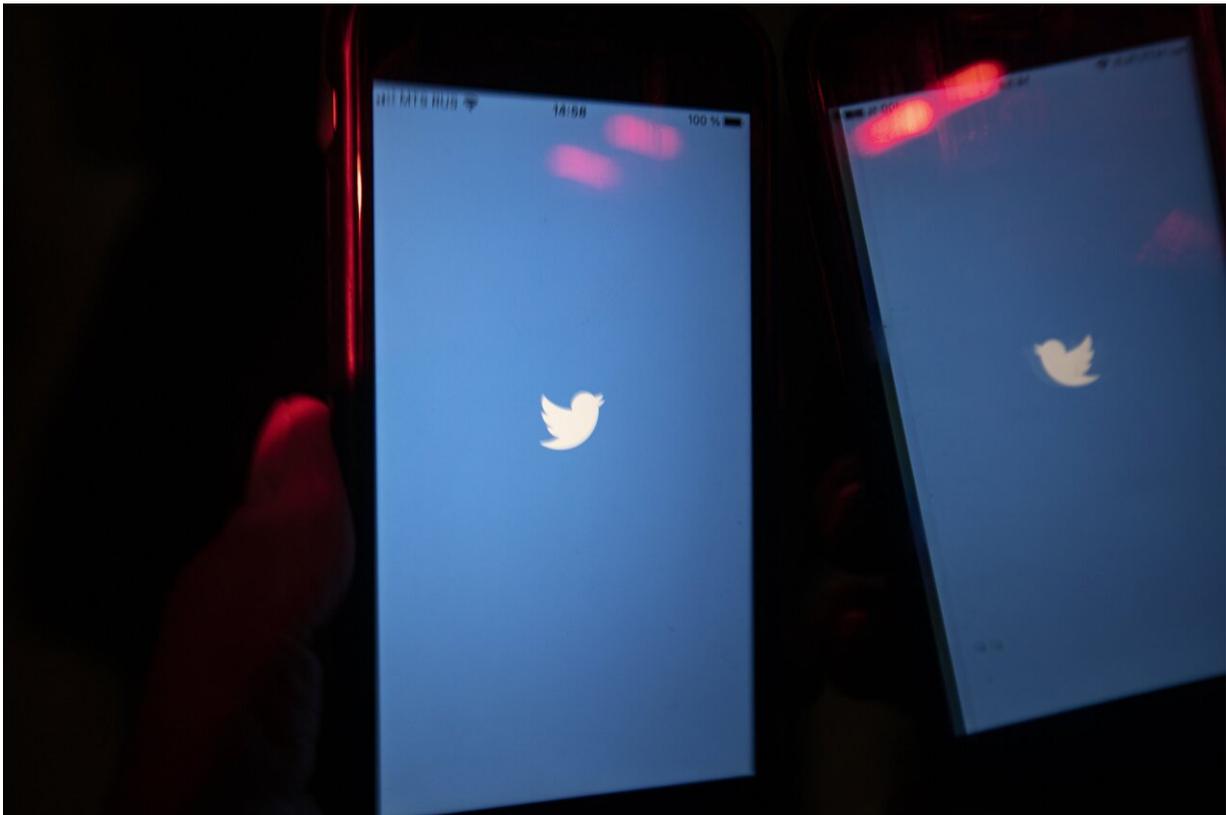


Russia slows down Twitter, part of social media clampdown

March 10 2021, by Vladimir Isachenkov and Daria Litvinova



A mobile phone user turns on Twitter application on his smartphone in Moscow, Russia, Wednesday, March 10, 2021. Russian authorities say they have moved to slow down the speed of Twitter over its failure to remove the banned content an action that reflects the government's effort to tighten rules for social platforms. The state communications watchdog, Roskomnadzor, said it took action Wednesday to slow down the speed of uploading photo and video on Twitter after it failed to remove the content encouraging children suicides and containing information about drugs and children pornography. (AP Photo/Alexander

Zemlianichenko)

Russian authorities said Wednesday they are slowing down the speed of uploading photos and videos to Twitter over its failure to remove banned content—part of growing efforts to curb social media platforms that have played a major role in amplifying dissent.

The state communications watchdog, Roskomnadzor, said it began the slowdown after it said Twitter failed to remove content encouraging suicide among children and containing information about drugs and child pornography.

The agency warned that if Twitter refuses to abide by Russian law, it could be blocked entirely, but it voiced hope the platform would "take a constructive stance" and comply with removing the banned content. Vadim Subbotin, deputy chief of Roskomnadzor, said in televised remarks that Twitter is the only social platform that has "openly ignored the Russian authorities' demand to remove the banned content."

Roskomnadzor said in a statement that Twitter has failed to remove more than 3,000 posts with the banned content, including more than 2,500 posts encouraging suicide among minors.

The watchdog said the slowdown would apply to all mobile devices and 50% of desktop users nationwide.

Twitter's [user policies outline](#) a host of banned behaviors, including prohibiting content that involves child sexual exploitation or material that promotes or encourages suicide or self harm. An email seeking comment on the Russian action was sent to Twitter.

The Twitter app has been downloaded 17.6 million times in Russia since 2014, accounting for just 1.8% of global installations, according to mobile analytics firm Sensor Tower.

The action against Twitter comes as the authorities have criticized social media platforms that have been used to bring tens of thousands of people into the streets across Russia this year to demand the release of jailed Russian opposition leader Alexei Navalny. The wave of demonstrations served as a major challenge to the Kremlin.

Russian authorities have assailed the platforms for failing to remove calls for children to join opposition protests, which is against the law in Russia.

President Vladimir Putin's spokesman Dmitry Peskov said Wednesday the government has "no desire to block anything," but added that it was necessary to enforce compliance with the law.

The move against Twitter is part of continuous efforts by the government to tighten control of social media.

In 2014, the authorities adopted a law requiring online services to store the personal data of Russian users on servers in Russia and have since tried to make Facebook and Twitter to comply with it. Both companies have been repeatedly fined, first small amounts of around \$50 and last year the equivalent of \$63,000 each, for not complying.

The government has stopped short of outright bans even though the law allows it, probably fearing the move would elicit too much public outrage. Only the social network LinkedIn, which wasn't very popular in Russia, has been banned by the authorities for the failure to store user data in Russia.

In recent months, Russian authorities have also increasingly bristled at Facebook and Twitter, blocking Russian accounts and content, as well as Twitter labeling of government and state-affiliated media accounts. Last fall, Russian Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova accused the two social media giants of "open censorship," saying that "Russian media, without trial or investigation, are being labeled as allegedly unreliable, excluded from the search, blocked, and accounts are deleted."

Two weeks ago, Roskomnadzor demanded Twitter to explain why it removed 100 accounts linked to Russia. Twitter said the accounts "amplified narratives that were aligned with the Russian government, "focused on undermining faith in the NATO alliance and its stability," and targeted the United States and the European Union.

Dmitry Medvedev, who was Russia's president in 2008-2012 when Putin had to step down because of term limits and currently is deputy head of Russia's Security Council, complained last month that Twitter labeled his account as a government one. He said the American platform only does that "to countries, relations with which are not very simple. And they did not do this to their own politicians."

As the Russian authorities slowed down Twitter, some government websites suffered outages and access problems. It's not clear if the events were connected, and some experts suggested they could have been the result of unrelated cyberattacks. The Ministry of Digital Development acknowledged outages on some government websites but said they were linked to equipment problems at communications provider Rostelecom.

In 2018, Roskomnadzor moved to block the popular messaging app Telegram over its refusal to hand over encryption keys used to scramble messages, but failed to fully block access to the app, disrupting hundreds of websites in Russia instead.

Last year, the watchdog officially withdrew the demands to restrict the app, which has been widely used by government institutions despite the ban. Some observers suggested Wednesday's outages of websites could be connected to the Twitter clampdown in a similar way.

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