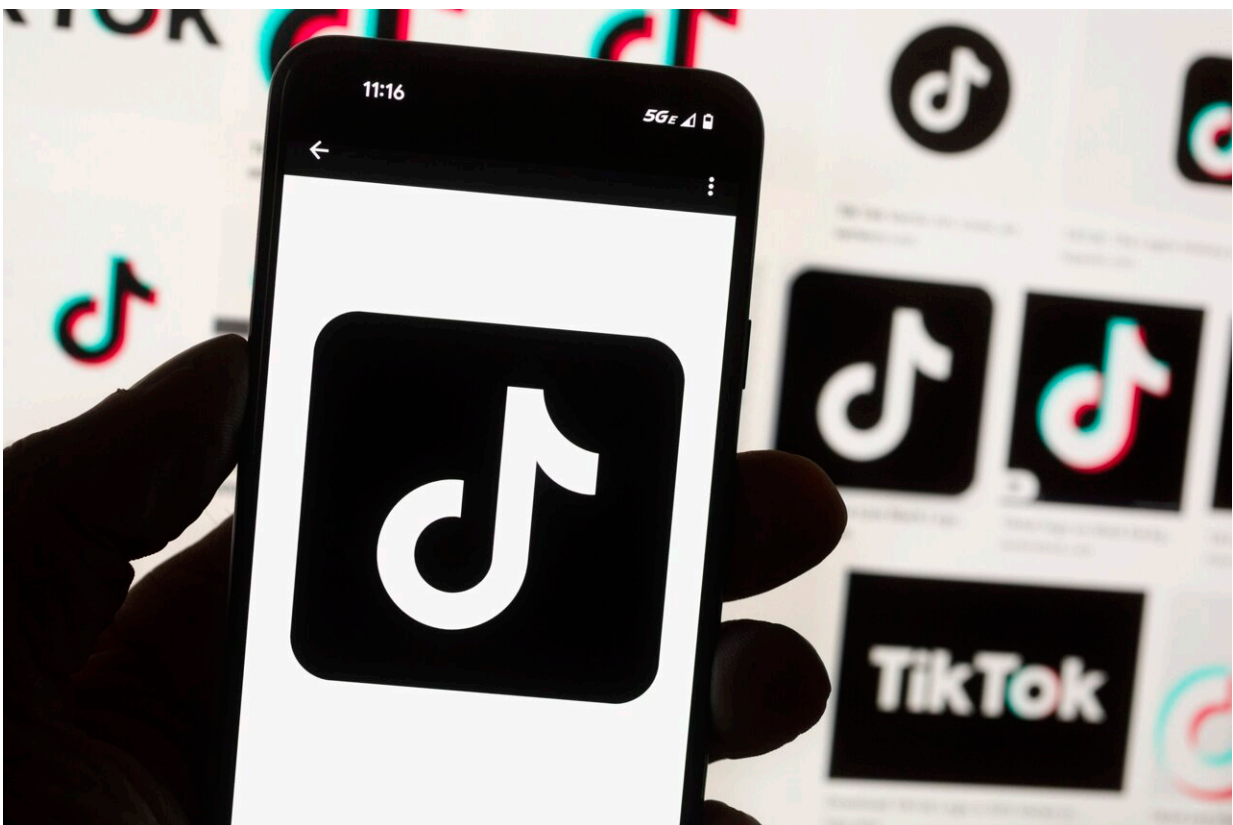


Maryland bans TikTok in state agencies, latest state to act

December 6 2022, by BRIAN WITTE, SCOTT BAUER and JAMES POLLARD



The TikTok logo is seen on a cell phone on Oct. 14, 2022, in Boston. Wisconsin's Republican representatives in Congress on Tuesday, Dec. 6, called on Democratic Gov. Tony Evers to delete the video platform TikTok from all state government devices, including his own, calling it a national security threat. Credit: AP Photo/Michael Dwyer, File

Maryland is banning the use of TikTok and certain China and Russia-based platforms in the state's executive branch of government, Gov. Larry Hogan said Tuesday, the latest state to address cybersecurity risks presented by the platforms.

The Republican governor announced an emergency cybersecurity directive to prohibit the platforms' use, saying they could be involved in cyberespionage, government surveillance and inappropriate collection of sensitive personal information.

"There may be no greater threat to our personal safety and our national security than the cyber vulnerabilities that support our daily lives," Hogan said in a statement, adding: "To further protect our systems, we are issuing this emergency directive against foreign actors and organizations that seek to weaken and divide us."

The Maryland directive comes a week after South Dakota Gov. Kristi Noem, also a Republican, banned state employees and contractors from accessing TikTok on state-owned devices, citing its ties to China. South Carolina Gov. Henry McMaster, also a Republican, on Monday asked the state's Department of Administration to ban TikTok from all state government devices it manages. Nebraska Gov. Pete Ricketts blocked TikTok on state electronic devices in August 2020.

The U.S. armed forces also have prohibited the app on military devices.

"It is a risk that most governments are starting to realize it's not worth taking," said Trenchcoat Advisors co-founder Holden Triplett, a former FBI government official who worked in Beijing and counterintelligence.

While there has been much debate about whether the Chinese government is actively collecting TikTok data, Triplett said the app poses a clear vulnerability. Because TikTok's owner, ByteDance, is a

Chinese company, it would have to comply with any potential requests from Chinese security and intelligence requests to hand over data, which could include employee's location and contacts, he said.

ByteDance moved its headquarters to Singapore in 2020.

TikTok has struggled to detect ads that contain blatant misinformation about U.S. elections, according to a recent report from nonprofit Global Witness and the Cybersecurity for Democracy team at New York University.

But TikTok spokesperson Jamal Brown said the concerns driving bans "are largely fueled by misinformation about our company."



Wisconsin Democratic Gov. Tony Evers makes his acceptance speech on Nov. 9, 2022, in Madison, Wis., after winning the governorship election. Wisconsin's Republican representatives in Congress on Tuesday, Dec. 6, called on Evers to delete the video platform TikTok from all state government devices, including his own, calling it a national security threat. Credit: AP Photo/Andy Manis, File

"We are always happy to meet with state policymakers to discuss our privacy and security practices," Brown said. "We are disappointed that the many state agencies, offices, and universities that have been using TikTok to build communities and connect with constituents will no longer have access to our platform."

TikTok Chief Operating Officer Vanessa Pappas, based in Los Angeles, has said the company protects all American users' data and that Chinese government officials have no access to it.

Also Tuesday, Wisconsin's Republican representatives in Congress called on Democratic Gov. Tony Evers to delete the video platform TikTok from all state government devices, calling it a national security threat.

"Wisconsinites expect their governor to be aware of the dangerous national security threats TikTok poses and to protect them from this avenue for CCP intelligence operations," U.S. Sen. Ron Johnson and U.S. Reps. Mike Gallagher, Tom Tiffany, Glenn Grothman, Bryan Steil and Scott Fitzgerald said in a letter.

Gallagher last month joined with U.S. Sen. Marco Rubio, of Florida, in writing an opinion piece calling for governments to ban TikTok.

Evers' spokesperson Britt Cudaback said the administration takes

cybersecurity threats "very seriously" and regularly consults with the U.S. Department of Homeland Security, the FBI, and counterintelligence specialists when making decisions about state government devices.

"We will continue to defer to the judgment and advice of law enforcement, cybersecurity, and counterintelligence experts regarding this and other evolving cybersecurity issues," Cudaback said.

Former President Donald Trump issued blanket-style orders against Chinese tech companies, but the White House under President Joe Biden has replaced them with a narrower approach. U.S. officials and the company are now in talks over a possible agreement that would resolve American security concerns.

A researcher with the conservative Heritage Foundation last month called on government officials to ban TikTok from operating entirely in the United States. And last week, FBI Director Chris Wray said China could use the app to collect data on its users that could be used for traditional espionage operations.

Still, some experts say the threat is overstated. In a Nov. 14 commentary for the Strategic Technologies Program, former diplomat and cybersecurity expert James A. Lewis said TikTok's national security risk is "easily exaggerated."

"Intelligence agencies routinely scrape social media to collect biographical information and do not need ownership of TikTok (or any other social media platform) to do this," Lewis wrote. "The question is, how much more does China obtain by having access to TikTok data that is not publicly available? There is probably some benefit, but it is likely small."

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