

Tracking Exposed Special Report: TikTok content restriction in Russia

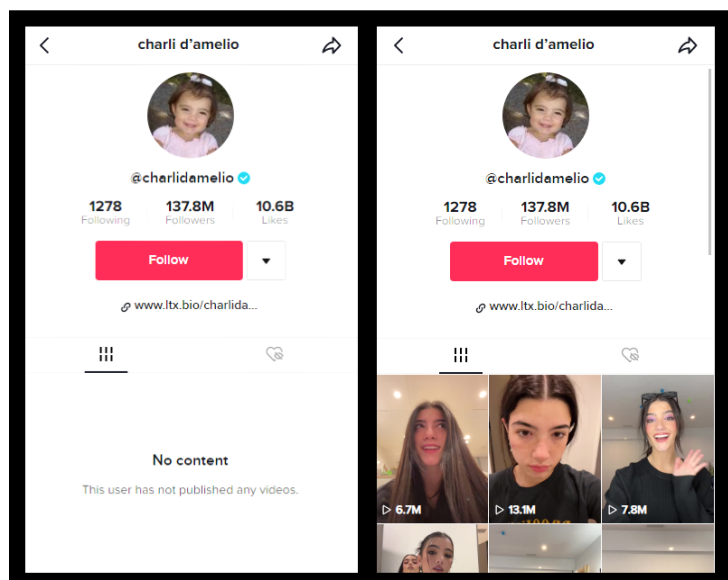
How has the Ukraine-Russia war affected the content that TikTok users see in Russia?

March 15 2022

reports@tracking.exposed

TikTok as seen
from Russia

TikTok as
seen from
the rest of
the World



Foreword

Tracking Exposed has investigated social media platforms' algorithms and their impact on society since 2016. This report is the first investigation into **TikTok** since Russia invaded Ukraine.

TikTok is the only global social media platform still available in Russia, and so has a powerful role in influencing public support for the war in Russia. But since the conflict escalated, **what can Russians TikTok users see on the Chinese-owned platform?**

Our findings unequivocally show that **TikTok is not being transparent** about its policy actions in Russia.

We call on TikTok to implement our recommendations: **TikTok must clarify its content policy** in Russia and give **data access for public scrutiny**, without delay.

At this moment in time, **a truly free internet has never been more important**. This war is the latest example of the devastating real world consequences of social platform policy decisions. Social media users around the world will continue to be unfairly impacted by algorithms and content restrictions until we have transparency and accountability. We are stepping up Tracking Exposed's investigations and looking for collaborators, funders and volunteers to help us scale this important work.

~ Claudio Agosti, founder & co-director, [Tracking Exposed](#)

Report authored by:

Salvatore Romano, Marc Faddoul, Claudio Agosti, Giulia Giorgi, Louise Doherty

~ Tracking Exposed

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Key Findings

The Tracking Exposed investigation into content restriction in Russia shows that:

- On March 7, TikTok made all the content posted by non-Russian channels unavailable to Russian users. This unannounced restriction removes an estimated 95% of the content previously available to Russian TikTok users.
- Content restriction is happening at the *application layer* rather than the *transport layer*, which requires the direct involvement of TikTok. It is the first time a global social media platform has restricted access to content at this scale.
- A network of coordinated accounts is using a loophole to post new content promoting Russian pro-war propaganda in Russia, despite the current ban on new content uploads.

See more: Findings (page 8)

Background

Tracking Exposed is an independent non-profit that has investigated the effects of social media platforms' algorithms on society since 2016.

As the Ukraine-Russia conflict escalated, Tracking Exposed was awarded funding to step up its investigations into TikTok. As the only foreign-owned global social media platform still available in Russia, TikTok has a significant and strategic role to play in the evolving conflict.

21 February 2022	Tracking Exposed is awarded new funding to step up investigations into TikTok, backed by Mozilla Technology Fund
	Russia recognises two self-proclaimed separatist states in the Donbas region and sends troops in
24 February 2022	Russia invades Ukraine
4 March 2022	Russia announces "fake news" law , which makes spreading "fake" news about the Russian army a crime with a maximum 15 year prison sentence
	The Russian government limits access to Facebook
	TikTok updates its policy to suspend live streaming and new content
6 March 2022	Tracking Exposed starts a systematic observation of TikTok in Russia
10 March 2022	Reuters reports Chinese social media platforms Weibo, WeChat and Douyin (Chinese-only state-affiliated version of TikTok) ban content criticizing President Vladimir Putin.
11 March 2022	Vice reports Russian TikTok influencers are being paid to spread Kremlin propaganda
14 March 2022	Instagram is now restricted in Russia
15 March 2022	Tracking Exposed releases this report, Tracking Exposed Special Report: TikTok Content Restriction in Russia

Research Questions

How has the Ukraine–Russia conflict affected the content that TikTok users see in Russia?

There has been widespread speculation about Russia’s intent to control information in and outside Russia, but not much has been confirmed on what people in Russia are actually experiencing on TikTok.

The main purpose of this report is to compare Russian TikTok content with the rest of the world since the implementation of the “fake news” law.

Additional questions explored include:

1. To what extent is TikTok enabling the spread of Russian propaganda?
2. How are content restrictions being implemented in Russia?
3. Did TikTok make any additional changes to those announced in response to the “fake news” law?

This report investigates TikTok content in Russia that has been made unavailable, but it does not investigate content that has been *demoted* (available but not picked up by algorithms, often known as a shadow ban) or *promoted* (algorithmically given higher prominence in users feeds). This will be the object of a further report.

Methodology

To conduct this research, Tracking Exposed accessed TikTok using its custom open access [free software](#), which automates access of TikTok's content in Russia using both Russian Virtual Private Networks (VPNs) and Residential Internet Protocol (IP) addresses.

[Tracking Exposed's TikTok infrastructure](#) scrapes the data from automated browsers in order to investigate TikTok, since Tiktok does not provide data access through APIs for transparency and public scrutiny.

The Tracking Exposed data collection pipeline emulates real users, allowing an independent and realistic monitoring of how the platform behaves in Russia, and what content is available. Forensic evidence is collected for every experiment, including the responses of our requests to TikTok's servers.

All Tracking Exposed tools are publicly available and released under an open access and free-software license, so they can be used and reviewed by anyone.

When war in Ukraine started, Tracking Exposed set up data collection pipelines to compare the content that was delivered to Ukrainian and Russian TikTok users.

As we did this, our scrapers started failing when performing searches with Russian IP addresses, which prompted us to do a more in depth investigation, and led to the creation of this Special Report.

Tracking Exposed's technology can retrieve the content suggested on the TikTok's *For You Page* in every country in the world simultaneously, enabling cross-country comparison. It can also analyze which content is promoted or demoted on all the major social media enabling cross-platforms research.

These capabilities were not used for this report, but will be used in future investigations.

Findings

Summary

- On March 7, TikTok made all the content posted by non-Russian channels unavailable to Russian users. This unannounced restriction removes an estimated 95% of the content previously available to Russian TikTok users.
- Content restriction is happening at the *application layer* rather than the *transport layer*, which requires the direct involvement of TikTok. It is the first time a global social media platform has restricted access to content at this scale.
- A network of coordinated accounts is using a loophole to post new content promoting Russian pro-war propaganda in Russia, despite the current ban on new content uploads.

Detailed Findings

This investigation confirmed that new content was restricted on TikTok, as announced by TikTok, but also found that TikTok had restricted all historical content from outside of Russia, and that a loophole is being used by a coordinated pro-war propaganda network of accounts.

What is restricted?

All European and American accounts' videos are not available in Russia, including institutional accounts such as the WHO and the UN. Even TikTok's own accounts on TikTok are not available, except the one for Russia. None of the ten most-followed global TikTok accounts are accessible, including for example Charlie d'Amelio (the most followed TikToker) and Will Smith. A longer list of example accounts is below.

In its attempts to restrict the free flow of information to Russians about the Ukraine-Russia war TikTok has restricted all old content from accounts outside Russia - including non-political content. This reduces the total content available in Russia by about 95% (see: Discussion section).

Is there a loophole to publish new content?

Yes. There is a loophole that allows users to upload new content that Russian accounts can access. In addition to the TikTok influencers paid by the Russian state who are using this loophole, as reported by Vice, Tracking Exposed found a coordinated network of accounts posting pro-war propaganda using the loophole too.

At the time of publishing this report on March 15, we were still observing content being posted using the loophole.

Investigation Timeline

On **March 7**, following the Russian “fake news” law, the TikTok search function was almost completely unavailable and returned no results (or sometimes just one video) on nearly any search in non-Cyrillic alphabet. For example the query “music” or “ukraine” gave no results that day, suggesting an ongoing patch.

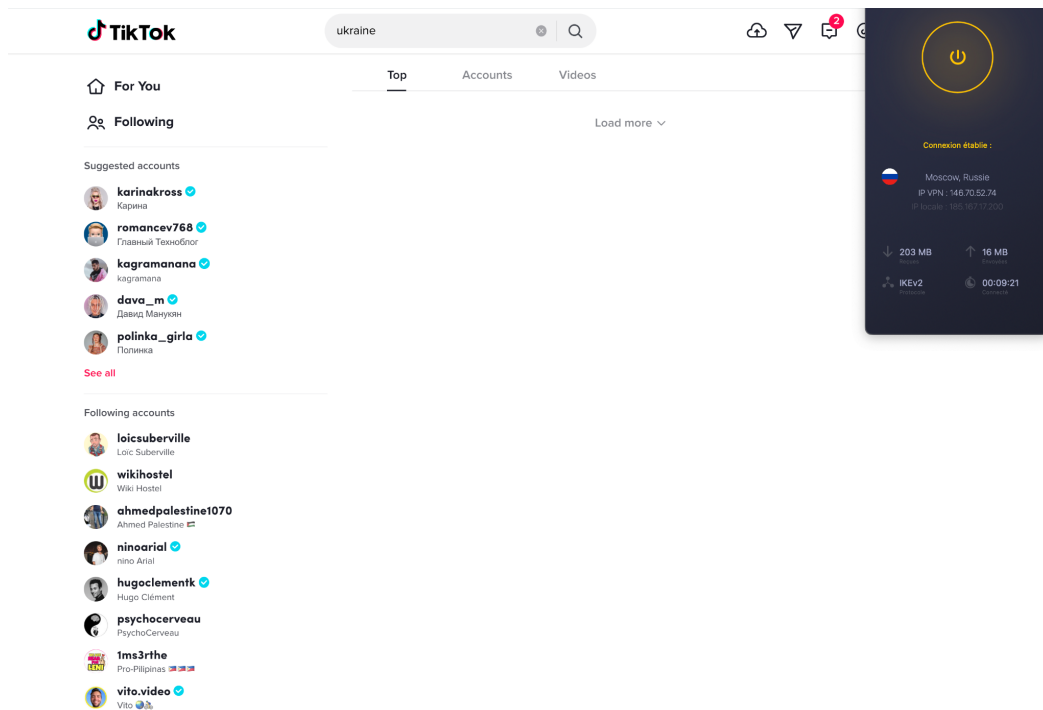


Figure 1: On the 7th of March, no content was served to users based in Russia when querying “Ukraine”

On **March 8**, the search function was working again with non-Cyrillic alphabet. However, starting the same day, the platform started to limit Russian content only, both in the search results and the For You feed.

This means that all non-Russian accounts return an empty page from a Russian IP address.

Examples include:

- **American and European politicians' official accounts** like [Macron](#), or traditional supporters of Putin like [Salvini](#). Most of the US politicians do not use TikTok, but the ones who use it like Senator [Ed Markey](#) are currently unavailable in Russia.
- **International organizations** like the World Health Organization ([WHO](#)) and the [United Nations](#) are blocked.

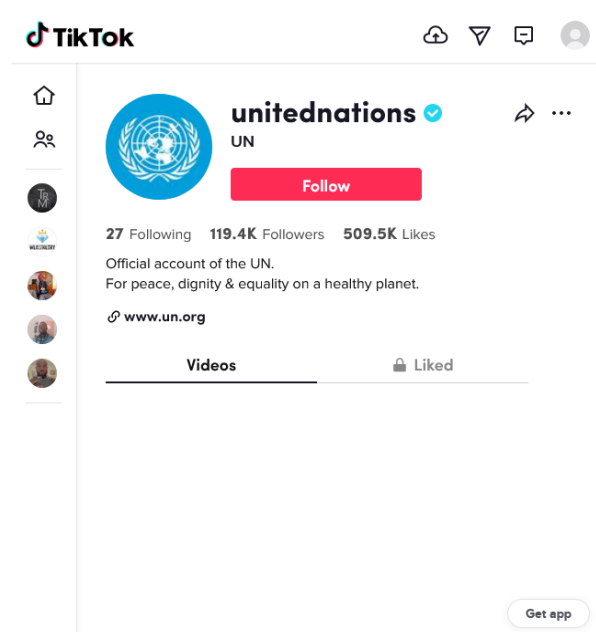


Figure 2: United Nations's official account videos are not available to users based in Russia.

- **The ten most-followed TikTokers**, including [Charlie d'Amelio](#) (the most followed TikToker), [Will Smith](#) and the Italian band [Maneskin](#), are not accessible in Russia.

- **The TikTok accounts of international news sources**, including [CNN](#) and the [BBC](#), are blocked, though their websites are still accessible directly and through Google. [Russia Today](#) or [Sputnik](#)'s TikTok accounts are still accessible in Russia, though they are banned in Europe and the US.

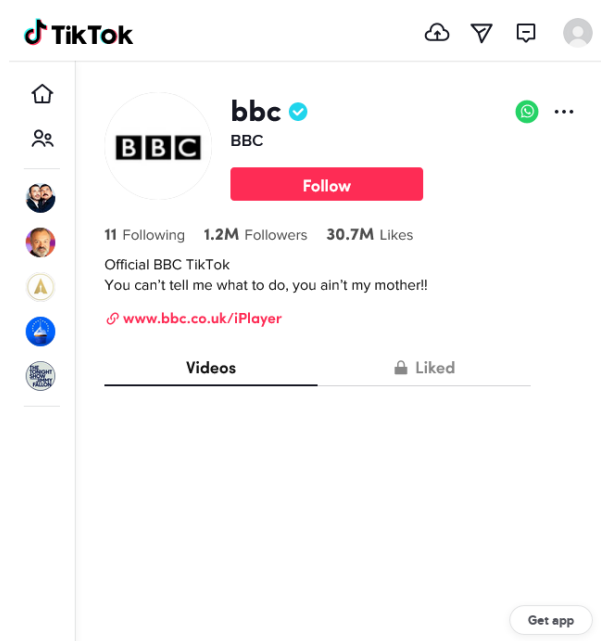


Figure 3: BBC's official account videos are not available to users based in Russia.

On **March 11**, TikTok started to flag Russian news media as "Russia state controlled media" (see screenshots below).

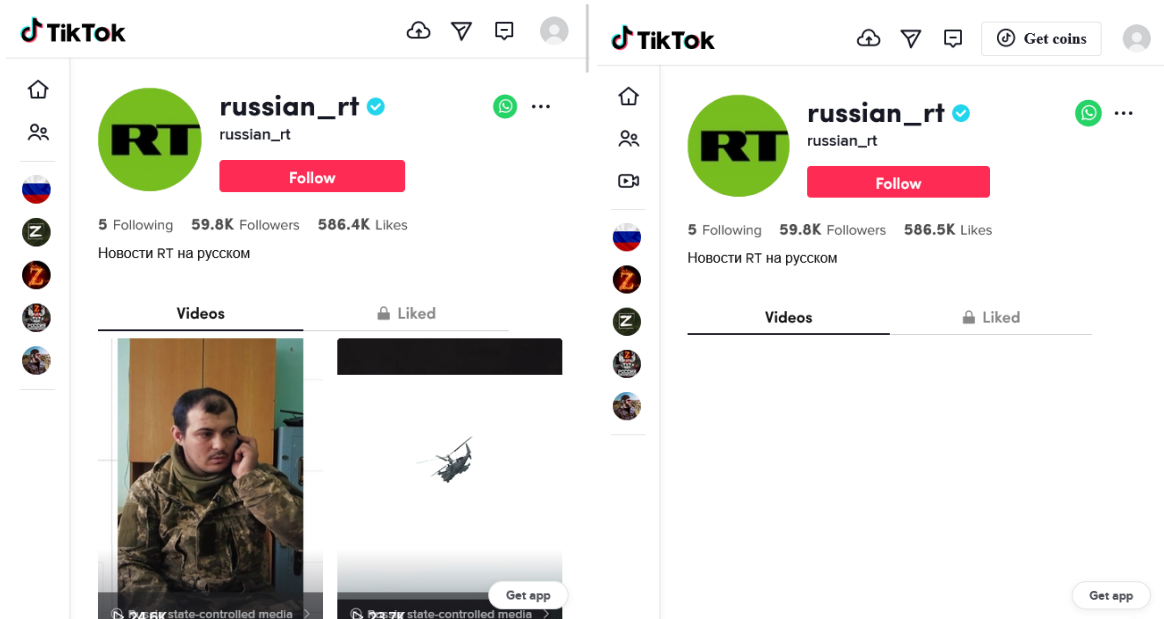


Figure 4: Russia Today's official account videos are available to users based in Russia (left picture), but not to the ones outside Russia (right picture).

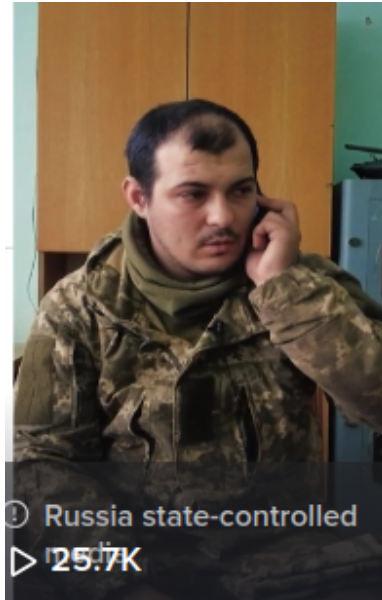


Figure 4B: A zoomed in of the previous image: Russia Today's videos are flagged with the caption "Russia state-controlled media", even accessing from Russia.

- **International brand pages**, including [McDonalds](#) are blocked (though the [Russian based account](#) is available). **Even TikTok's [official page](#) is blocked in Russia.**

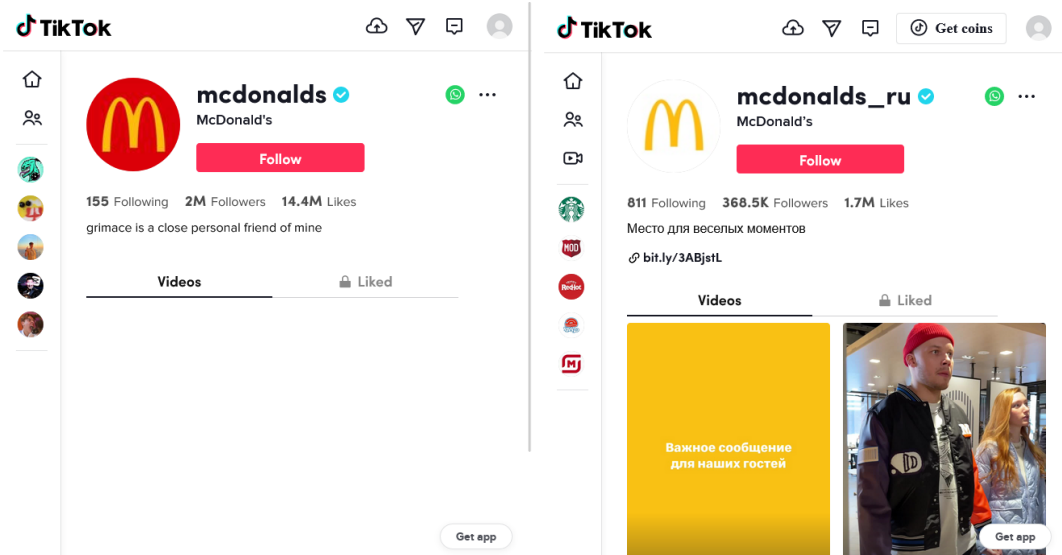


Figure 5: McDonald's official account videos are not available to users based in Russia (left), but the McDonald's Russian-based account is still available to users based in Russia (right).

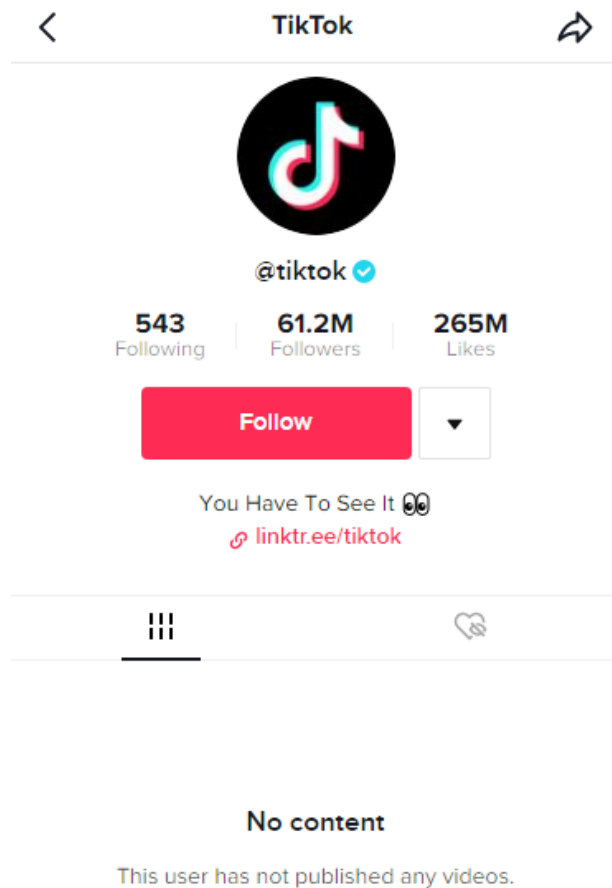


Figure 6: Even TikTok's own official account videos are not available to users based in Russia.

We can conclude with high certainty that the content restriction affects all non-Russian channels, regardless of their content.

A loophole in the content restrictions

The publication of new content was restricted on March 7, but Russian-based accounts are still available to upload their content using a loophole. Users can upload a video with a VPN from a

non-Russian location, but the video shows up on Russian TikTok because their account appears to be based in Russia thanks to the VPN.

Some [TikTok users pointed this out](#), but their accounts are now blocked in Russia. Even if posting content is technically possible, the TikTok moderation team may have a way to identify this and take it down once uploaded.

After [Vice reported](#) on the 11th of March TikTok users were paid by Russia to promote pro-war propaganda we tested the quoted accounts:

- [@d00zenn](#) is still available in Russia and posting pro-Russia propaganda
- [@tvoya_malyshka001](#) is still available in Russia posting pro-Russian propaganda
- [@roldozzer](#) and [@kirill_felix](#) are available in Russia without recent content, suggesting their content was removed (by the user or the platform) after the Vice article was published.

A coordinated network of pro-war propaganda

We then used our technology to detect other similar accounts, using hashtag analysis and scaling the data collection to build an extensive list of TikTok users posting pro-war propaganda using the loophole. Within this data we found what appears to be a coordinated network of accounts, including:

- [@_lmires_](#) posted 8 pro-war videos after the restrictions, collecting over 6 million views.
- [@zarussia20222/](#) posted this [video](#) after the restrictions, showing the pro-war “Z” symbol, with more than 3.8 million views.
- [@v.kurse](#) posted 5 pro-war videos after the restrictions including [this](#), [this](#), [this](#), and [this](#), which collectively have 235,000 views.
- [@.voiceofrussia](#) posted 7 videos after the restrictions, which collectively have 56,000 views.

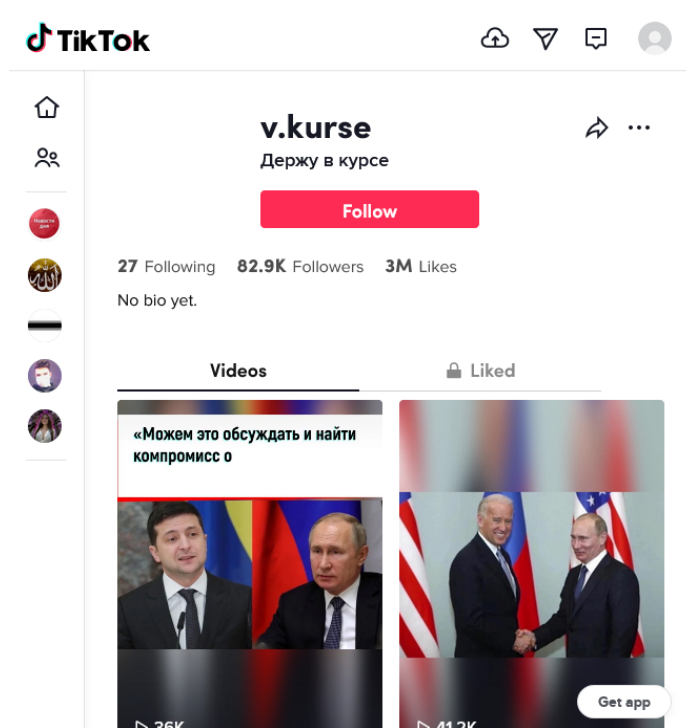


Figure 7: A non-individual channel posting news that is accessible to users based in Russia and is posting pro-war propaganda, after the TikTok upload restrictions.

If these accounts are a coordinated network, it's possible they are directly governed by a Russian government propaganda team. A more extensive list of these accounts is available on request.

What content about Ukraine is available in Russia?

By looking at the Search function of TikTok, we found that the keyword [Zelensky](#) is not banned, but the search returns mostly content against the politician, and is contains homophobic themes, including in [this](#) and [this](#) example.

Pro-Putin accounts are still available, along with several Russia Today related channels, influential pro-Lukashenko (Belarusian president) accounts, and several accounts of Russian opposition leader Navalny (though we found no recent content on his accounts). Prominent Russian TikTok users aligned with the Russian government, such as [Margarita Simonyan](#) are still available.

We found no evidence of anti-war content posted after the TikTok restriction.

A new Splinternet Frontier

Why do these findings matter?

Tracking Exposed's findings are important because:

- TikTok is restricting information about the Ukraine-Russia war in a way that is above and beyond what is required in response to the Russian "fake news" law.
- By making foreign content unavailable in Russia, TikTok is isolating Russian users from the rest of the world, leaving them exposed to only pro-war Russian propaganda.
- Although we know the restrictions have been implemented at the application layer, TikTok has not publicly announced these changes, or commented on our initial findings, highlighting the need for increased scrutiny on TikTok by independent organizations.
- National content restrictions at such scale are unprecedented for a global social media platform, and the motives of TikTok are not clear.

Discussion

The effect of TikTok's changes since the war began is that Russian people are deprived of a global perspective on Russia's actions in Ukraine, and can only see content heavily weighted towards Kremlin-approved information. This makes it less likely that public opinion in Russia will become critical of the war.

As TikTok is the last non Russian-owned global social media platform in Russia, TikTok should clarify its content policy in Russia and provide data access to researchers to allow for public scrutiny on how its decisions are impacting the Ukraine-Russia war.

~ [Salvatore Romano](#), Head of Research, [Tracking Exposed](#)

We are experiencing an unprecedented form of Splinternet. We estimate that 95% of TikTok's content is now unavailable to Russian users. It's the first time a global platform has made restrictions at a national level at such a scale. These restrictions were implemented on the application layer, and thus required a direct intervention from TikTok.

Before the war, the Russian internet landscape was unique in that Russian services like VKontakte and Yandex were able to flourish, while Facebook or Google remained uncensored and freely accessible. The era of the free internet in Russia just came to a sudden end. Within a week, Facebook, Twitter and Instagram were blocked. TikTok, the only global platform still available in Russia, is effectively turning into a propaganda channel for the Kremlin. Russia seems to be moving toward the Chinese model of internet censorship.

~ [Marc Faddoul](#), co-director, [Tracking Exposed](#)

A truly free internet has never been more important. This war is the latest example of the devastating real world consequences of social platform policy decisions. Social media users around the world will continue to be impacted by algorithms until we have transparency and accountability. We are stepping up Tracking Exposed investigations and looking for collaborators, analysts, funders and volunteers to help us scale this important work.

~ [Claudio Agosti](#), founder and co-director, [Tracking Exposed](#)

Further Discussion

As the war unfolded, global social media platforms saw an overwhelming majority of support for Ukraine. [Russia was losing](#) 'the TikTok war'. The “fake news” law was introduced in reaction, in order to limit the spread of opinions which could hamper the popular support for the war in Russia. Russian users are now at risk of severe prosecution if they criticize the official narrative on the war. By also barring foreign accounts, TikTok removed most of the remaining critics of the Kremlin.

TikTok's content restrictions are notable because they advance the “splinternet” – a term used to describe the fragmentation of the internet network as a result of censorship.

[Unlike the Russian Facebook ban](#), the content restrictions on TikTok are happening at the *application layer*, meaning that the restrictions were implemented by TikTok themselves. We know this since TikTok's servers are reachable when querying any of the blocked accounts, and even return the account snippet, but emptied of video.

This is a new type of *splinternet*: Russia is now alienated from both their neighbors in Ukraine, and the rest of the world. A war between ideologies and nations is generating an unprecedented split (or *balkanization*) of social media like TikTok into nation specific policies and isolated (if not conflicting) communities.

Although platforms commonly implement country-specific restrictions (i.e. to adapt to local hate-speech or terrorism laws), those typically target a tiny minority of the overall platform content. Since users in Russia constitute about [5% of TikTok's global audience](#), we estimate that 95% of content previously available to them is now unavailable.

The scale of this application layer geo-blocking is therefore unprecedented.

Until now, the Russian internet landscape was unique, in that it was the only country where an ecosystem of national platforms (like VKontakte, Yandex...) was able to flourish without banning or restricting the foreign equivalents (like Facebook, Twitter).

In the days after Russia's invasion of Ukraine, Chinese social media platforms Weibo, WeChat and Douyin [restricted anti-war content](#), suggesting an alliance between Russia and China in the information warfare part of the conflict. This may have led Chinese authorities to put pressure on ByteDance to restrict content in Russia.

The move is likely also motivated by business constraints. To remain active in Russia (the platform's [fourth biggest market](#)), TikTok had to comply with the Russian “fake news” law. Since most of the critics of the Russian army come from outside Russia, banning all non-Russian content was a very coarse but relatively effective way to comply with the new law.

The solution implemented by TikTok, which results in most of the platform's profiles to be still visible, but empty, does not seem to be viable in the long term. It seems more like a patch implemented under time-pressure, as well as political and business constraints.

With the blockage of Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and now extensive content restriction on TikTok, the era of the free internet in Russia has ended.

Therefore, Russia appears to be moving towards the Chinese model, where platforms are forced to abide by the government censorship guidelines in order to remain available, as seen with TikTok. We can imagine that in the future ByteDance, the Chinese owner of TikTok, could release a Russian-specific version of its app, as it did with Douyin, the Chinese version of TikTok which is also owned by ByteDance.

With these recent changes, TikTok runs the risk of effectively converting itself into a propaganda channel for the Kremlin.

Recommendations

Tracking Exposed recommends that TikTok:

1. Provides data access via an open API, in order to allow researchers to independently analyze TikTok's activities and verify TikTok's own reports, without delay.
2. In light of Tracking Exposed's findings TikTok should clarify:
 - a. Why are foreign accounts blocked in Russia? Is this a policy decision, and if so why was this not announced?
 - b. Is TikTok aware of the loophole that allows new videos to be uploaded despite the announcement that they are restricted in Russia?
 - c. Will TikTok commit to removing the Russian sponsored pro-war propaganda that is being posted by individual influencers? Will TikTok commit to removing the networked news accounts that use this same loophole?

Conclusion

Our investigations uncovered that TikTok made all content posted by non-Russian channels unavailable to Russian users.

Such a restriction at a national level is of unprecedented scale for a global social media platform. It concerns about 95% of the content previously available, including the accounts of the biggest TikTok stars, those of international organizations, and, ironically, TikTok's own official account.

Despite that TikTok was directly involved in implementing this new policy, the company did not announce it.

As Russian users are banned from posting new content, and state-propagandists have a loophole to workaround this ban, TikTok is effectively converting itself into a propaganda channel for the Kremlin.

These discoveries were made in the context of an ongoing monitoring of TikTok's algorithm by the Tracking Exposed team.

They highlight the importance of independent scrutiny over social media platforms, particularly during times of information warfare.

Transparent data should be provided by the platform itself, rather than having to rely only external scraping by third-party organizations like Tracking Exposed.

This investigation will remain ongoing as the conflict unfolds. Further reports will describe the content that is being promoted and demoted on the ForYou page in Russia, as well as networks of state-propagandist accounts.

About Tracking Exposed

[Tracking Exposed](#) is a European non-profit organization defending digital rights through algorithmic investigations.

For more than 5-years, its team has been pioneering new methodologies to scrutinize the most influential recommender systems, such as those of YouTube, Facebook, Amazon, PornHub and TikTok. The [code](#) is released as free software, enabling anyone to use, extend or review it.

Tracking Exposed's infrastructure and methodologies have been validated in several [peer-reviewed publications](#), and the works of the team have received coverage on [major media outlets](#). Some of its reports have been cited in a [United Nations report](#), a house [testimony](#) and a [US Congress official letter](#) to YouTube's CEO.

Tracking.Exposed is also developing [YouChoose.ai](#), an alternative recommendation system for YouTube which empowers users and content creators.

Tracking Exposed was born in Italy and its legal nonprofit is registered in France. The organization is funded through various grants and foundations, including from the European Commission, the Mozilla Foundation or [Reset.tech](#).

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