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Russia Threatens to Block YouTube for 'Censoring' State Media

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The bill accuses YouTube, Facebook and Twitter of having "censored" the accounts of Russian state-run news outlets. **Tatyana Flegontova / TASS**

Russia could block YouTube and other major U.S. social media platforms for "censoring" content from Russian state media, according to draft legislation submitted to parliament Thursday.

The draft bill explains that the Prosecutor General's Office and the Foreign Ministry would be able to identify foreign platforms they view as violating Russians' rights by restricting content. That designation would allow Russia's federal media watchdog Roskomnadzor to fully or partially block the platform.

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The bill's explanatory note singles out YouTube, Facebook and Twitter for having "censored" the accounts of Russian state-run news outlets including RT, RIA Novosti and Crimea 24 since

April. Facebook and Twitter began labeling state-affiliated media accounts this summer, months after Alphabet's YouTube introduced similar labels.

"The urgency in adopting the draft law," says a Reuters translation of the explanatory note, "is due to numerous cases of unjustified restriction of Russian citizens' access to information in the Russian media."

The Kremlin said a mechanism is needed to counter the perceived discrimination of Russian content but stopped short of endorsing the restrictions.

"Discriminatory actions against Russian clients of these services have taken place," spokesman Dmitry Peskov told reporters, according to Bloomberg.

"This must be countered," Peskov said.

Lawmakers in the lower house of Russia's parliament, the State Duma, and the upper-house Federation Council need to approve the draft bill before President Vladimir Putin can sign it into law.

Currently, Moscow levies relatively small fines against Facebook and Twitter for not complying with a 2015 law requiring social media companies to store Russian users' data on Russian servers. Russia blocked access to LinkedIn for violating that law in 2016.

Russia attempted to block the popular Telegram messaging app in 2018 for not sharing encryption keys with the security services. Roskomnadzor, the media watchdog, joined Telegram this week after the failed two-year effort to ban it.

Last year, Russia passed a "sovereign internet" law tightening state control of web traffic in response to what Moscow called an aggressive U.S. cybersecurity strategy. Free speech activists criticized the law, saying it could allow the authorities to restrict access to information at will.

RT editor-in-chief Margarita Simonyan cheered on the latest bill but criticized the "laughable" fines of up to 3 million rubles ($39,000), calling them "more of an annoyance than a threat to Google and the likes."

If the bill is passed, Russian authorities would also be able to throttle traffic to the offending platforms.

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