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Russia Disrupts Twitter Access in Banned Content Row

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Russian officials and regulators have amped up their rhetoric against foreign social media platforms this year. **PA Images / TASS**

Russia's media watchdog announced Wednesday that it will disrupt Twitter's loading speeds within the country for failing to remove banned content, a move that experts say represents a new crackdown on foreign social media.

"Starting March 10, 2021, centralized response measures have been taken against Twitter to protect Russian citizens and force the internet service to comply with Russian legislation," Roskomnadzor said in a statement.

Roskomnadzor said it will slow down Twitter — which polls say is used by 3% of Russians — on all Russian cellphones and half of its desktops. The slowdown will mainly affect photo and video content on Twitter, the watchdog said.

Following the announcement, the websites of the Kremlin, Roskomnadzor and the Russian government were briefly inaccessible. Rostelecom, whose website also went down, denied

that the outage was related to the Twitter slowdown announcement.

The Kremlin said Wednesday that it supports the regulator's efforts to force foreign platforms to comply with Russian law.

Related article: Russia Says 'Equipment Failure' Behind Government Website Outages, Not Twitter Slowdown

Twitter could face heavy fines for not removing 3,000 posts containing information about suicide, child pornography and drugs since 2017, Roskomnadzor said last week.

It was not clear if the slowdown has taken immediate effect, but the Russian version of the outage monitoring website Downdetector notes that Twitter users "could currently experience problems."

Roskomnadzor said it "added the spread of information on Twitter to its list of threats" and warned that it could block the platform if it "continues to ignore legal requirements."

Roskomnadzor's action comes amid growing tensions with western social media platforms over what Russia calls censorship and bias against its state-affiliated accounts.

'New clampdown'

Experts and analysts interviewed by The Moscow Times said that disrupting Twitter is an unprecedented move by the Russian authorities, but it's unclear how the slowdown will be carried out.

"It makes sense from a government point of view to pressure Twitter first. It is relatively small but hyper-politicized in Russia," said Mikhail Klimarev, the executive director of the Internet Protection Society. He added that Twitter's future in Russia would depend on its CEO Jack Dorsey's response, but that he doesn't "expect [Twitter] to bow down to the Kremlin."

"This is only the beginning. Facebook and Google are next. They are sending a strong signal," Klimarev said. "Of course Russian users can still use VPNs, but this is a start of a new clampdown."

The slowdown will mark the first time that Russia will deploy deep packet inspection (DPI) technology, said Stanislav Selezenov, head of the Agora human rights group's "Network Freedom" project.

Yet Selezenov questioned whether Russia had the technical means to slow Twitter down, pointing to its unsuccessful attempt to block the Telegram messaging app as an example.

"Roskomnadzor slows down Twitter, and the largest Russian provider Rostelcom falls while Twitter continues to function," he said. "This speaks, first of all, to the authorities' deep technical unpreparedness to realize their desires to control the online space."

Leonid Kovachich, a tech analyst for the Carnegie Moscow Center think tank, was also skeptical toward Roskomnadzor's announcement.

"First, Russia doesn't have the technological means to ensure effective blocking of [social media platforms]. In China, where the entire internet infrastructure is designed for blocking, they're still not very good at it. ... In this case, it's hard to take this statement about the slowdown and other sanctions seriously."

Investigative journalist and Russian cybersecurity expert Andrei Soldatov said the government website outages stemmed from the Twitter slowdown, proving that Russia's technical capabilities remain limited.

"What was meant to be partly a nationwide test of the Sovereign Runet infrastructure, partly a warning to global platforms, (and partly a soothing message to Putin getting emotional), failed on all fronts," he tweeted.

President Vladimir Putin last month raised fines for social media giants accused of "discriminating" against Russian media. On New Year's Eve, he granted Roskomnadzor the power to block social media platforms if they are found to "discriminate" against Russian media.

Putin accused social media giants in a January videolink at the World Economic Forum in Davos of "controlling society" and "restricting the right to freely express viewpoints."

A Moscow court is scheduled to hear cases against Twitter, Facebook, Google, TikTok and the Telegram messaging app next month over failure to remove calls for protests that swept the country earlier this year.

Russia ranked "not free" with a 30/100 score in U.S. watchdog Freedom House's 2020 Freedom on the Net report, with the country's "sovereign internet" law, prosecutions of activists for online activity and restrictions on encrypted communications cited as factors harming its score.

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