation (i.e., calling it a war, invasion or attack instead of a special military operation) to the law enforcement and intelligence bodies daily. Russian courts have already handed down hundreds of fines, ranging from 30,000 to 100,000 rubles (~250–800 Euro). People across Russia—in Siberia, in southern Russia, and in the North—have been accused of posting or reposting "fakes" about the war in Ukraine on VK.

At the same time, Facebook, despite its spotty reputation when it comes to the protection of users' personal data, refused to localize the data of its Russian users in Russia, as the authorities had demanded, fearing that doing so would make the data more vulnerable to the interested state bodies.

Growing Militarization of VK

VK not only bans and deletes information about the Russian invasion of Ukraine in accordance with the new law "on spreading fakes about the Russian armed forces," but also promotes a strong pro-Russian military agenda.

In some Russian regions, public sector employees are reportedly being forced to post diverse content supporting the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Some teachers received instructions from the municipal administration to post a range of hashtags, such as #ЗаПутина (for Putin) and #Своихнебросаем (we don't abandon our people), on their VK pages. The instruction also included a link to materials that they were encouraged to post.

About the Author

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In an anonymous interview, a teacher from the Russian Far East said that she was ordered to support the Russian invasion of Ukraine on her VK page or risk dismissal. "They called on February 26 and said that it is necessary to post materials on social networks. They asked me to make my VK page visible. I know that the order came 'from above,' from the regional ministry of education. They sent me the pictures and a reporting form via WhatsApp," she explained. Similar anonymous statements were made by a range of state employees—doctors, teachers, and employees of state media outlets—as well as students.

At the same time, students and teachers at Russian universities are reported to have faced problems for attending anti-war meetings and posting anti-military content on their VK pages. Some insist that they were expelled from their universities as a consequence.

It follows that VK is also exploited by the Russian authorities as a platform for the promotion of pro-war content.

Conclusion

The blocking of Western social networks in Russia and the virtual monopoly consequently gained by Facebook's Russian analogue, VK, represents a disturbing trend. Since 2014, VK has been closely allied with the Russian government and does not ensure the safety of users' data. Instead, it instantly cooperates with the Russian censorship (Roskomnadzor) and intelligence (FSB, MVD) bodies and blocks any content they find objectionable. In the context of war and the range of repressive laws passed by the Russian government against freedom of speech, it is especially crucial for local social network users that the only platform left available is VK.

ABOUT THE RUSSIAN ANALYTICAL DIGEST

Editors: Stephen Aris, Matthias Neumann, Robert Ortung, Jeronim Perović, Heiko Pleines, Hans-Henning Schröder, Aglaya Snetkov

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