

Effectiveness of the sanctions on Russian state-affiliated media in the European Union

An investigation into website traffic and
possible circumvention methods

Authors: Kata Balint, Jordan Wildon, Francesca Arcostanzo
and Kevin D. Reyes

About this publication

The purpose of this research is two-fold: first, to assess the effectiveness of the restrictions placed on Russian state-affiliated media by the European Union after the start of the Russian invasion of Ukraine; second, to unearth potential circumvention methods and their success in enabling pro-Kremlin content to reach European audiences.

This report breaks down into two parts: firstly, an analysis of traffic from global and European audiences to all RT websites, as well as websites associated with Rossiya Segodnya, a media group affiliated with the Kremlin that operates various outlets, including Sputnik. For this, analysts conducted website forensics and collected website traffic data to identify all RT and Rossiya Segodnya domains and to understand who is still accessing their content and how.

The second study explored how RT articles that negatively depict Ukrainians seeking refuge in Europe and elsewhere were made available through various means across the EU.

About the authors

Kata Balint is an Analyst on ISD's Digital Analysis Unit, where she supports research on malign influence operations, disinformation, conspiracy theories and hate speech online. She has been involved in research around the world, using a range of data analysis tools and open-source intelligence methods. Kata previously worked as an Analyst in the Radicalisation and Extremism Programme of Political Capital, an independent research institute based in Hungary, where she co-authored a number of research papers on far-right radicalisation and extremism, as well as political attitudes and behaviour, and was involved in radicalisation prevention activities.

Jordan Wildon is a Senior Digital Methods Manager at ISD, working to develop and implement the latest tools for digital investigations and analysis. He has extensive experience using open-source intelligence and ethnographic research methods to monitor public health mis- and disinformation, conspiracy networks and far-right movements online. This has included creating open-source tools for researching Telegram. Jordan has a Master's degree in Multimedia Journalism, and has published written and audio-visual content in various media outlets.

Francesca Arcostanzo is a Senior Research Manager

- Digital Methods Lead within ISD's Digital Research Unit, working across a variety of research projects to ensure consistency in methods, training and approaches to digital analysis, and leading the ISD-CASM shared strategy for technological development. She has 7+ years of experience in digital research, with a focus on issue politicization, digital polarization and election campaigns. Her main areas of expertise are social media research methods, including content, text, network and statistical analysis of large-scale datasets. She holds a PhD in public opinion, political communication and electoral behaviour from the University of Milan, a MA in Government and Public communication, and a MSc in Intelligence & ICT.

Kevin D. Reyes is a Senior OSINT Specialist in ISD's Digital Analysis Unit, where he leads open-source investigations methods and researches online hate, extremism and disinformation. He previously worked as the director of research and intelligence at a consulting firm, and conducted open-source investigations for law enforcement and Fortune 500 clients. Prior to intelligence consulting, Reyes worked in law library management at several law schools, and in international criminal law research at Robert F. Kennedy Human Rights in Washington DC and at the Human Rights Center at UC Berkeley School of Law. While at the Human Rights Center in 2016, he helped launch its Human Rights Investigations Lab, the first university-based, open-source investigations lab of its kind to discover and verify human rights violations and potential war crimes. Reyes received his bachelor's from the University of California, Berkeley.

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Introduction

Shortly following the start of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the European Union imposed sanctions on Russian state-affiliated media outlets RT and Sputnik, in order to curb information manipulation by Russia in the territory of the EU. From 2 March 2022, the broadcast of, and access to, these outlets and their various language versions was suspended within the EU Member States. The sanctions cover all means for the transmission and distribution of RT and Sputnik content, including on social media and search engines.

The purpose of this research is two-fold: first, to assess the effectiveness of the restrictions placed on Russian state-affiliated media by the European Union after the start of the Russian invasion of Ukraine; second, to unearth potential circumvention methods and their success in enabling pro-Kremlin content to reach European audiences.

This report breaks down into two parts: firstly, an analysis of traffic from global and European audiences to all RT websites, as well as websites associated with Rossiya Segodnya, a media group affiliated with the Kremlin that operates various outlets, including Sputnik. For this, analysts conducted website forensics and collected website traffic data to identify all RT and Rossiya Segodnya domains and to understand who is still accessing their content and how.

The second study explored how RT articles that negatively depict Ukrainians seeking refuge in Europe and elsewhere were made available through various means across the EU.

Key Findings

- ISD analysts found that global web traffic to RT websites and news outlets affiliated with Rossiya Segodnya is lower than before the start of the war. The 69 news sites that post in any European language, English or Russian, amassed an aggregate of 977 million visits between July and September 2021, which dropped to 797 million visits between April and June 2022.
- This decrease was common across traffic source types, meaning that fewer users visited these sites by searching for them using Google or other search engines, clicking through to the sites from social media platforms, or by typing the site address in directly to a web browser. In fact, visits via search engines declined by 100%, while accessing the sites through social media dropped by 70%. The only traffic source type through which traffic increased to these domains was users clicking through from other websites. This could indicate that other outlets are actively directing users to them.
- In the case of most social media platforms, traffic to RT domains and Rossiya Segodnya-owned websites decreased. Certain platforms, such as Facebook, Messenger, LinkedIn and Pinterest, were able to put an end to directing traffic to these domains by 100%, while referrals from Reddit also decreased significantly. Referrals from YouTube and Twitter declined by 64%, compared to 28% from Instagram, which may indicate that these platforms have been less successful in restricting users from sharing links to the websites. On the other hand, in the case of Disqus, Whatsapp and Telegram, traffic referrals to RT- and Rossiya Segodnya-owned websites have increased since 2021.
- Web traffic from the EU has also significantly decreased, with a 74% drop in traffic from Member States between 2021 and 2022. For more than half of the countries studied, traffic to RT and Rossiya Segodnya websites declined by 90%. This may indicate that EU-wide sanctions have been effective in curbing Russian information manipulation targeting European audiences.
- However, ISD found that content from the sanctioned outlets is still available to European audiences through various means. The four types of websites that are providing loopholes for this content to reach the EU information space are:
 - 1) Alternative RT domains that are identical to the most well-known RT websites and connected to RT/Rossiya Segodnya's digital infrastructure, but have not been sanctioned;
 - 2) Mirror websites, that are also identical to RT's sites, but could not be directly attributed to RT;
 - 3) Websites that copy-paste articles from RT in their entirety;
 - 4) Websites that direct traffic to RT.
- The alternative domains of RT outlets, many of which were created since the start of the ban, are likely being used to evade the restrictions on Russian state-affiliated media content. While these alternative domains have not yet made up for the lost web traffic, on average 86% of their traffic came from one of the EU Member States in June 2022. These domains amass millions of views monthly and could be a critical vector for Russian propaganda continuing to reach users in the European Union.

Recommendations

Based on these findings, ISD proposes the following recommendations to enhance the policy response to the threat of information manipulation by Russia:

- National regulators should consistently enforce the ban on websites associated with sanctioned outlets across platforms and geographies within the EU, as some of these domains are still accessible from various locations in Europe and receive traffic from European audiences.
- European regulatory bodies should monitor websites that are used to circumvent the sanctions, in order to adapt and ensure the effectiveness of policy responses to state-affiliated information manipulation. This should include domains that either feature content from the sanctioned outlets, such as the alternative RT domains, mirror websites and copy-paste websites, or sites that redirect traffic to them. If and when attributed to the Kremlin, these entities should be sanctioned in a similar fashion to the official RT and Sputnik domains, especially in the case of those with alternative domain names but identical content.
- European regulators should complement policy responses by restricting monetisation via advertising for websites that feature RT and Sputnik content or direct traffic to its domains. Advertising technology companies could play a key role in restricting advertising for these actors.
- Where feasible, social media companies should ensure the comprehensive enforcement of the ban. This is particularly pertinent to those platforms that direct traffic to the domains at a higher volume after the invasion than before, such as Disqus, WhatsApp and Telegram.
- Tech companies, such as Google, should renew efforts to remove official domains of the sanctioned outlets and affiliated alternative domains from search results.

Part I: The effectiveness of the EU-wide ban on RT and Rossiya Segodnya websites

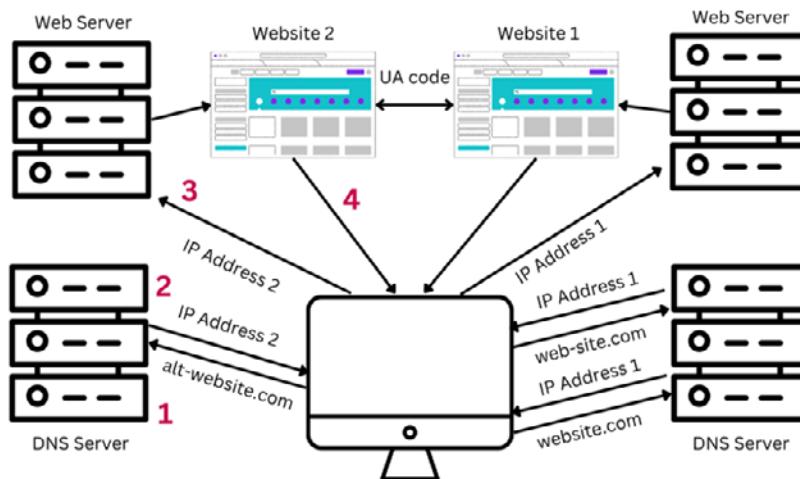
The following research examines all RT websites and all news-oriented domains affiliated to Rossiya Segodnya, the state-affiliated media group that operates Sputnik and other outlets, to better understand the digital infrastructure used by these outlets and to gauge the reach of these domains globally and within Europe. The investigation also assesses whether the sanctions have been effective in limiting the exposure of European audiences to Russian information manipulation, as well as exposing potential efforts made by RT and Rossiya Segodnya sites to circumvent these limits.

It is worth noting that the organisational structure of the two sanctioned outlets RT and Sputnik is intricate, yet they are affiliated with each other. A recent report shows that the parent companies of RT and Sputnik, namely TV-Novosti and Rossiya Segodnya, are in fact linked through 1) personnel and leadership: the Editor-in-Chief for both entities is Margarita Simonyan, who was personally sanctioned by the EU, Canada and the United Kingdom for her role in spreading pro-Kremlin disinformation around Russia's invasion of Ukraine; and through 2) RIA Novosti: the news agency reconstituted under Rossiya Segodnya, which founded TV-Novosti, the entity that operates RT. Furthermore, as the Global Engagement Center's report highlights, the two sanctioned outlets are state-directed and funded, and play a key role in the disinformation ecosystem of Russia.

1.1 Methodology

To identify all domains connected to RT and Rossiya Segodnya, analysts used a variety of online investigative methods. A pre-existing list of the main domains of RT and Rossiya Segodnya, including the most well-known domains of Sputnik and other outlets was used to find similar and connected domains. In order to do so, analysts focused on four key pieces of information:

- Alternative URLs which were shared by official RT social media pages, such as "actualidad-rt.com," a workaround domain for the Spanish-language RT subdomain "actualidad.rt.com" (rt.com);
- URLs that share the same Domain Name Server (DNS) information, such as "ns1.rttv.ru". In the case of domains created after the sanctions, these were usually linked to the nameservers of Megafon, a Russian telecommunications company;
- URLs that direct to the same IP address, meaning that two or more URLs (for example "rtde.tv" and "rtdeutsch.de") lead to exactly the same website. This is similar to how either "facebook.com" or "fb.com" takes you to Facebook;
- Google Analytics Tracking IDs (UA code), which tell Google Analytics which account to send search engine optimization and marketing data to. For example, the UA code for the Spanish-language sanction evasion domain shared to the official RT Spanish Twitter account is also used across several alternative Spanish-language domains hosting RT content.



The process of a browser requesting a website:

1. Browser requests IP from the DNS server by supplying the URL.
2. The DNS Server replies with the Web Server's IP address.
3. The browser connects to the Web Server via the supplied IP address.
4. Web Server responds with the website content.

To verify each URL included in this report as being somehow affiliated with another, and therefore with RT or Rossiya Segodnya, at least two of the above connection types were confirmed. ISD also investigated domain registration information for the URLs using WHOIS records, including evaluating registration dates to find signifiers of coordinated or batch registration of alternative domains.

For data storage and to gather additional information on these domains, analysts used Maltego, an open-source intelligence and forensics program. The web analytics provider SimilarWeb was also used to find additional subdomains, with this information being supplemented with an automated subdomain enumeration tool to discover subdomains for other language codes.

The domains surfaced through these methods were then filtered based on the language specified within the subdomain or the language of the content on the website itself. Any domain that was not either in European languages, English, or Russian was excluded from further analysis. Analysts then classified the remaining domains based on:

- whether the site was functional in the sense that it can be accessed (initially from a non-European location);
- whether it was a news site, meaning that its primary function is to publish and distribute news articles; and
- whether it was accessible from within the EU.

To investigate the web traffic trends of the domains, analysts used SimilarWeb. The service provided information on:

- the number of visits per month for the months of April, May and June 2022;
- the top five geographic locations of the audience in June 2022;
- traffic referral sources, such as direct traffic, search engine, email, or social media in June 2022; and
- a breakdown of traffic from social media by platforms from June 2022.

For comparative analysis, a similar dataset was also collected to cover a time period from before the invasion, from July, August and September of 2021. In the case of data from 2021, the top five geographic locations, traffic referral sources and social media sources, analytics were available for all three months, while for the recent dataset, this information was only available for June 2022. For this reason, ISD analysts used an average of the data from the months of July, August and September 2021 to establish a stable baseline figure to compare the June 2022 data. While this does not account for the potential natural growth of the websites between October 2021 and May 2022, the findings form a strong evidence base to indicate the reach these websites would previously obtain, versus the reach after the sanctions.

In the case of some domains, certain parts or all of the web analytics data were not available: of these, the monthly visits were below 5,000, for which SimilarWeb does not provide a detailed breakdown of the data. Therefore, this analysis does not include all data on all domains. This is particularly relevant for the average calculations, where the domains for which data was not available were not taken into account.

1.2 Findings

After filtering for domains that host content in either European languages, English or Russian, 131 remained. Of those, 86 were functional and 69 were classified as websites primarily featuring news content. Nearly half (32) of these domains were accessible from a European location at the time of writing.

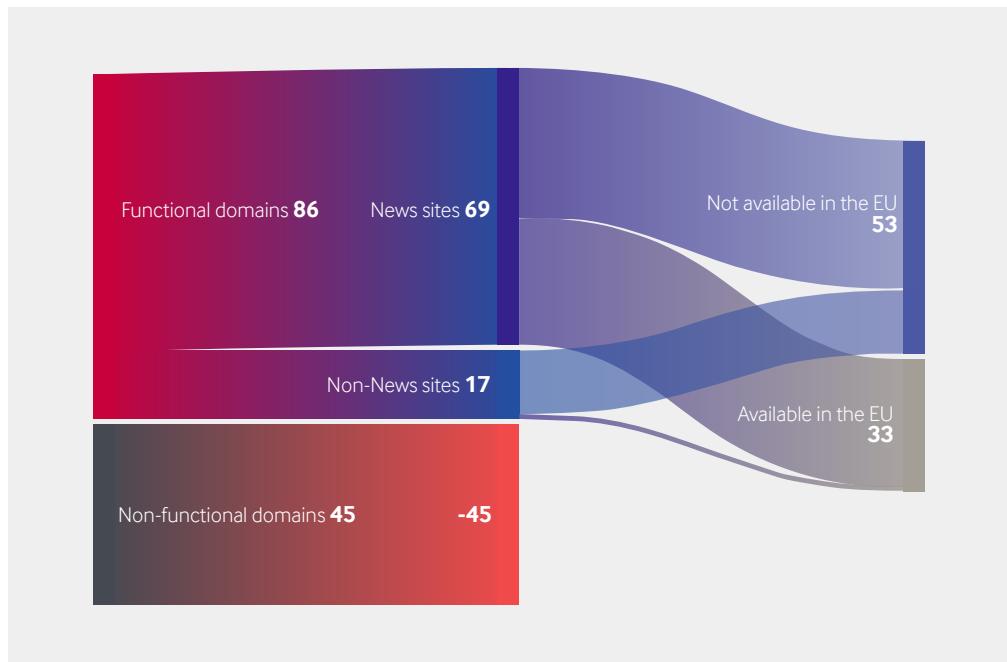


Figure 1: Breakdown of the identified domains of RT and Rossiya Segodnya

When examining the web traffic to these news websites, regardless of whether they are available from a European location or not, an 18% decrease can be observed in the number of visits between the two time periods globally. Between July and September 2021, an aggregate of 977 million visits was amassed by these 69 domains, while after the invasion, between April and June 2022, this count declined to 797 million visits.

In contrast, web traffic from the EU dropped considerably more, by 74%. For the comparison between the two time periods, analysts calculated an average number from the months of July-September 2021, which showed that on average 54 million visits came from EU Member States in 2021 compared to 14 million in the month of June 2022. This indicates that the EU-wide sanctions have been effective in limiting exposure to Russian state-affiliated information manipulation.

Country-specific web traffic data confirms that the sanctions have been impactful in most countries within the EU. Of the 21 EU countries where audiences visited these sites in either or both of the time periods of data collection, 18 had decreased traffic, with an average of 85% decline in visits. In the case of six countries, namely Belgium, Bulgaria, Cyprus, Czechia, Ireland and Sweden, this decline was 100%, meaning that there were no visits from these countries to RT and Rossiya Segodnya websites in June 2022. An additional five countries - France, Greece, Poland, Portugal and Slovakia - were able to decrease traffic to these domains by more than 90%.

On the other hand, in the case of Estonia and the Netherlands, a significant increase can be observed between the two time periods: 953% and 461%, respectively. This may mean that the implementation of the sanctions is lacking, and/or that there is an increased demand from Dutch and Estonian citizens for this content. Furthermore, traffic from Austrian visitors decreased only by 3%, which compared to the decline in other countries is relatively low. Lastly, in 2021, Romania and Croatia were not among the top 5 countries for any of the domains, while in 2022, there were nearly 20,000 Romanian and 5,000 Croatian visitors to these sites.

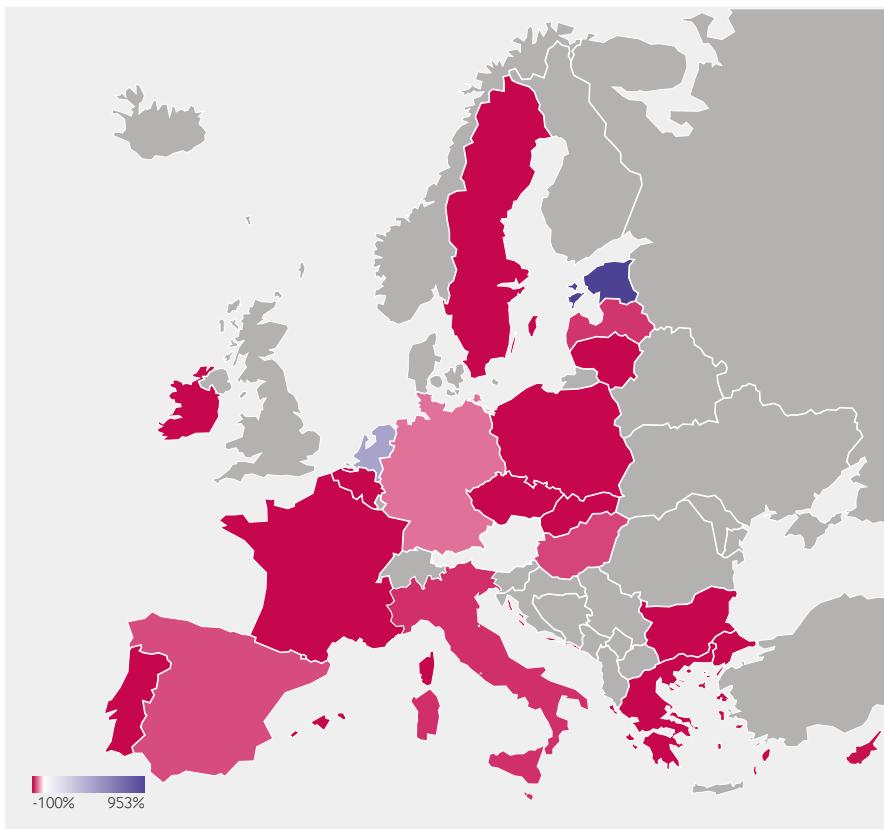


Figure 2: Map of Europe showing the percentage difference between web traffic in 2021 and 2022

There was a decrease in nearly all traffic sources globally between the two time periods. Visits via search engines declined by 100%, social media referrals (when audiences are directed to these domains by social media posts that link to them) dropped by 70%, and direct traffic and referrals through email decreased by 40% and 39% respectively. The drop in visits via search engines is likely due to Google and others both de-indexing RT and Sputnik websites from search, as well as removing articles from both outlets from their news features.

It is worth noting that direct traffic, meaning visitors going directly to these sites, instead of being referred to them through other means, might also include links that have been posted to social media in a format where the user would have to copy and paste the URL into their web browser, rather than clicking through. For example, analysts observed a number of cases where URLs were posted as "rt (dot) com", presumably to evade automatic content flags by social media platforms. The only traffic source that increased between 2021 and 2022 is referrals, meaning other websites linking to these domains and audiences following these links. These referrals may have come from different Russian news sources, either state or otherwise, linking back to articles from the assessed websites as a potential form of information laundering between these entities.

When examining social media referrals broken down by platforms between the two periods globally, it is apparent that most social media platforms have significantly reduced their referral rates to these domains. In the case of Meta-owned Facebook and Messenger, as well as LinkedIn and Pinterest, the decline in referrals was 100%. Similarly, Reddit managed to reduce referrals by 91%, which indicates that these platforms have put in significant effort to avoid directing audiences to Russian state-affiliated media sites. Others have been less successful - referrals from YouTube and Twitter declined by only 64%, while from Instagram, another Meta-owned platform, referrals decreased by only 28%.

On the other hand, from certain social media platforms, referrals increased to these domains: from Disqus by 250%, from WhatsApp by 204%, and while Telegram had no referrals recorded in 2021, there were 24,000 referrals in June 2022. These findings highlight that these three platforms have not taken effective action against referrals to Russian state-affiliated media globally.

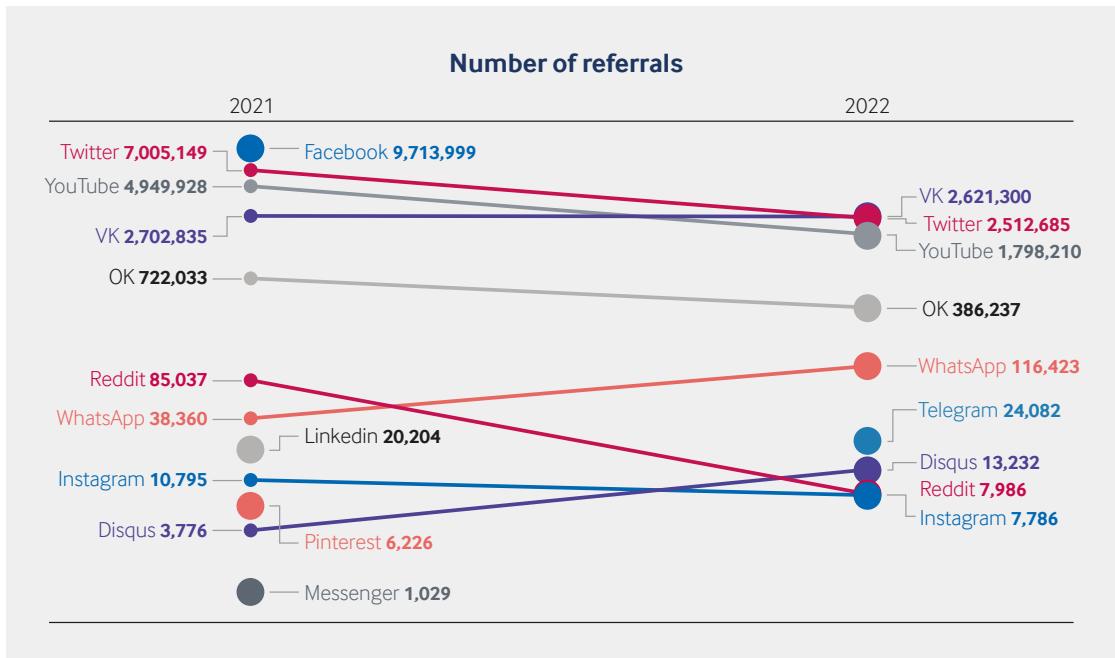


Figure 3: Changes in referrals by social media platforms between 2021 and 2022

Circumvention methods

Analysts identified a network of websites that are identical to RT, are connected to RT's digital infrastructure, and that are still accessible within the EU. Most of them were either created or updated after the introduction of the sanctions, which indicates a deliberate effort to circumvent the ban. While the traffic to these sites does not make up for the lost visits to the sanctioned RT domains, the large majority of their audience comes from European countries.

Of the 32 news sites analysts identified as accessible from the EU, 19 of them are alternative RT domains, meaning that they are visually identical and carry the same content as their better-known counterparts, but via different URLs. Among these are nine German sites, seven Spanish, two French and one English.

Although functional, one of the French and three of the Spanish websites did not seem to attract web traffic, and hence, web analytics data is unavailable. The existence of these websites is still relevant, as they may have been built for later use in case other domains get restricted.

Twelve of these domains were created after the announcement of the ban on 2 March 2022 and an additional two were updated after the ban. The creation and updates to these domains coinciding with the sanctions suggests a deliberate effort to circumvent the ban and make RT content available to European audiences.

Web traffic data from June 2022 supports this assumption as, on average, 86% of the audience for these domains was based in one of the EU Member States. This proportion is even higher when looking only at the nine German-language sites, with 94% of their audience based within the EU and the vast majority coming from Germany.

In the case of those Spanish websites for which the geographic traffic breakdown was available, the picture is more nuanced. On average, 66% of their audience is based in Spain and no other EU country made the top 5 list in our collection. Unlike the German-language sites, the proportion of Spanish visitors is more dispersed, with one domain receiving 100% of its visits from Spain and another getting only 37% of visitors from the country. These sites, however, also attract a significant audience from South American nations.

In the case of the English-language domain, 86% of the audience is from the Netherlands and an additional 3.5% is from other European countries. This type of data was unavailable for the French-language domains.

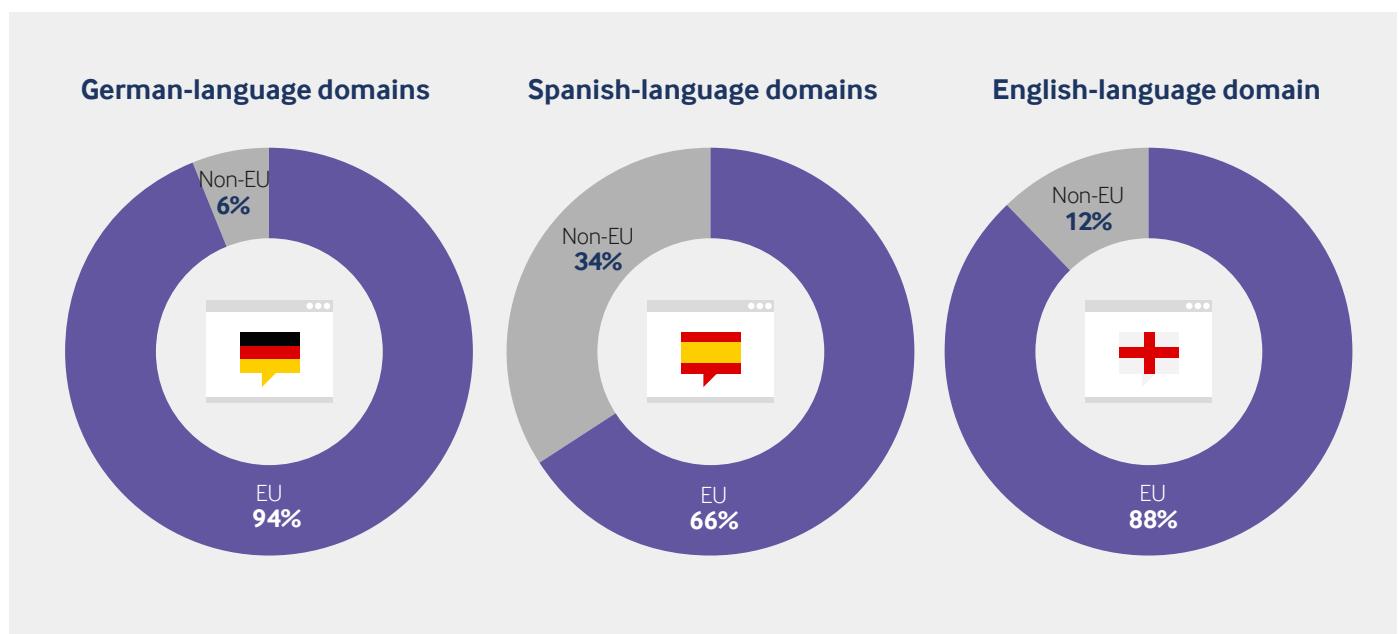


Figure 4: Percentage of EU vs. non-EU audiences of the alternative RT domains broken down by language

The 19 alternative RT domains amassed more than 11.3 million visits over the three months period between April and June 2022. Three German sites, the only English site and two Spanish sites received over a million visits during these months, while the Spanish actualidad-rt.com received the most visits of any site, with nearly 2.7 million views in the three months.

In the month of June, the aggregate traffic count to the alternative domains was 3.8 million, of which the large majority, 3.3 million visits, were from EU Member States. While the visits to these domains do not yet make up for the lost traffic to the official RT domains, they are successful in continuing to reach millions of people across Europe.

In terms of traffic sources, on average 71% of the traffic to these websites is direct and another 15% of traffic comes from social media, with Twitter, VKontakte (VK) and YouTube being the main sources of social media traffic. Generally speaking, the German sites garnered more visits directly (84% on average), while the Spanish sites received the same proportion of visits directly and through social media (on average 44% and 42% respectively).

Other news sites that can be accessed from the EU

The remaining 13 news sites that are functional and accessible to European audiences are all affiliated with RT or Rossiya Segodnya outlets that were not sanctioned by the EU. These outlets include BaltNews and Ruptly. EU officials claim that sanctions were imposed on RT and Sputnik specifically because these are the most prominent and attributable media outlets used for foreign information manipulation by Russia. Hence, other smaller outlets were not included. In the case of Sputnik, the most well-known pro-Kremlin media outlet beside RT, analysts could not identify alternative domains used to circumvent the ban.

Most of the domains that are accessible in the EU are in Russian, with the exception of an English-language website and one that is available in English, Spanish and Russian, which might also explain why they are not sanctioned.

In June 2022, an average of 8% of the traffic to the sites came from the European Union, most notably from the Baltic States and Germany. In the case of the Estonian version of BaltNews, 21% of the audience came from EU Member States and an additional 27% from the United Kingdom. The different domains of BaltNews seem to be frequented by audiences from the UK, with the Lithuanian version amassing 60% of its audience from the UK. It is worth noting that Latvia has a history of restricting Russian state propaganda, having blocked BaltNews from operating on the country's domain extension (.lv) in 2019.

Part II: How RT articles on Ukrainian refugees find their way to European audiences

With the arrival of millions of Ukrainians to the territory of the European Union, governments and citizens stepped up to support those fleeing the war. However, this support may wane with the protraction of the conflict, particularly if negative sentiments towards Ukrainians are emboldened by pro-Kremlin voices. Certain actors, including Russian state-affiliated media outlets like RT, are pushing narratives that focus on the negative aspects of the arrival of Ukrainian refugees and their integration into host countries.

In this investigation, ISD explored the different ways in which content from RT about Ukrainian refugees are available to European audiences despite the sanctions.

2.1 Methodology

This investigation, carried out between the end of June and the beginning of July 2022, focused on the language versions of RT that are banned within the EU. These are RT English, RT Germany, RT France, and RT Spanish. To identify the relevant set of RT articles, analysts developed a search query in each of these four languages that included the various versions of the terms “refugee”, “asylum-seeker” or “migrant”, in combination with the terms “Ukraine” or “Ukrainian”.

Analysts used a VPN to mask the geographic location of the analysts and to avoid restrictions accessing RT websites. 236 English, 269 German, 38 French and 41 Spanish official RT articles were identified as containing the search terms, as indexed by Google. These articles were manually vetted and filtered so that only articles that could be construed as implying and focusing on the negative consequences of the arrival of Ukrainian refugees remained in the sample set. This resulted in 15 English, 30 German, 10 French and 11 Spanish articles.

The most common topics present in this set of RT articles were:

- Preferential treatment of Ukrainian refugees compared to other refugees in host countries;
- Stretched resources and the cost of admitting Ukrainian refugees to the host country;
- Security risks to the host country, such as integration issues and the perceived aggression of refugees;
- Mistreatment of Ukrainian refugees;
- Disadvantages for Russian-speaking Ukrainian refugees;
- Ukrainian women being portrayed in a sexualized manner;
- Lack of help from the US and UK for European countries hosting Ukrainian refugees;
- Migrants from other countries taking advantage of the Ukraine crisis.



Figure 5: Examples of RT articles

In order to surface the websites that host and publish RT content but are currently not subject to sanctions, analysts searched the titles of these original articles using Google and collated the results for further analysis. This resulted in 425 English, 292 German, 38 French and 105 Spanish websites that were indexed by Google as featuring the exact titles of the related RT article. After manually assessing these websites, analysts categorized and investigated the nature of these domains using OSINT techniques.

2.2 Findings

Through the manual investigation of the discovered websites, four categories were identified:

1. Alternative domains and subdomains for RT

Analysts identified 12 domains that are identical to RT, as well as an additional two subdomains with similar qualities. Using the methods outlined in section 4.1, these were shown to have links to RT's digital infrastructure.. The two subdomains appear to have been used to test the evasion of restrictions, with domain names containing terms such as "against censorship" and simply "test". 12 of the domains were registered in Moscow and hosted by an entity called RU-CENTER. 11 were created in the six-week period following Russia's invasion: one English domain on 5 March, seven German domains on 6 April, and three Spanish domains on 8 April. The English-language domain and a Spanish-language one created in 2017 were registered to ANO TV-Novosti, the parent company of RT.

2. Mirror websites of RT

Five additional domains were identified as mirror websites of RT. A mirror website is an identical copy of a website that is placed under a different URL. Hence, the mirror websites identified here contain content and design identical to RT but are hosted on servers that cannot be attributed to RT. As such, there is no clear indication that these websites are affiliated to RT or are in any way connected to each other.

3. Copy-paste websites

The most prevalent type of website was copy-paste websites, with a total of 112 domains identified. These featured RT's articles in their entirety. The architecture and registration details of many of these does not imply affiliation to RT. However, there are certain websites that seem to be connected as a result of being registered by the same entity. An example of this is an organisation that registered seven of these copy-paste websites, indicating a network between them.

Sometimes, popular international web hosting companies are used by the actors behind these domains. For example, GoDaddy - a domain registrar and web hosting company based in the US - hosts 32 of these websites. Hosting such websites does not indicate complicity, as the services of web hosting companies, such as GoDaddy, are used by various entities. Nevertheless, this finding highlights how these services can be exploited to malign ends.

4. Aggregator websites

46 additional websites were discovered that only feature part of an RT article, such as the title, the lede, or the first few paragraphs. These direct traffic to official RT websites by linking to the original article.



Figure 6: The categories and quantity of discovered websites

One of RT's official domains, 'deutsch.rt.com', was also found in our search. Analysts observed that from certain locations within the EU, these articles could be opened, meaning that despite the ban even an official RT domain can be accessed by European audiences via a simple Google search.

For a number of the URLs that were indexed by Google as featuring the exact title of the articles, analysts were unable to identify the titles or any other part of the article on the site. Subsequently, these websites were not categorized and were excluded from further analysis.

43 of the copy-paste websites, three alternative RT domains and one mirror website were found to have a Google Analytics ID. Google Analytics is a web analytics service that tracks web traffic and visitors' behaviour on one's website, which may indicate that these websites are monetised.

Web traffic to alternative and mirror domains

To understand the reach of the alternative RT domains and mirror websites, analysts investigated the web traffic to these domains using SimilarWeb. To the eleven alternative RT domains and two mirror websites for which web traffic data could be collected, there was an aggregate of more than 2,593,000 visits within the month of May 2022 and more than 2,490,000 within the month of June 2022. Of the nearly 2.6 million visits to these domains in May, 1.2 million were to one of the Spanish alternative domains - 'actualidad-rt.com', while in June, the Spanish 'esrt.press' amassed 1.1 million visits out of the aggregate 2.5 million. In June, the primary audience for both of these sites was based in Spain, with 88% of traffic to 'actualidad-rt.com' and 43% to 'esrt.press' coming from Spain.

Spread on Twitter and Facebook

In order to quantify the spread of the alternative RT and mirror domains on social media, ISD analysts looked into the spread of links referring to the 19 identified domains. Using the social listening tools Brandwatch and CrowdTangle, analysts collected all tweets and posts from public Facebook pages and groups posted between February 1 2022 and June 30 2022.

Overall, posts containing links to these websites were shared over 450,000 times on Twitter by almost 50,000 unique users. On Facebook, there were over 6,000 shares from around 1,200 public Facebook pages and groups, with a combined followership of over 46.7 million users.

As shown in Figure 7, these websites began to get significant traction on the two platforms as of April 1 2022, while posts linking to these websites were almost entirely absent prior to the implementation of the EU ban.

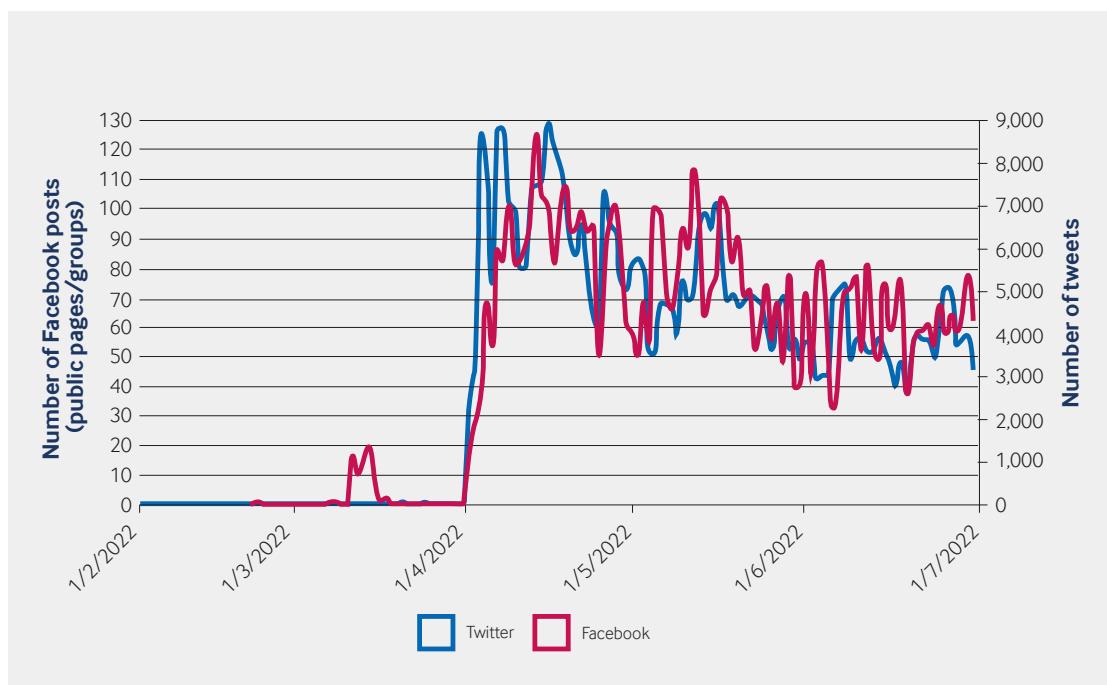


Figure 7: The graph above shows the spread of alternative RT domains on Facebook (red) and Twitter (blue) from February 1, 2022 to June 30, 2022

On both platforms, the main accounts responsible for the spread of these links were accounts linked to RT itself. On Facebook, most of the posts sharing links to alternative RT and mirror domains came from official RT pages. In particular, RT DE shared links to these websites 1,610 times in the period analysed; RT Latinoamérica 680 times; RT Futuro 438 times; and RT Viral 129 times.

On Twitter, the most prolific author was found to be the Spanish-language RT account, ActualidadRT, which shared the links over 9,000 times. Fifteen other accounts were found to have shared the links more than 1,000 times in the period analysed. With the exception of RT DE, all of the other accounts are tied to Spanish-speaking individuals seemingly based in Latin America.

The increase in the spread of messages including these links starting from April 1, 2022 was primarily due to retweets of Spanish RT accounts, namely RTultimahora and ActualidadRT. On April 1 alone, 36 tweets from these two accounts linking to alternative RT and mirror URLs received a total of 2,637 retweets.

It is worth noting that none of the Twitter and Facebook accounts mentioned above affiliated to RT is available to European audiences and no other official RT account could be accessed from a European location.

However, while conducting this research analysts noticed that if a user on Twitter changed their location manually to a country outside of the geo-ban, these entities became accessible, despite the user's IP address indicating that they

are located inside the EU. This means that self-declared location was the primary signal used in deciding whether users are able to access RT content, rather than where the individual is actually based. Since then, Twitter took action against this loophole and today, despite the manual location settings of one's accounts, users located in the EU are not able to access these accounts anymore.

Pushing alternating domains on Twitter: the case of RT Spanish

In order to shed light on the tactics used by RT to promote these domains, ISD looked at all content posted by ActualidadRT on Twitter since February 1 and analysed which websites the account had been directing traffic to.

As shown on Figure 8, the RT account appears to switch the use of different websites during particular periods. Between February 1 and April 1 2022, the account exclusively shared links to the pages 'es.rt.com' and 'actualidad.rt.com', both subdomains of the official 'rt.com' website. From April 1 to May 18 2022, the account appears to switch to sharing the website 'actualidad-rt.com' which was then gradually replaced by the website 'esrt.press'. From the end of June, a fifth alternative domain, 'estr.online', began to be shared on Twitter. It is worth noting that the account did not entirely stop sharing the previously used websites but appears to keep sharing multiple websites at the same time.

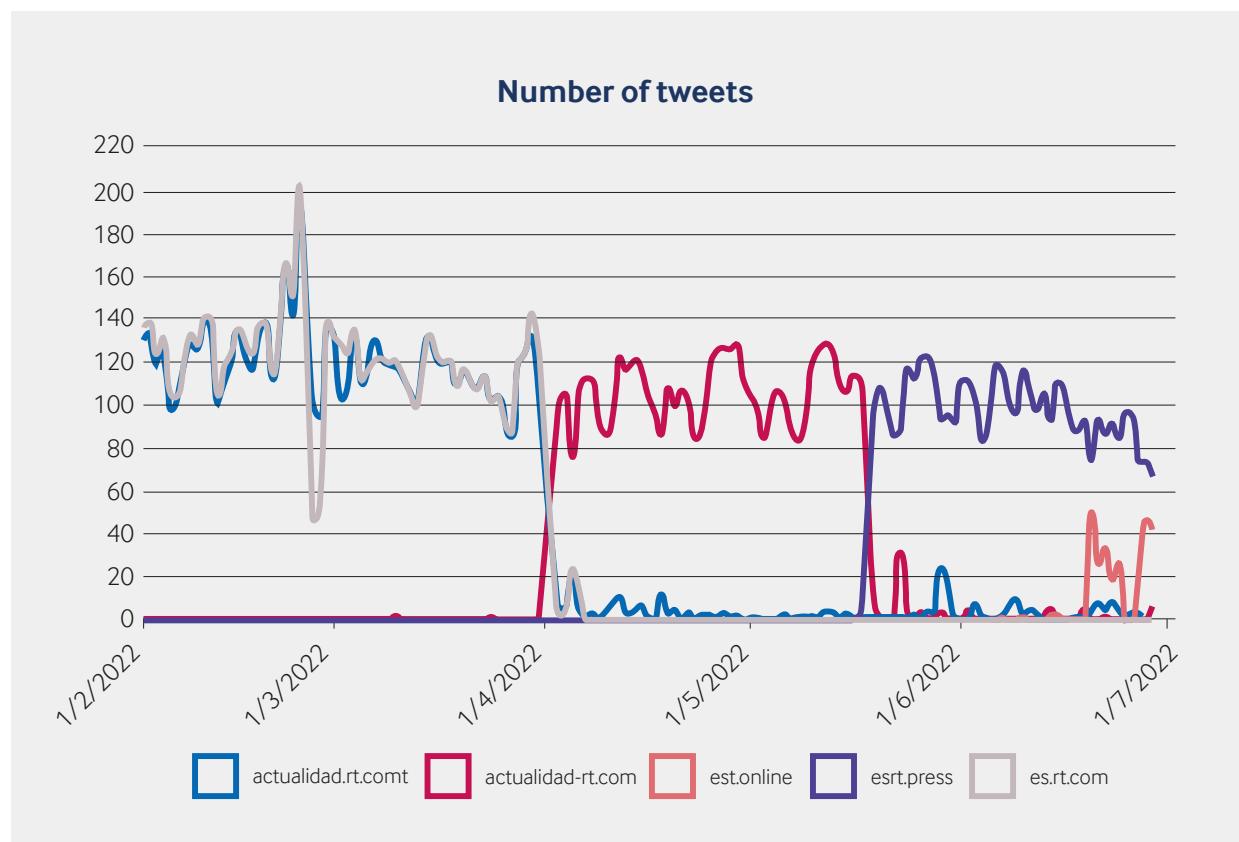


Figure 8: The graph above shows the volume of shares of different websites linked to RT by the account ActualidadRT from February 1, 2022 to June 30, 2022

The tweet below from ActualidadRT, posted on 24 March 2022, promotes 'actualidad-rt.com' (one of the alternative URLs) and states "if the page does not work, you can try this address".



Figure 9: A tweet posted by RT in Spanish announces "Hello everyone! If the page does not work, you can try this address: actualidad-rt.com. And remember that you can follow us on VK."

6. Conclusions

The primary aim of this report was to examine how effective the sanctions on Russian state-affiliated media outlets are within the European Union and to identify possible circumvention methods. Findings show that while global web traffic has slightly declined since the start of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, traffic from the EU has plummeted, likely due to the implementation of the sanctions. In this way, the ban has overall been effective in reducing the visibility of Russian state-affiliated media among European audiences.

However, ISD identified various means through which content from the sanctioned websites is made available to European audiences, some of which can be attributed to Russian state-affiliated media. This indicates a deliberate attempt to circumvent the restrictions, which has proven to be successful in reaching millions of people within the EU. When made available to European audiences, RT content portraying Ukrainian refugees in a negative light may influence the way in which European citizens view those fleeing the war, and hence, may result in lower support and solidarity for these refugees within the EU. Therefore, if these circumvention methods are not addressed by EU policy-makers, the result may be a nullification of the intended effects of the sanctions, i.e. limiting the reach of Kremlin disinformation and information manipulation within the EU.

ISD's findings show that social media platforms and tech companies have been effective in limiting the spread of these domains, with many of them managing to cease traffic referrals entirely. At the same time, certain platforms such as Disqus, Whatsapp and Telegram are directing traffic to these domains in greater volumes than before the start of the war, illustrating both the difficulty of regulating the spread of misinformation on closed messaging platforms, as well as the ineffectiveness of some initiatives employed by the companies involved.

Further efforts are needed to lower the exposure of European citizens to this type of content by proactively monitoring and sanctioning workaround domains, while also ensuring the consistent implementation of the sanctions among all EU countries.

Furthermore, sanctions targeting only the two most well-known outlets, RT and Sputnik, may not be sufficient in limiting exposure to information manipulation by Russia, and instead, focus should be on the parent companies and affiliated entities, as well as the other outlets they operate.

Previous ISD research has indicated a substantial penetration of pro-Kremlin misinformation narratives to mainstream audiences on social media in multiple scenarios, including the [Bucha atrocities](#). The efficacy of EU sanctions in keeping RT and Sputnik from being linked to is not necessarily a reflection of the information war being won on every front. In some cases, the social media platforms that have managed to reduce referrals to RT and Rossiya Segodnya content down to near-zero are the very same platforms whose [top search results](#) for news about Ukraine may expose users to pro-Kremlin narratives from other sources. Even while applauding efforts to successfully implement EU sanctions, we must continue to recognise these shortcomings.



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