

Why the Kremlin is still active on Facebook, Twitter and YouTube

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Western political leaders have hailed decisions by tech companies to suspend or muffle Russian state media such as RT and Sputnik amid the war in Ukraine, and there's evidence those moves are having an impact. Yet official Kremlin accounts have largely escaped such restrictions, continuing to post freely on Twitter and other U.S.-based social platforms even as their owners rain bombs on Ukrainian cities.

To some political leaders in the U.S. and Europe, that makes no sense. Several members of Congress, from Republican Sens. James Lankford (Okla.) and Thom Tillis (N.C.) to Democratic Rep. Eric Swalwell (Calif.), have blasted Twitter in particular for continuing to host Russian government accounts, such as those of the Kremlin and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. They say the pages serve a crucial function in Russia's propaganda machine, which has kicked into high gear amid the war.

"RT NOW if @twitter should BAN the baby-killing country of Russia from its platform," Swalwell tweeted on March 7, referring to Russia's deadly bombing of a maternity hospital in Mariupol, Ukraine.

So far, none of the major social platforms have done that, even as Russia has cracked down on them within its own borders, including blocking Facebook and Instagram entirely. Instead, with some exceptions, Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and TikTok have largely treated Russian government accounts like any other user, taking enforcement actions only when their posts violate specific rules, such as prohibitions on inciting real-world violence.

Social media companies' delicate handling of Russian officials resurfaces long-standing questions about their role in hosting and moderating the speech of controversial public figures, from former president Donald Trump to Iran's supreme leader to military officials in Myanmar. Facebook and Twitter in particular have historically argued that keeping official government accounts active serves the public interest, at times exempting them from fact-checks and enforcement actions.

Yet that posture has been evolving, as some experts argue officials should be held to the same or higher standards as ordinary users. Meanwhile, some lawmakers want certain political leaders barred from social media as punishment for what they're doing in the real world, regardless of their online behavior.

“We don't remove accounts even when we disagree with the content they post — but we do take action when they violate our rules,” said Drew Pusateri, a spokesperson for Meta, the parent company of Facebook and Instagram. “The world deserves the opportunity to hear and scrutinize the content of Russian leaders at this moment.”

In a statement, Twitter spokesperson Katie Rosborough said, “While we've had a policy around state-affiliated media and government accounts for years, the war in Ukraine raises a complicated set of challenges in how we handle the accounts — our goal is to consistently enforce our rules while balancing the public interest.”

Twitter has begun labeling Russian government accounts, and it has removed certain tweets from Russian embassies under its policy against denying violent incidents. But so far it is not taking steps to reduce Russian officials' audience, as it does for state media accounts and posts that link to state media sites.

The rationale that carrying Russian government accounts serves the public good has drawn criticism as the Kremlin and its proxies have used major platforms to spread unsubstantiated claims about Ukraine developing U.S.-backed bioweapons and the “nazification” of the country. Misinformation researchers say the accounts frequently parrot misleading or false talking points that Russian President Vladimir Putin and his top deputies have used to justify the conflict.

“The platform companies have to be much more nuanced in their approach here and realize that their products are in these instances weapons of warfare,” said Joan Donovan, research director at Harvard University's Shorenstein Center on Media, Politics and Public Policy.

There are dozens of official Russian government accounts across major social media platforms. Russia's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, led by Sergei Lavrov, has pages on Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, Twitter and TikTok. A slew of Russian embassies from around the world have accounts across top platforms. While Putin does not have any verified individual accounts on top platforms, the office of the Russian president is active on YouTube, Facebook and Twitter.

Graham Brookie, senior director of the Atlantic Council think tank's Digital Forensic Research Lab, said that accounts like those of the Russian embassies pose a unique challenge because they are often “a primary testing vehicle for certain false narratives” boosted by the Kremlin.

“We've seen consistently in our work that those accounts are used to seed strategic disinformation from official government accounts,” said Brookie, who served on the National Security Council under President Barack Obama.

European officials have argued that Russia's invasion of Ukraine deserves at least as forceful an answer from social media companies as their reaction to the Jan. 6, 2021, attack on the U.S. Capitol, which prompted Trump's suspension from Twitter, YouTube, Facebook and other sites.

At the time, the platforms cited posts by Trump they said violated their policies and the risk that his activity could incite further violence as their rationale.

But critics, including on Facebook's own oversight board, dinged the companies for enforcing their policies inconsistently and shifting their rules on the fly to deal with Trump's case. Now, they're urging platforms to be more malleable in dealing with Russia's accounts during wartime.

"Online platforms took unprecedented steps after the Capitol Hill attacks. Surely Russian war #propaganda merits at least the same level of response," European Commissioner Thierry Breton tweeted in February after meeting with the CEOs of Google and YouTube.

But unlike in Trump's case, where the platforms suspended his personal account, the Russian government's messaging is largely being disseminated by official state-run accounts.

Will Duffield, a policy analyst at the Cato Institute think tank, said that complicates the decision-making process for platforms.

"Even when content posted by states can be harmful or concerning, because it's a state posting it, and states have the capacity to do violence ... then there's often more of an interest in leaving it up to warn "Online platforms took unprecedented steps after the Capitol Hill attacks. Surely Russian war #propaganda merits at least the same level of response," European Commissioner Thierry Breton tweeted in February after meeting with the CEOs of Google and YouTube.

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Spokespeople for YouTube and TikTok didn't offer public-interest rationales for allowing Russian government accounts. Instead, they pointed to their existing rule books, saying their goal was simply to continue enforcing them consistently.

"Our policies apply to everyone, including channels associated with the Russian government, and our teams continue to monitor the situation closely," said YouTube spokesperson Ivy Choi.

Choi noted that YouTube did ban the hawkish Russian media figure Vladimir Solovyov, even as it has allowed official accounts for the Kremlin to continue posting. He first earned a "strike" — a temporary suspension that marks the first step toward a permanent ban under YouTube's "three strikes" policy — for violating YouTube's "incitement to violence" rules with a post that encouraged more bombings in Kyiv, including of civilian targets. His channels were then removed after posting a video while suspended, which breaks YouTube's terms of service, Choi said.

TikTok said its community guidelines "apply to everyone" and that it would issue bans for any user "involved in severe or repeated on-platform violations." On its face, that would seem to suggest the company isn't applying any special scrutiny to pro-Russian propaganda, though it, like other platforms, does have existing policies against "harmful misinformation" and "promotion of violence," and it recently followed its rivals in beginning to label some state media accounts.

Russian accounts, including Kremlin officials, might be having a hard time posting on TikTok for another reason. On March 6, the Chinese-owned platform said it would suspend the ability for any users in Russia to live-stream or post videos, in response to Russia's new "fake news" law.

Yet there are signs that TikTok's pullback from Russia may be helping the Kremlin more than hurting it: As ordinary Russians struggle to use it and other Western social platforms, they have ever fewer independent sources of information beyond traditional state media. And while de-platforming Russian officials might work elsewhere, silencing them within their own country is one thing social media companies can't do.