

MEDIA INFLUENCE MATRIX



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RUSSIA

Technology, the Public Sphere and Journalism

Editor:

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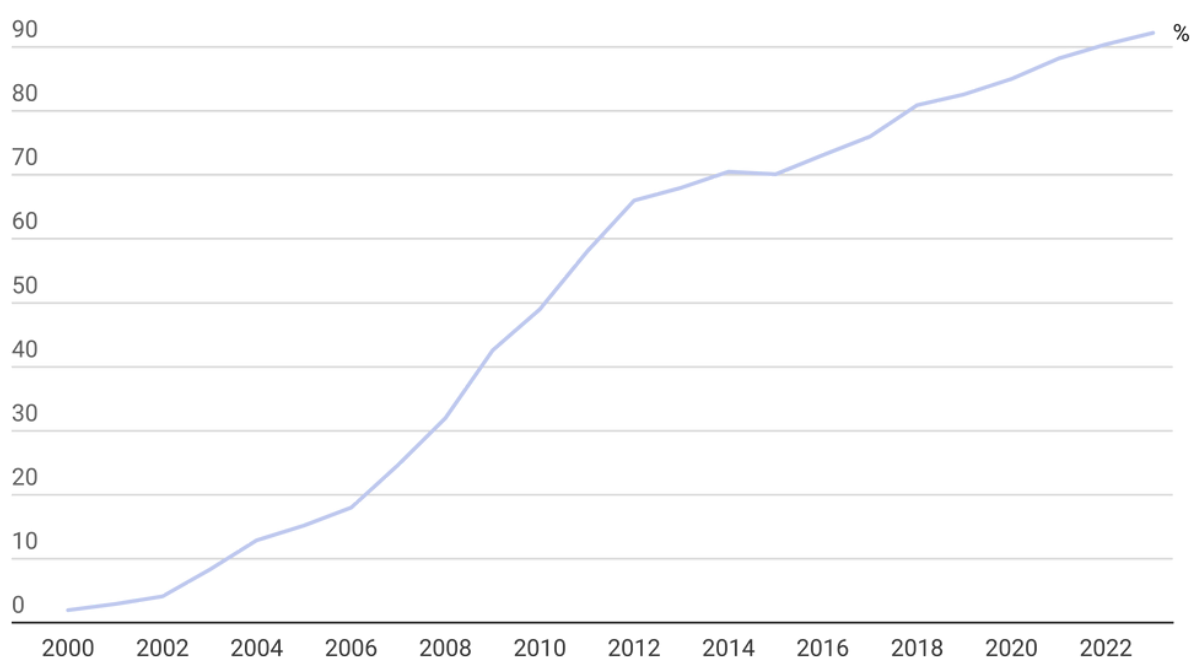
I. Technology Overview

Since the early 2000s, digital technologies have occupied a central place in Russian society—first as instruments of modernization and progress, and later as tools of political governance and control. The story of Russian media and technology since the turn of the century can be traced along three interlinked trajectories: the diffusion of digital technologies and the transformation of media consumption patterns; the emergence and consolidation of domestic tech giants; and the gradual tightening of state control over the digital information space. Each of these developments builds upon the previous one, producing a layered evolution of the Russian media environment.

Technology and the Evolution of Media Consumption

In the 1990s, Russia's Internet and telecommunications infrastructure was weak and uneven, with usage confined mainly to universities, government agencies, and small circles of enthusiasts.^[1] From the early 2000s, however, connectivity expanded rapidly. Between 2000 and 2023, the share of Russians using the Internet rose from just 1.98% to more than 92%, with home access following a similar trajectory. The spread of 4G/LTE networks in the 2010s cemented the primacy of mobile broadband, which by 2023 reached over 93% of the population.

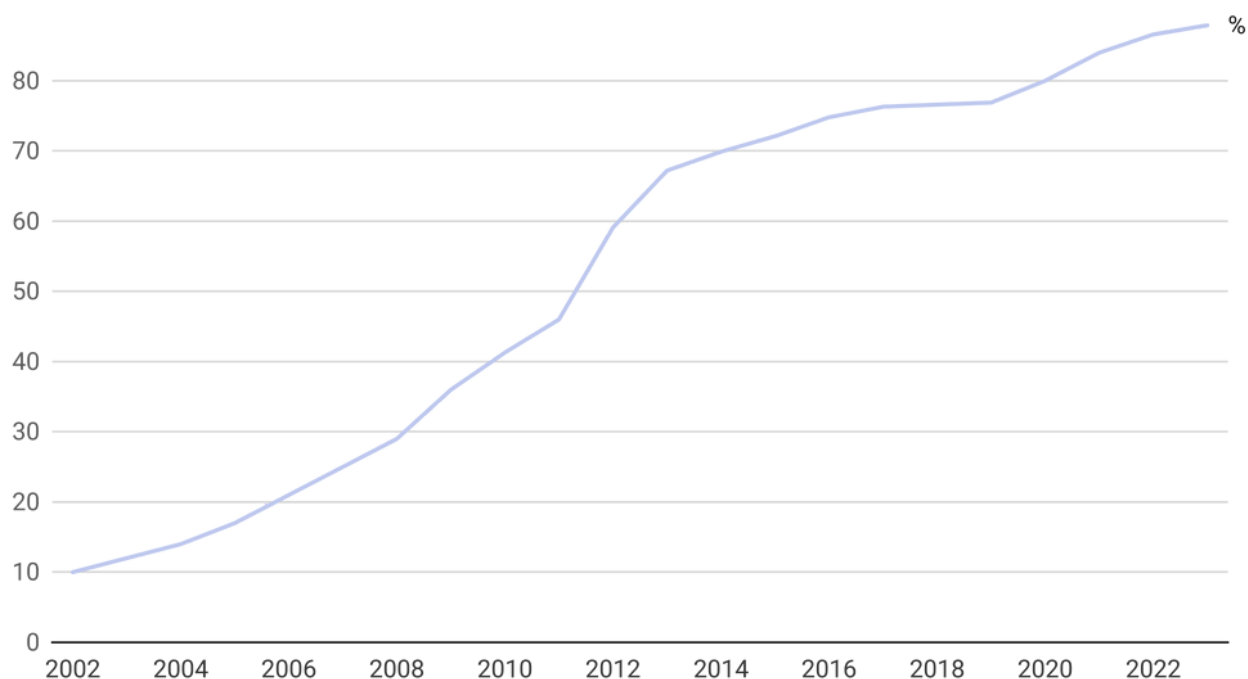
Share (%) of individuals using the Internet in Russia



Source: ITU DataHub • Created with Datawrapper

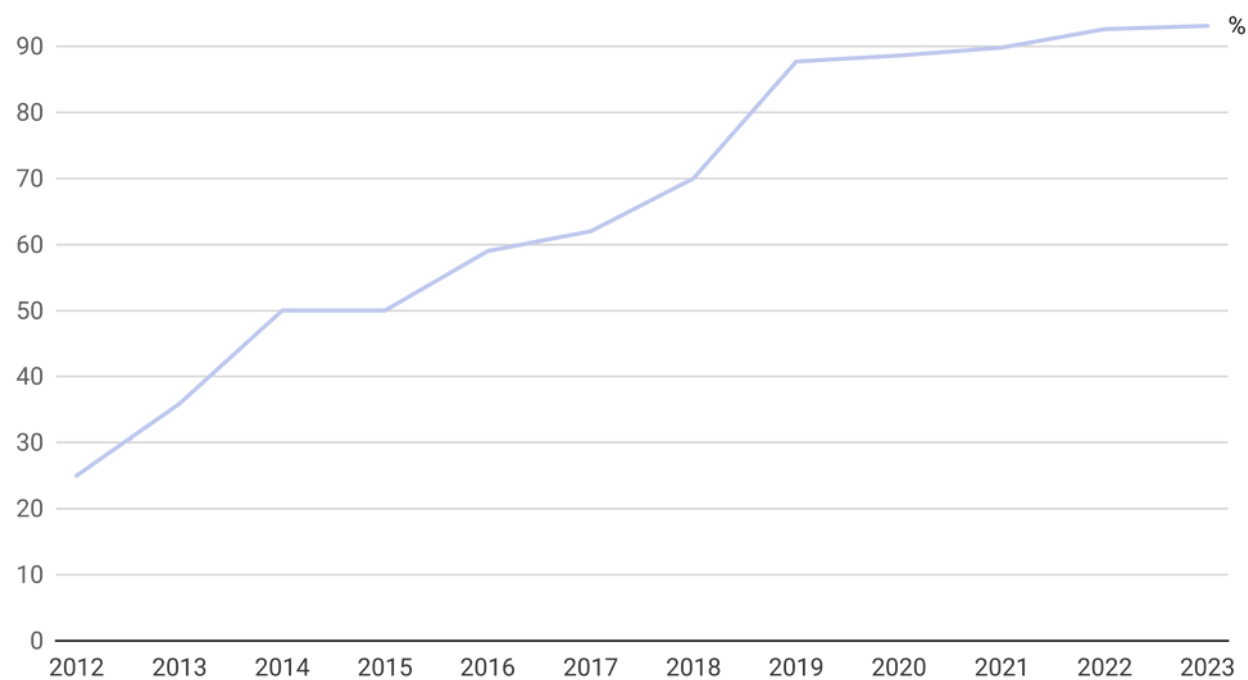
[1] George Lawton. (1993). The End of the Party Line. 1 April 1993. WIRED. <https://www.wired.com/1993/04/russnet/>.

Share (%) of households with Internet access at home in Russia



Source: ITU DataHub • Created with Datawrapper

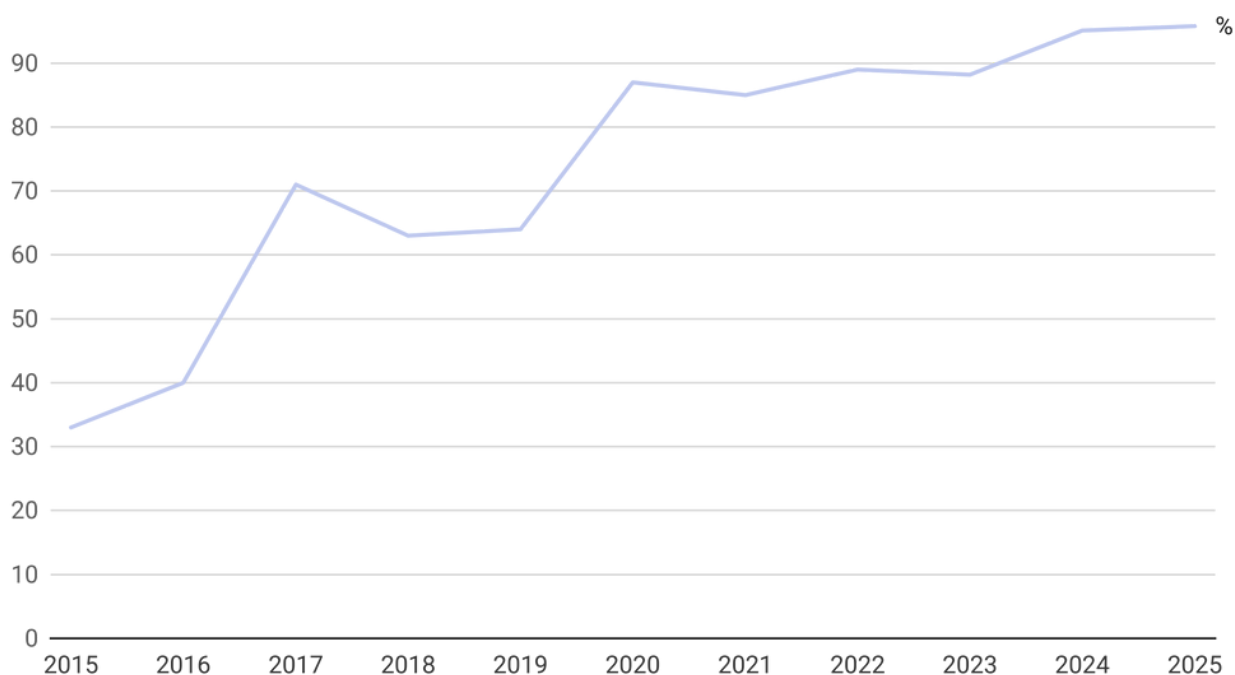
Share (%) of individuals with access to at least 4G/LTE in Russia



Source: ITU DataHub • Created with Datawrapper

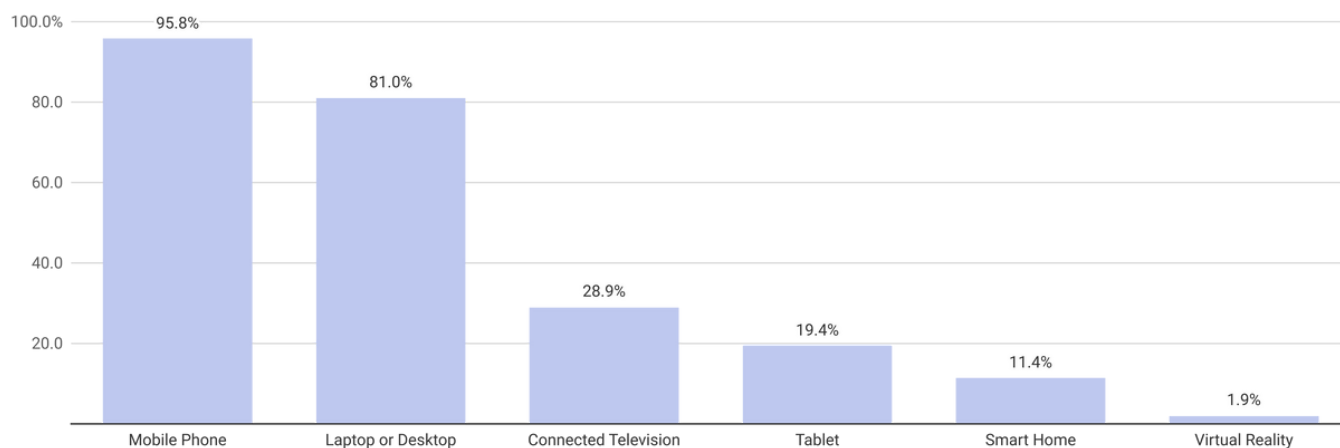
Alongside the expansion of Internet access, the devices through which Russians go online have also transformed. By 2025, 95.8% of Internet users access the web via smartphones—up from about one-third in 2015, when smartphone penetration was still emerging. Computers and laptops remain an important part of the access infrastructure, used by 81% of users, though largely confined to work and educational purposes.

Share (%) of Internet users via mobile phones in Russia



Source: Datareportal • Created with Datawrapper

Devices used to access the Internet in Russia in 2025

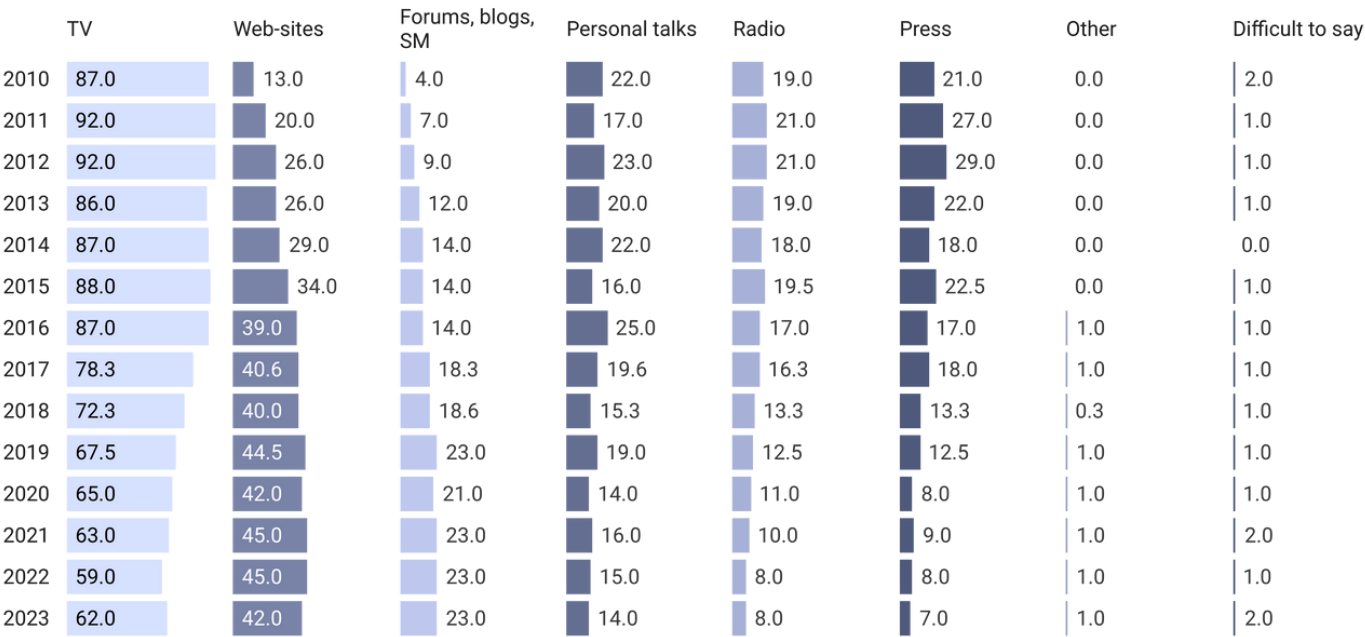


Source: Datareportal • Created with Datawrapper

These infrastructural changes triggered a profound transformation in media consumption. Traditional outlets began migrating online in the 1990s and early 2000s, with pioneers such as *Echo of Moscow* experimenting with news websites.[2] By the mid-2000s, digital-native platforms emerged, soon followed by the rise of social media: VK in 2006, the Russian version of YouTube in 2007, and Facebook’s entry into the Russian market in 2008.

Sociological data from 2010 to 2023 capture this shift. Television’s dominance steadily eroded, its share as the primary news source falling from above 90% to around 60%. At the same time, websites and social media gained ground. Online news became a regular source for over 40% of respondents, while social platforms plateaued at just above 20%. Print media experienced the sharpest decline, shrinking from 29% in 2012 to only 7% by 2023. Notably, the weakening of television’s dominance correlates more strongly with the mass adoption of smartphones in the latter half of the 2010s than with earlier increases in general Internet access.

Survey data: main news sources in Russia, in %



Source: FOM • Created with Datawrapper

Importantly, this evolution has been punctuated by shocks. The COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 introduced uncertainty and temporarily disrupted media habits. Although all media categories experienced a dip, most rebounded within a year. Political events likewise served as inflection points: the annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 both produced surges in television consumption, as the Kremlin mobilized broadcast media to shape narratives and reinforce national unity. These episodes illustrate how global crises and domestic politics alike influence media-consumption trajectories in Russia.

[2] VDud. (2025). Венедиктов – страх, Симоньян, компромиссы (Venediktov – fear, Simonyan, compromises). 10 June 2025. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RnHCIXiNWS8>; Irina Raspopina. (2013). Russian Internet-Journalism: The History of the Formation and Characteristics of the Contemporary Status. *Voprosy Teorii i Praktiki Zhurnalistiki* 1: 208–214.

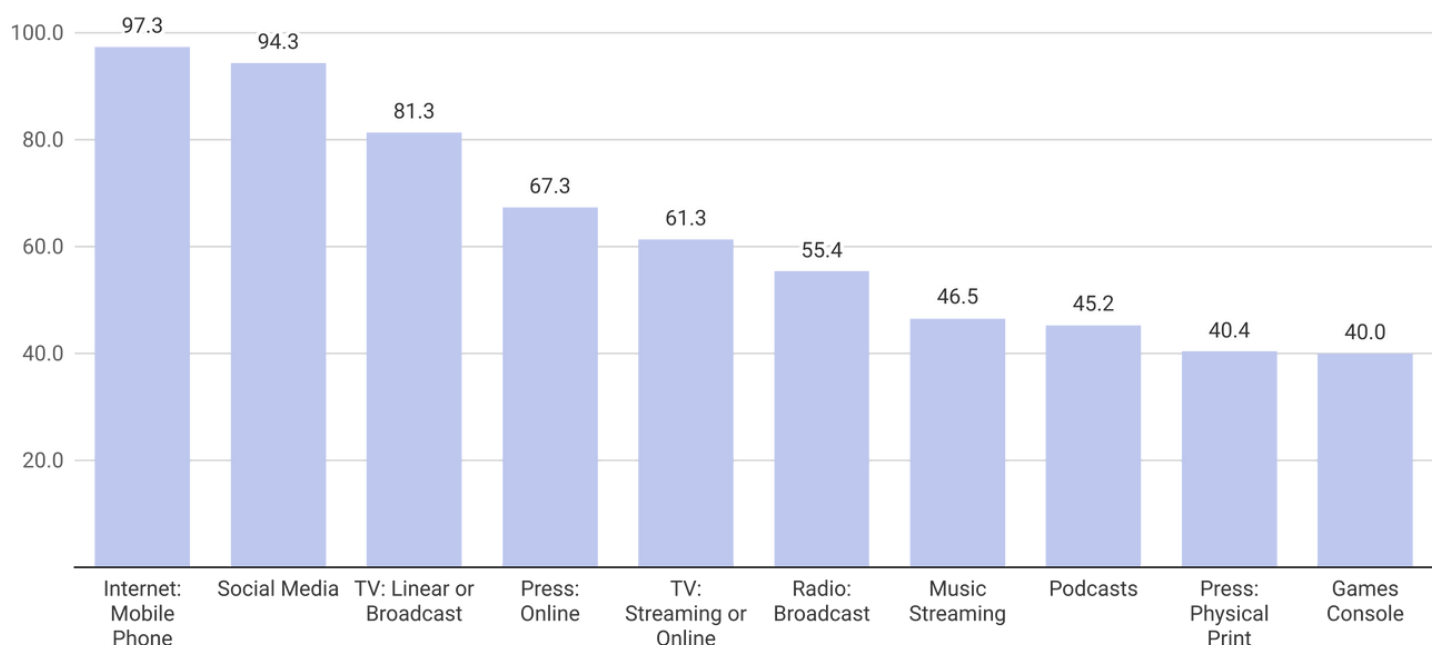
Yet the expansion of digital access and platform use did not spell the end of traditional media. Survey data suggest that television and print continue to play a meaningful role in the Russian information landscape. This persistence is partly explained by the fact that a substantial share of Internet users in Russia go online for purposes other than news. Only in 2023—the second year of the war in Ukraine—did information-seeking rise to second place among the top reasons for going online, cited by 68.3% of users. Although interest dipped slightly after that peak, it remained high enough to overtake almost all other motivations and by 2025 had become the second leading reason for Internet use.

Audience (% of population) and daily consumption of main media types in Russia, Q1 2025

	TV	Internet	Radio
Daily audience	65%	84%	51%
Monthly audience	99%	85%	85%
Daily consumption	3h 36min	4h 33min	1h 55min

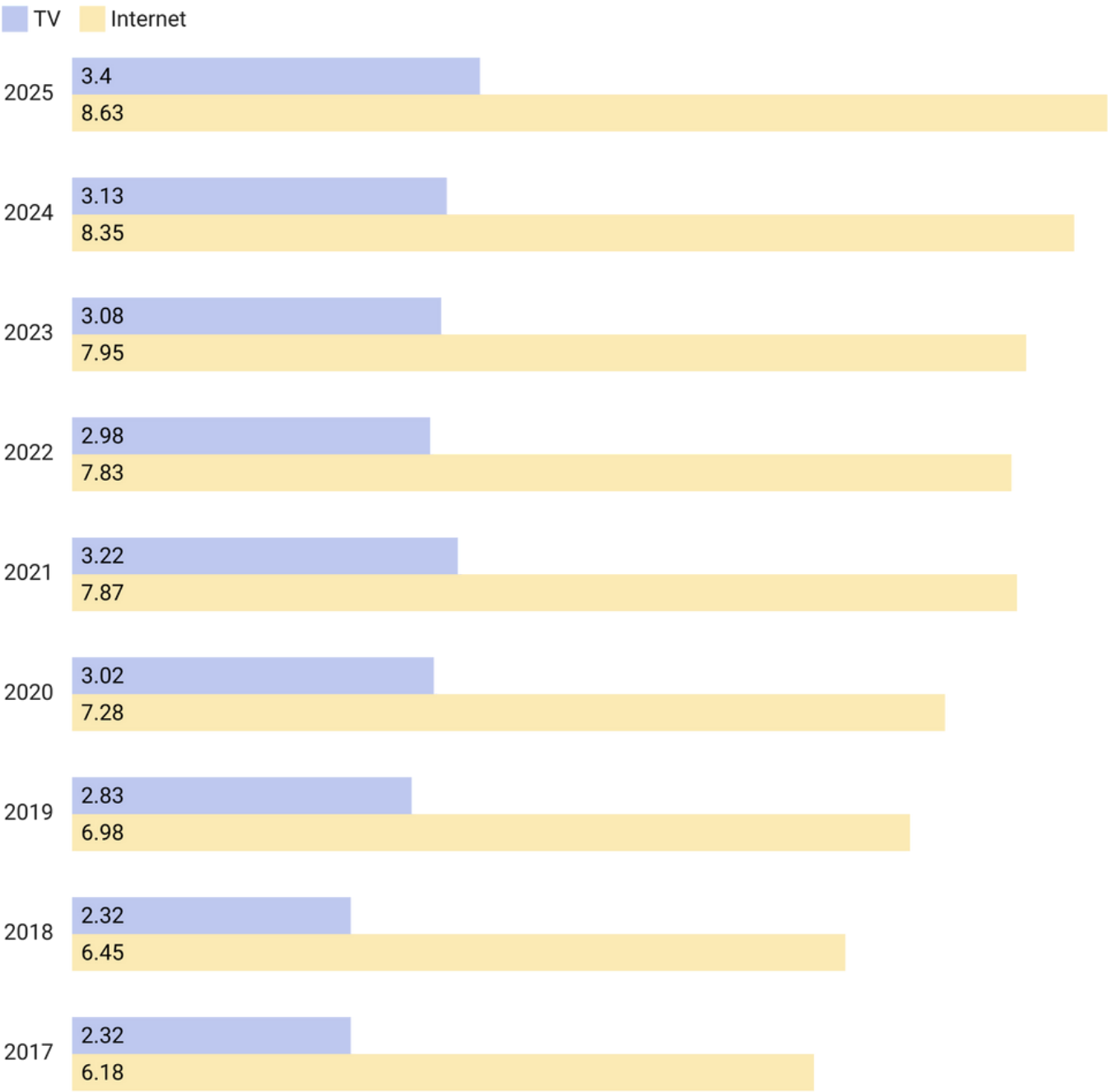
Source: Mediascope • Created with Datawrapper

Audience (% of internet users) of different media types in Russia, 2025



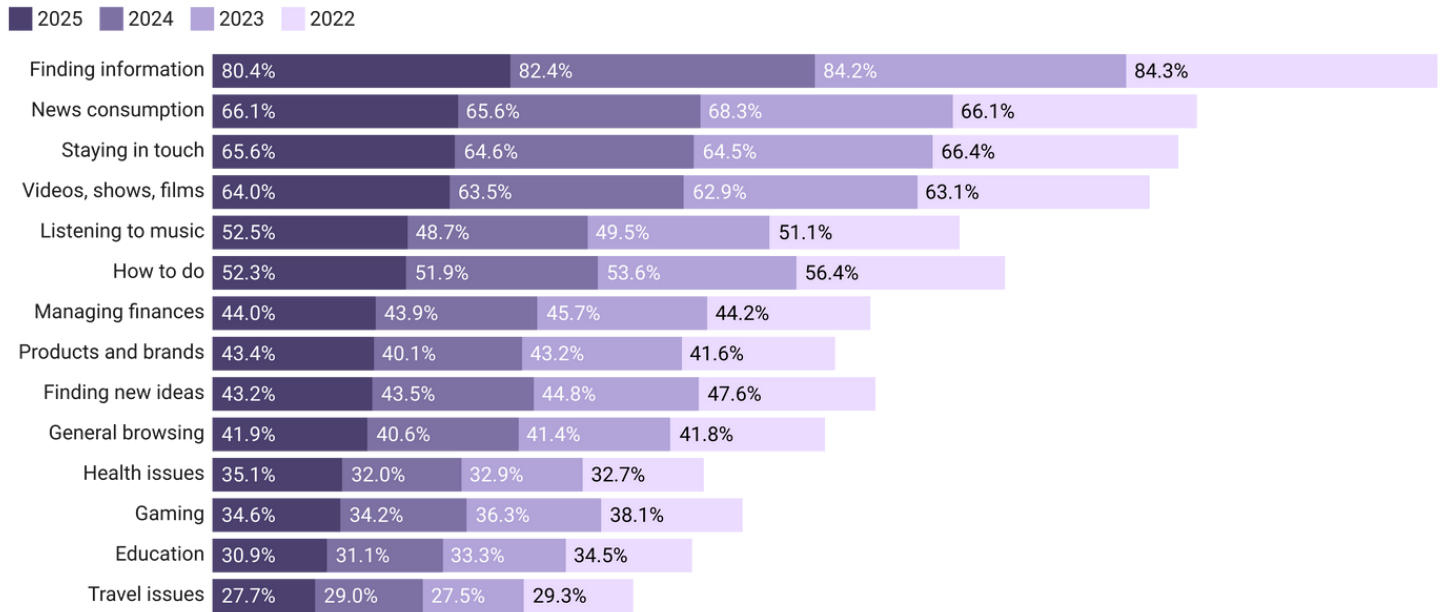
Source: Datareportal • Created with Datawrapper

Time spent on consumption of TV and Internet daily, in hours



Source: Datareportal • Created with Datawrapper

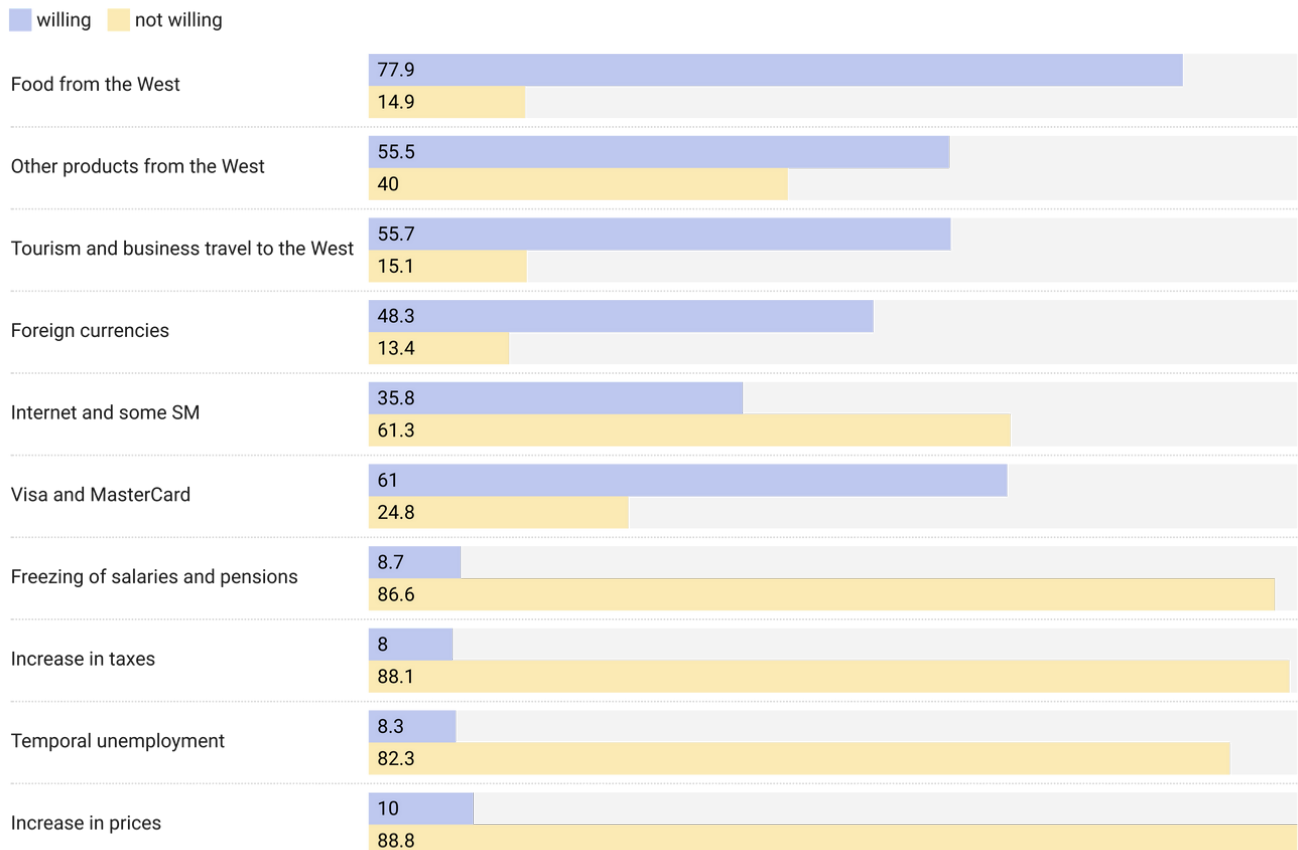
Purposes of Internet use in Russia



Source: Datareportal • Created with Datawrapper

Despite the widespread digitalization of Russian society, the Internet continues to hold only limited perceived importance for many citizens. A 2022 sociological survey found that more than one-third of respondents would be willing to forgo Internet use if it were “required for the sake of strengthening Russia’s sovereignty.” The full distribution of responses is presented below, illustrating how the Internet is positioned within the broader hierarchy of values in Russian society, as revealed by this single question.

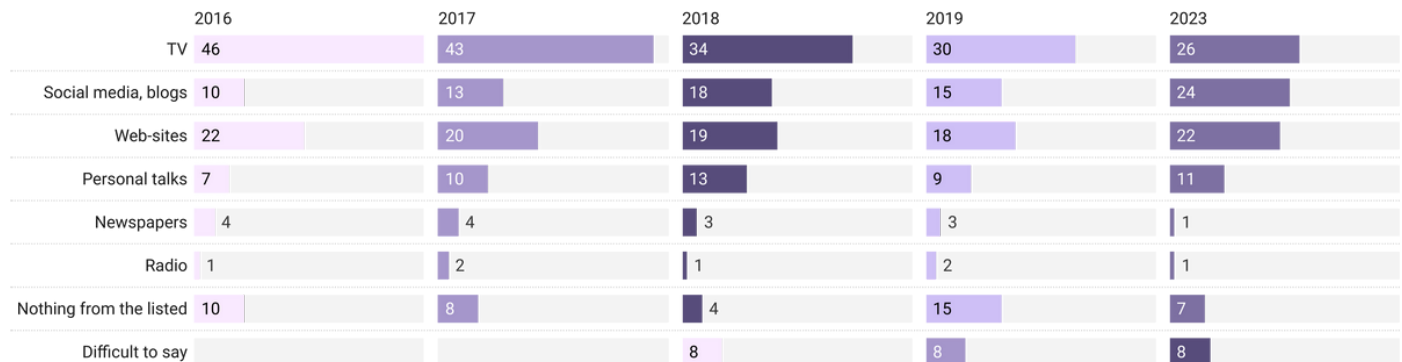
What would you be willing to give up to protect the country?



Source: IS RAS • Created with Datawrapper

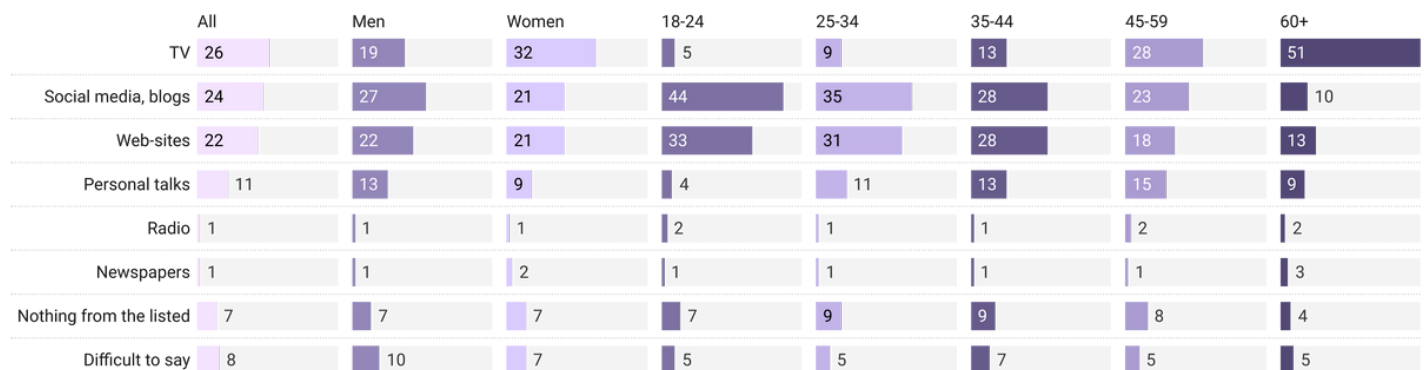
On the other hand, watching news on television does not necessarily imply unconditional trust. Data from another sociological survey show that confidence in the objectivity of TV reporting has been steadily declining, although it remains comparatively high among older age groups. This suggests that television news consumption may involve less the internalisation of narratives and adjustment of personal beliefs, and more a superficial familiarization—an effort to remain aware of the official “party line.”

Trust in news sources (%), 2016-2023



Source: VCIOM • Created with Datawrapper

Trust in news sources (%), by gender and age groups, 2023



Source: VCIOM • Created with Datawrapper

In sum, the evolution of media consumption in Russia cannot be reduced to a linear narrative of digital triumph. Rather, it reflects a complex interplay of technological innovation, user pragmatism, and political constraint. While connectivity and smartphone penetration have reached near-universal levels, the informational practices of many users remain cautious, habitual, and shaped by legacies of institutional mistrust.

Television endures not only as a source of news but as a symbolic anchor within a state-managed communicative order. Digital platforms, for all their interactivity and reach, have yet to fully displace entrenched patterns of authority and belief. What emerges is a hybrid media environment—digitally saturated yet normatively ambivalent; technologically modern yet marked by inherited habits of mediated consent. This environment is structured not only by user behaviour but also by the affordances and policies of dominant platforms—companies that, over time, did not simply facilitate but actively engineered Russia’s informational order, steering it from open access to managed visibility, from editorial pluralism to algorithmic governance.

The Rise of Russian Tech Giants

The second major development in Russia’s digital transformation was the ascent of powerful domestic technology companies that, over the course of two decades, came to dominate not only the digital economy but also the informational sphere. Unlike in many other markets, where global platforms such as Google, Facebook, and Twitter rapidly gained dominance, Russia saw the parallel emergence and entrenchment of its own tech giants—Yandex, VKontakte, Mail.ru, and others—who successfully resisted foreign competition and embedded themselves deeply within national digital habits.

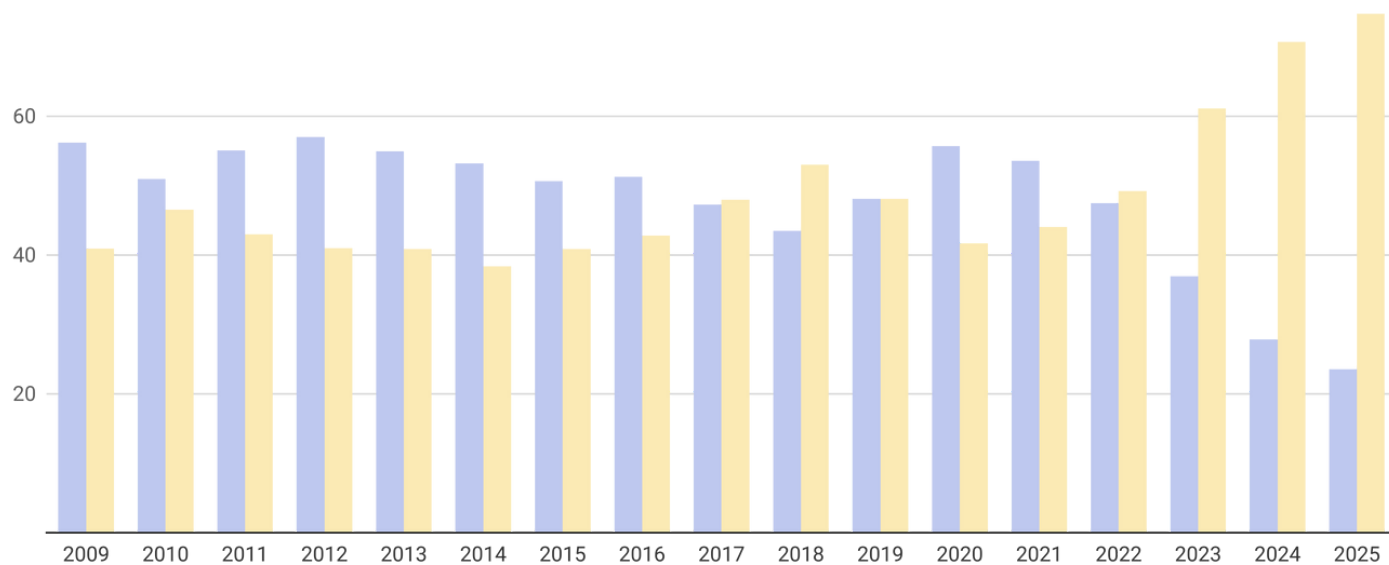
This algorithmic infrastructure altered not merely the availability of content but also the behavior of users. By privileging relevance and engagement over chronology or editorial balance, platforms such as Yandex.News and VK’s personalized feeds shifted consumption patterns from deliberate search to passive intake. In the process, the traditional role of editorial hierarchies gave way to opaque, feedback-driven architectures of visibility.

Yandex, established in 1997, quickly rose to prominence as Russia’s leading search engine. By the early 2000s, it had outpaced competitors, thanks in part to its superior handling of Russian-language morphology and its focus on localization.^[3] While Google gradually expanded its presence in Russia, the combination of state regulatory pressures, consumer preferences, and Yandex’s strategic ecosystem-building helped the company consolidate its dominance. By the mid-2020s, Yandex commanded nearly three-quarters of all search traffic in Russia—a margin of supremacy unmatched in any other major market outside China.

[3] Yulia Abdulbarova. (2022). Yandex: история создания и успеха Яндекс (Yandex: History of creation and success of Yandex). IinDEAL. <https://iindeal.com/business/yandex-istoriya-sozdaniya-i-uspekha>.

Competition between Google and Yandex (share of search engines in the Russian market, %, 2009-2025)

Google Yandex



Source: Statcounter • Created with Datawrapper

Largest browsers market share in Russia (% , 2009-2025)

	Chrome	Yandex	IE	Opera	Firefox	Safari
2009	2.3%	0.0%	32.8%	37.1%	26.3%	0.8%
2010	8.0%	0.0%	25.0%	31.7%	32.5%	1.6%
2011	18.1%	0.0%	20.1%	28.3%	30.5%	2.1%
2012	30.5%	0.3%	19.9%	21.3%	23.2%	3.3%
2013	36.5%	4.5%	14.9%	14.5%	20.0%	5.5%
2014	38.9%	6.5%	11.6%	12.1%	15.4%	9.6%
2015	41.7%	9.0%	9.6%	12.7%	13.8%	6.7%
2016	46.1%	10.4%	6.2%	10.7%	12.3%	7.3%
2017	51.2%	11.5%	4.0%	8.0%	9.8%	9.0%
2018	55.3%	12.4%	2.5%	7.2%	7.6%	9.4%
2019	59.1%	13.2%	1.8%	6.1%	6.1%	8.7%
2020	59.2%	14.2%	1.0%	6.1%	5.5%	10.1%
2021	62.9%	12.8%	0.5%	6.0%	4.1%	8.5%
2022	54.4%	16.9%	0.5%	7.2%	4.6%	11.1%
2023	52.9%	18.6%	0.3%	6.7%	3.4%	12.8%
2024	49.5%	23.4%	0.2%	6.9%	3.5%	10.8%
2025	45.8%	28.9%	0.2%	6.7%	3.6%	8.3%

Source: Statcounter • Created with Datawrapper

Unlike Google, which largely remained a search and services provider, Yandex evolved into a multifaceted ecosystem. It expanded horizontally into sectors such as ride-hailing, food delivery, mapping, online retail, cloud infrastructure, and even artificial intelligence. Its news aggregator, Yandex.News, became one of the most significant gateways to information in Russia, used daily by tens of millions of people.[4] Through algorithmic curation and deep integration into the mobile environment, Yandex positioned itself not merely as a platform but as an infrastructure—shaping how Russians moved, consumed, paid, and, increasingly, how they thought.

A similar trajectory can be seen in the history of VKontakte (VK), launched in 2006 as a Russian-language social network modeled on Facebook. Within just a few years, VK overtook all rivals, including Facebook itself, to become Russia’s dominant social media platform. After the forced departure of its founder, Pavel Durov, in 2014, VK came under the control of Mail.ru Group[5], which later rebranded as VK Group and consolidated multiple services, including Odnoklassniki, VK Music, VK Video, email, cloud storage, and fintech products, into a single integrated platform. With more than 80 million monthly users by 2024 and near-total penetration among Russian-speaking Internet users, VK emerged as a critical hub for digital communication and a primary venue for news distribution, entertainment, and state messaging.[6]

Social media in Russia, 2011-2024 (% , survey data)

Values represent percentage of respondents who reported using certain social networks by year according to the Levada survey data

	VK	YouTube (from 2018)	OK	TikTok	Instagram	Dzen	RuTube	Facebook	Mail.ru	Twitter (X)
2011	17.0	0.0	26.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	3.0	11.0	1.0
2012	27.0	0.0	35.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	6.0	12.0	3.0
2013	33.0	0.0	43.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	10.0	17.0	5.0
2014	32.5	0.0	44.5	0.0	2.5	0.0	0.0	10.0	12.5	4.5
2015	35.0	0.0	44.0	0.0	5.0	0.0	0.0	9.0	10.0	4.0
2016	36.0	0.0	44.0	0.0	6.0	0.0	0.0	11.0	8.0	5.0
2017	39.0	0.0	40.6	0.0	13.3	0.0	0.0	12.0	7.3	5.6
2018	36.5	18.5	34.0	0.0	15.5	0.0	0.0	8.5	5.5	3.5
2020	45.0	30.0	31.0	5.0	28.0	0.0	0.0	10.0	5.0	3.0
2021	43.0	35.0	31.0	14.0	31.0	0.0	0.0	9.0	4.0	3.0
2022	46.5	33.5	28.5	23.5	15.5	0.0	0.0	4.0	3.5	2.0
2023	47.0	34.0	27.0	21.0	15.0	9.0	2.0	3.0	2.0	2.0
2024	50.0	37.0	25.0	20.0	14.0	9.0	3.0	2.0	2.0	1.0
2025	50.0	21.0	24.0	21.0	11.0	8.0	8.0	1.0	2.0	1.0

Source: Levada • Created with Datawrapper

[4] Aleksey Begin. Статистика Яндекса в 2022 году (Yandex Statistics in 2022). ERIO Media. <https://er10.kz/read/tehnologii/obzory/statistika-jandeksa-v-2022-godu/>.
[5] Dmitriy Filonov. (2014). Театр Дурова: почему основатель «ВКонтакте» проиграл битву за социальную сеть (Durov's Theater: Why has the founder of "VKontakte" lost the battle over the social media). 20 March 2014. Forbes Russia. <https://www.forbes.ru/kompanii/internet-telekom-i-media/252431-teatr-durova-pochemu-osnovatel-vkontakte-proigral-bitvu-za>.
[6] Alesya Sokolova. (2024). Tailored propaganda: how Russia manipulates public opinion in VK. July 2024. Center for Data and Research on Russia. <https://cedarus.io/research/tailored-propaganda>.

Total audience and % of the population using certain social media platforms in 2024

	YouTube	VK	Telegram	Dzen	TikTok	OK
Total audience (m)	96	90	85	80	67	51
Share (%)	79	74	70	66	55	42

Source: Mediascope • Created with Datawrapper

Share of time spent in social media in different age categories in Russia in 2024

12-24	25-34	35-44	45-54	55+
YouTube - 36%	YouTube - 41%	YouTube - 40%	YouTube - 39%	YouTube - 43%
TikTok - 24%	VK - 22%	VK - 21%	VK - 18%	OK - 13%
Telegram - 24%	Telegram - 15%	Telegram - 16%	Telegram - 16%	Dzen - 12%
VK - 12%	TikTok - 12%	TikTok - 10%	TikTok - 9%	Telegram - 12%
Instagram - 1%	OK - 2%	OK - 5%	OK - 8%	VK - 10%

Source: Mediascope • Created with Datawrapper

In contrast to their Western counterparts, which generally operate at arm's length from state influence, Russian tech companies became increasingly entangled with the government.[7] Yandex initially resisted pressure to alter its news algorithms, publicly defending its editorial neutrality. Yet following a series of legislative changes and mounting informal pressure from the Kremlin, the company quietly modified its aggregator in 2016 to prioritize content from officially registered outlets.[8] VK, meanwhile, became a textbook case of political co-optation: after Durov's ouster, the platform was absorbed into ownership structures linked to state-controlled firms, and in 2021 Vladimir Kiriyenko—the son of a senior Kremlin official—was appointed CEO.[9]

This proximity to state power came with trade-offs. On one hand, domestic platforms benefited from preferential regulation, guaranteed market access, and—following the blocking of foreign services such as Facebook and Instagram after 2022—near-total monopoly.[10] On the other hand, they increasingly functioned as instruments of surveillance and control. Content moderation became politicized[11]; data-localization laws ensured state access to user information[12]; and platforms adopted preemptive self-censorship to avoid fines or shutdowns.[13] The result was a hybrid ecosystem in which commercial logic and political compliance became inseparably fused.

By the 2020s, these companies had evolved into more than businesses: they were the infrastructural backbones of Russia's digital environment. Their reach extended into nearly every domain of daily life—commerce, communication, navigation, entertainment, education, and news. Crucially, they reshaped media consumption not by producing content themselves but by engineering the architecture through which content was discovered, ranked, and engaged with. In doing so, they redefined the very boundaries of visibility and participation in Russia's information space. Whereas their Western counterparts operate in competitive and often adversarial regulatory environments, Russia's tech giants expanded through state-facilitated protectionism and, ultimately, state capture. This fusion of market power and political alignment transformed them into central nodes of Russia's managed digital public sphere—omnipresent, indispensable, and increasingly compliant.

[7] Nika Golikova. (2021). Новый железный занавес: как государство захватывает контроль над интернетом (New Iron Curtain: How does the state take control over the Internet). 21 June 2021. Afisha Daily. <https://daily.afisha.ru/relationship/20023-novyy-zheleznyy-zanaves-kak-gosudarstvo-zahvatyvaet-kontrol-nad-internetom/>.

[8] Svetlana Reiter. Мы замучились бороться. Как российское вторжение в Украину раскололо "Яндекс". Расследование Светланы Рейтер (We're Exhausted from Fighting: How the Russian Invasion of Ukraine Split Yandex. An Investigation by Svetlana Reiter). 05 May 2022. Meduza. <https://meduza.io/feature/2022/05/05/my-zamuchilis-borotsya>.

[9] Igor Sevryugin. "ВКонтакте" становится частью кремлевской пропаганды". Как российская соцсеть перешла под контроль друга Путина и сына Кириенко ("VKontakte" Becomes Part of Kremlin Propaganda: How the Russian Social Network Came Under the Control of Putin's Friend and Kirienko's Son). 3 December 2021. The Current Time. <https://www.currenttime.tv/a/vkontakte-stanovitsya-chastyu-kremlevskoy-propagandy-kak-glavnaya-rossiyskaya-sotsset-pereshla-pod-kontrol-druga-putina-i-syna-kirienko/31592555.html>; Vladislav Skobelev. (2021). «Скромный, держится по-европейски»: что известно о новом главе VK Владимире Кириенко ("Modest, behaves in a European manner": what is known about the new head of VK Vladimir Kiriyenko). December 2021. Forbes Russia. <https://www.forbes.ru/tekhnologii/448371-skromnyj-derzitsa-po-evropejski-cto-izvestno-o-novom-glave-vk-vladimire-kirienko>.

[10] Kirill Frolov. (2024). Монополия ВКонтакте – причем тут РКН и блокировки (VKontakte Monopoly – What Does RKN and Blocking Have to Do With It?). 23 December 2024. s-z-n. https://s-z-n.ru/news_block/monopoliya-vkontakte-prichem-tut-rkn-i-blokirovki-rassledovanie/?ysclid=mdsrn7k8ut419456652; Yulia Melnikova. (2022). Монополизация в ИТ – необходимое зло (Monopolization in IT is a necessary evil). 19 September 2022. Comnews. <https://www.comnews.ru/content/222217/2022-09-19/2022-w38/monopolizaciya-it-neobkhodimoe-zlo>.

[11] Roskomsvoboda. (2023). Слепое пятно: как ВК прячет контент от российских пользователей (Blind Spot: How VK Hides Content from Russian Users). 27 July 2023. <https://roskomsvoboda.org/en/post/slepolo-pyatno-vk/>.

[12] Evgeniy Zhukov. (2024). За 14 лет в РФ возбуждены более 30 тысяч дел за посты в Сети (Over 30,000 cases have been opened in Russia for online posts in 14 years). 2 December 2024. DW. <https://www.dw.com/ru/za-14-let-v-rossii-vozbuzhdeny-bolee-30-tysac-del-za-internetaktivnost/a-70939417>.

[13] Svetlana Reiter. Мы замучились бороться..., cit.

The Expansion of State Control and the Push for a Sovereign Internet

The third trajectory in Russia's digital evolution—after the diffusion of digital technologies and the rise of domestic tech giants—was the progressive consolidation of state control over the online information environment. As digital platforms became integral to daily life and public discourse, they also emerged as potential arenas of dissent, civic mobilization, and narrative contestation. What began as a state-led modernization project gradually evolved into a strategy of regulatory containment, infrastructural capture, and political control.

In the early 2000s, Russian authorities largely viewed the Internet as a tool for economic development and global integration. Official discourse emphasized connectivity, innovation, and modernization.^[14] Yet signs of anxiety were already evident. The 2000 Information Security Doctrine, adopted just months after Vladimir Putin's first inauguration, articulated for the first time the notion that the information sphere, including online spaces, could threaten "national stability and sovereignty."^[15] This rhetorical shift laid the foundation for future interventions.

The 2008 war in Georgia marked a turning point. The conflict coincided with a tenfold increase in Russian Internet use since 2000 and underscored the strategic role of digital media in shaping public narratives. It also prompted early, informal attempts by state actors to pressure domestic platforms such as Yandex to adjust the visibility of politically sensitive content.^[16] Though limited in scope, these efforts signaled growing interest in algorithmic influence and agenda control.

The protests of 2011–2012, sparked by electoral fraud and coordinated largely through social media^[17], further crystallized Kremlin fears. Authorities responded by building a formal infrastructure of digital governance. A federal registry of banned websites was introduced in 2012^[18], followed by a cascade of legal instruments designed to place platforms under institutional oversight.^[19] The annexation of Crimea in 2014 accelerated this trend. The so-called Blogger Law, passed that year, required any individual with more than 3,000 daily readers to register with Roskomnadzor, effectively transforming popular users into regulated media entities.^[20] Platforms faced mounting pressure to suppress dissenting voices; Yandex modified its aggregator to down-rank critical content.^[21]

[14] BBC News Russian. (2019). Что Путин говорил об интернете и его судьбе в России (What Putin Said About the Internet and Its Fate in Russia). 21 February 2019. <https://www.bbc.com/russian/news-47317481>.

[15] Doctrine of information security of the Russian Federation, approved by the President of the Russian Federation on September 9, 2000 N Pr-1895 (no longer in effect)

[16] Svetlana Reiter. Мы замучились бороться..., cit.

[17] Civil Society Development Foundation. (2012). Доклад «Новая протестная волна: мифы и реальность» (Report "New wave of protest: myths and reality"). 6 December 2012. <http://civilfund.ru/mat/view/37>.

[18] RosBusinessConsulting. (2012). В.Путин подписал закон о черном списке интернет-сайтов (V. Putin signed the law on the blacklist of Internet sites). 30 July 2012. <https://www.rbc.ru/politics/30/07/2012/5703ad109a7947625bd4085d>.

[19] RosBusinessConsulting. (2016). СМИ узнали о планах государства взять под контроль интернет-трафик в РФ (Media learned about the government's plans to take control of Internet traffic in the Russian Federation). 11 February 2016. https://www.rbc.ru/technology_and_media/11/02/2016/56bbc9de9a7947f08a0367d5; IFreedomLAB. (2023). Полная история регулирования интернета в России: от 80-х и до наших дней (The Complete History of Internet Regulation in Russia: From the 80s to the Present Day). <https://ifreedomlab.net/campaigns/istoriya-regulirovaniya-svyazi/>.

[20] Sergey Yakovina. (2014). В России вступил в силу закон о блогерах (Law on bloggers comes into force in Russia). 1 August 2014. DW. <https://www.dw.com/ru>

[21] Svetlana Reiter. Мы замучились бороться..., cit.

By the late 2010s, state control had expanded from content to infrastructure. The 2016 Yarovaya Laws imposed strict data-retention and decryption obligations on service providers, bolstering the state's technical capacity for surveillance.[22] In 2019, the Sovereign Internet Law laid the groundwork for centralized Internet governance, mandating the installation of deep packet inspection (DPI) equipment at the backbone level.[23] While framed in the language of cybersecurity and sovereignty, these measures institutionalized the state's ability to monitor, filter, and reroute traffic, effectively enabling infrastructural censorship.

The 2022 full-scale invasion of Ukraine triggered a new phase of digital repression. Sweeping legislation criminalized "fake news" about the military, resulting in mass arrests and the shuttering of independent outlets.[24] Tens of thousands of websites were blocked, and the last major foreign platforms—including Facebook and Instagram (Meta)—were officially banned.[25] YouTube, though not blocked outright, faced throttling, rhetorical campaigns, and regulatory threats.[26] Telegram, one of Russia's most widely used messaging apps, occupied an ambiguous position: tolerated but closely monitored.[27] Meanwhile, VPN usage surged, though unevenly, and proved insufficient to compensate for the informational vacuum created by censorship.[28]

Throughout this process, the state framed its interventions as necessary to safeguard "information sovereignty" and shield national interests from Western manipulation. [29] In practice, these controls consolidated informational hegemony. Platforms such as Yandex and VK, already structurally embedded within Russia's digital ecosystem, began proactively adapting to the regulatory environment. Self-censorship became institutionalized, as algorithms were recalibrated to exclude sensitive topics, particularly those related to the war in Ukraine, from aggregator feeds. What began as informal state influence matured into a regime of preemptive compliance, where legal ambiguity, algorithmic opacity, and risk avoidance converged.

[22] Meduza. (2017). «Пакет Яровой» принят больше полугода назад. Как он работает? (The "Yarovaya Law" was adopted more than six months ago. How does it work?). 13 February 2017. <https://meduza.io/feature/2017/02/13/zakon-yarovoy-prinyat-bolshe-polugoda-nazad-kak-on-rabotaet>.

[23] BBC News Russian. (2019). В России вступил в силу закон о "суверенном рунете". Но работать он пока не будет (The law on the "sovereign Runet" has come into force in Russia. But it won't work yet). 1 November 2019. <https://www.bbc.com/russian/news-50259217>.

[24] Leonardo Ingannamorte. (2024). Media Regulation, Government and Policy in Russia. (eds. Marius Dragomir & Theodore Southgate). Tallinn/London/Santiago de Compostela: Media and Journalism Research Center (MJRC).

[25] RosBusinessConsulting. (2024). Суд запретил Instagram и Facebook. Что это значит для пользователей (Court Bans Instagram and Facebook. What Does This Mean for Users?). 21 March 2022.

https://www.rbc.ru/technology_and_media/21/03/2022/6238a5e89a79477e5dc0245f.

[26] Dmitriy Kozenko. (2024). Суета вокруг Youtube (The Fuss Around Youtube). 1 August 2024. Svobodnyye.

<https://fnvolga.ru/news/view/id/229287>; Meduza. (2024). Либо идите в VK, либо занимайтесь чем-нибудь другим. В 2024 году Кремль практически заблокировал YouTube в России. Мы выяснили, кто и как принимал это решение (Either go to VK or do something else. In 2024, the Kremlin practically blocked YouTube in Russia. We found out who made this decision and how). 24 December 2024.

<https://meduza.io/feature/2024/12/24/libo-idite-v-vk-libo-zanimaytes-chem-nibud-drugim>.

[27] Eva Nikitina. (2025). Насильно придушить? В России спорят о блокировке западных мессенджеров (Forcibly strangle? Russia debates blocking Western messengers). 18 July 2025. NSN. <https://nsn.fm/society/nasilno-pridushit-v-rossii-sporyat-o-bloirovke-zapadnyh-messendzherov>.

[28] Olga Mamikonyan. (2023). Количество пользователей VPN в России выросло почти на 40% в 2023 году (The number of VPN users in Russia has grown by almost 40% in 2023). 6 December 2023. Forbes Russia. <https://www.forbes.ru/tekhnologii/501873-kolicestvo-pol-zovatelej-vpn-v-rossii-vyroslo-pochti-na-40-v-2023-godu>.

[29] Elena Botoroeva. (2019). Путин разъяснил смысл закона о суверенном Рунете (Putin explained the meaning of the law on the sovereign RuNet). 19 December 2019. Parlamentskaya Gazeta. <https://www.pnp.ru/social/putin-razyasnil-smysl-zakona-o-suverennom-runete.html>.

In this final trajectory, Russia's digital transformation reached a paradoxical conclusion: the very technologies that once promised openness and decentralization were repurposed into instruments of discipline, demobilization, and narrative control. Within two decades, the Internet in Russia was domesticated, not only in infrastructural and corporate terms but also ideologically, becoming a managed space aligned with the imperatives of state power.

The Trajectory of Media and Technology in Russia

The interplay of technological change, corporate development, and state intervention has profoundly reshaped Russia's media environment. On one hand, digital penetration is deep and sustained; on the other, state influence over digital spaces has expanded dramatically. The result is a paradox: despite widespread digitalization and growing technical fluency, the scope for critical engagement has narrowed. Domestic platforms dominate but are politically captured. The Internet remains a vital tool for civic coordination and resistance—yet its autonomy is steadily eroding.

The future of Russian media and technology remains uncertain. A generation of digital natives is coming of age within an increasingly controlled ecosystem. Still, user ingenuity, informal networks, and technical workarounds persist. The struggle for the Russian Internet continues—fought not only over infrastructure but over the very boundaries of public discourse.

II. Profiles of Key Players

Domestic Tech Giants and Their Ecosystems

Yandex

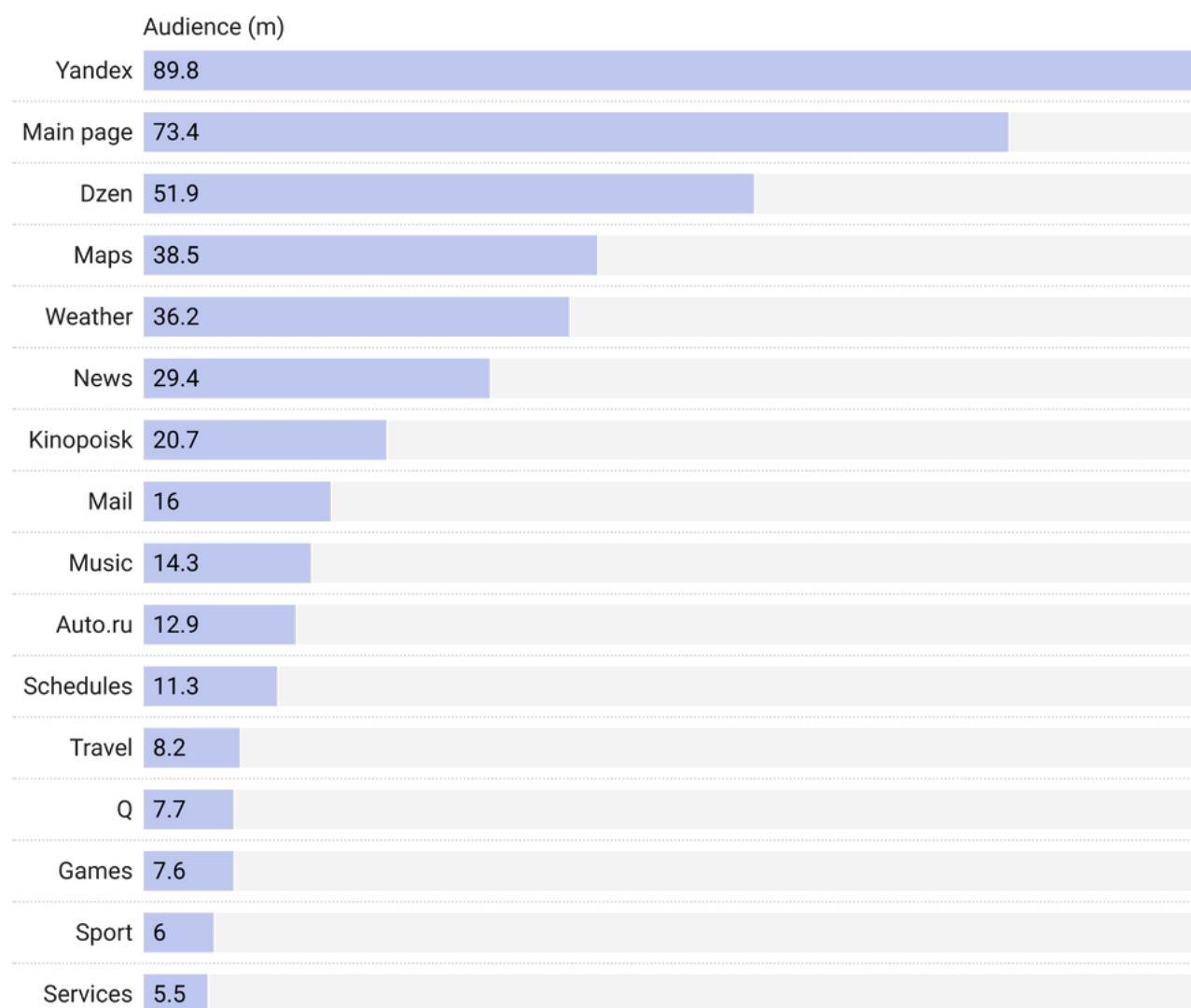
Yandex was officially founded in 2000, though its origins trace back to 1997, when its first search engine prototype was released. Emerging from the CompTek research lab and the work of co-founders Arkady Volozh and Ilya Segalovich, Yandex quickly established itself as Russia's leading search engine.[30] Its key competitive advantage lay in its superior processing of Russian-language morphology and its ability to deliver localized, context-sensitive results—features that enabled it to outperform foreign competitors such as Google in the domestic market.

Over the next two decades, Yandex expanded into a sprawling digital ecosystem that stretched far beyond search. By the 2020s, its portfolio included Yandex.News, Yandex.Taxi, Yandex.Market, Yandex.Maps, and numerous other services, forming a vast infrastructure that touched nearly every aspect of daily life.[31] This diversification was not merely commercial; it embodied a broader strategic ambition to create an all-encompassing digital environment—a “Russian Google + Amazon + Uber” rolled into one. Through vertical and horizontal integration, Yandex embedded itself into the routines of millions of users. By the early 2020s, an urban resident could live much of their digital life entirely within the Yandex ecosystem—from ordering a taxi and checking the weather to reading the news, paying bills, shopping online, and receiving a delivery.

[30] Valeriy Igumenov. (2011). Миллиарды «Яндекса». В процессе поиска (Yandex Billions. In the process of searching). 18 March 2011. Forbes Russia. <https://www.forbes.ru/tehnno/internet-i-telekommunikatsii/65029-v-protsesse-poiska>.

[31] Yulia Abdulbarova. Yandex..., cit.

Yandex monthly audience in June 2022



Source: Radar.Yandex • Created with Datawrapper

Yandex's growing centrality to the Russian information environment drew increasing scrutiny from the state. By the 2010s, the Kremlin was actively seeking to shape digital narratives. Yandex initially resisted altering the algorithms of Yandex.News, publicly defending its editorial neutrality. Mounting political pressure, however, including public attacks by pro-government lawmakers and warnings from Roskomnadzor, eventually forced the company to yield. In 2016, Yandex modified its algorithms to prioritize content from officially registered outlets, reducing the visibility of independent sources without banning them outright.[32]

[32] Svetlana Reiter. Мы замучились бороться..., cit.

Journalists from the outlet Agency, based on their analysis of court rulings that held Yandex accountable for failing to cooperate with law enforcement, discovered that as early as 2019 Yandex had agreed with the FSB to install surveillance equipment for monitoring users. The installation was partially completed in 2022 and was nearly finished in 2023. Court documents indicate that Yandex representatives stated in court that there was “effectively round-the-clock remote access to Yandex’s information environment.”[33] Given the scale of Yandex’s ecosystem and the wide range of life aspects it covers—from smart home systems and the AI assistant Alice to marketplaces, email, browsers, and cloud storage—such “round-the-clock remote access” effectively eliminates any user privacy within Yandex ecosystem.

Following the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, state demands on Yandex intensified dramatically. War-related content disappeared from Yandex.News, and the platform’s editorial decisions fell in line with government directives.[34] In August 2022, Yandex announced the sale of its news aggregator (Yandex.News) and homepage (yandex.ru) to VK, a company closely tied to the Presidential Administration.[35] This transfer effectively removed Yandex from news distribution, the most politically sensitive component of its operations. The sale was both a political retreat and a structural turning point: traffic dynamics shifted, and the company lost control over users’ primary digital entry point. The homepage had long served as a powerful funnel into the Yandex ecosystem; its loss was symbolic as well as operational. Even as of June 2025, direct requests to yandex.ru—now redirected to dzen.ru—account for nearly 80% of the traffic that once flowed to the Yandex search engine and its associated services.[36]

Later that year, in December 2022, Yandex announced a sweeping corporate restructuring, including the spin-off of its international operations and the sale of its core Russian assets to a consortium led by figures allegedly aligned with the Kremlin. [37] The transaction was finalized in early 2024, marking the definitive end of Yandex’s operational independence in Russia. Co-founder Arkady Volozh, based in Israel, publicly condemned the war but no longer exercised any authority over the company’s domestic activities.[38]

[33] Andrey Zatirko. (2025). «Яндекс» еще в 2019 году согласовал с ФСБ установку оборудования для слежки за пользователями, а к 2023 году выполнил большую часть работ (Yandex agreed with the FSB to install equipment to monitor users back in 2019, and by 2023 had completed most of the work). 11 September 2025. Agentstvo. <https://www.agents.media/yandeks-eshhe-v-2019-godu-soglasoval-s-fsb-ustanovku-oborudovaniya-dlya-slezhki-za-polzovatelyami-a-k-2023-godu-vypolnil-bolshuyu-chast-rabot/>.

[34] Meduza. (2022). «Яндекс» сегодня — ключевой элемент в сокрытии информации о войне». Бывший руководитель «Яндекс.Новостей» призвал коллег не молчать о войне с Украиной (“Yandex is now a key element in concealing information about the war.” Former head of Yandex.News urged colleagues not to remain silent about the war with Ukraine). 1 March 2022. <https://meduza.io/news/2022/03/01/yandeks-segodnya-klyuchevoy-element-v-sokrytii-informatsii-o-voyne-byvshiy-rukovoditel-yandeks-novostey-prizval-kolleg-ne-molchat-o-voyne-s-ukrainoy>.

[35] BBC News Russian. (2022). “Яндекс.Новости” и “Яндекс.Дзен” покупает VK. При чем здесь Украина и Путин? (“Yandex.News” and “Yandex.Zen” are bought by VK. What does Ukraine and Putin have to do with it?). 28 April 2022. <https://www.bbc.com/russian/news-61258387>.

[36] Semrush. (2025). Yandex.ru: June 2025 Traffic Stats. <https://www.semrush.com/website/yandex.ru/overview/>.

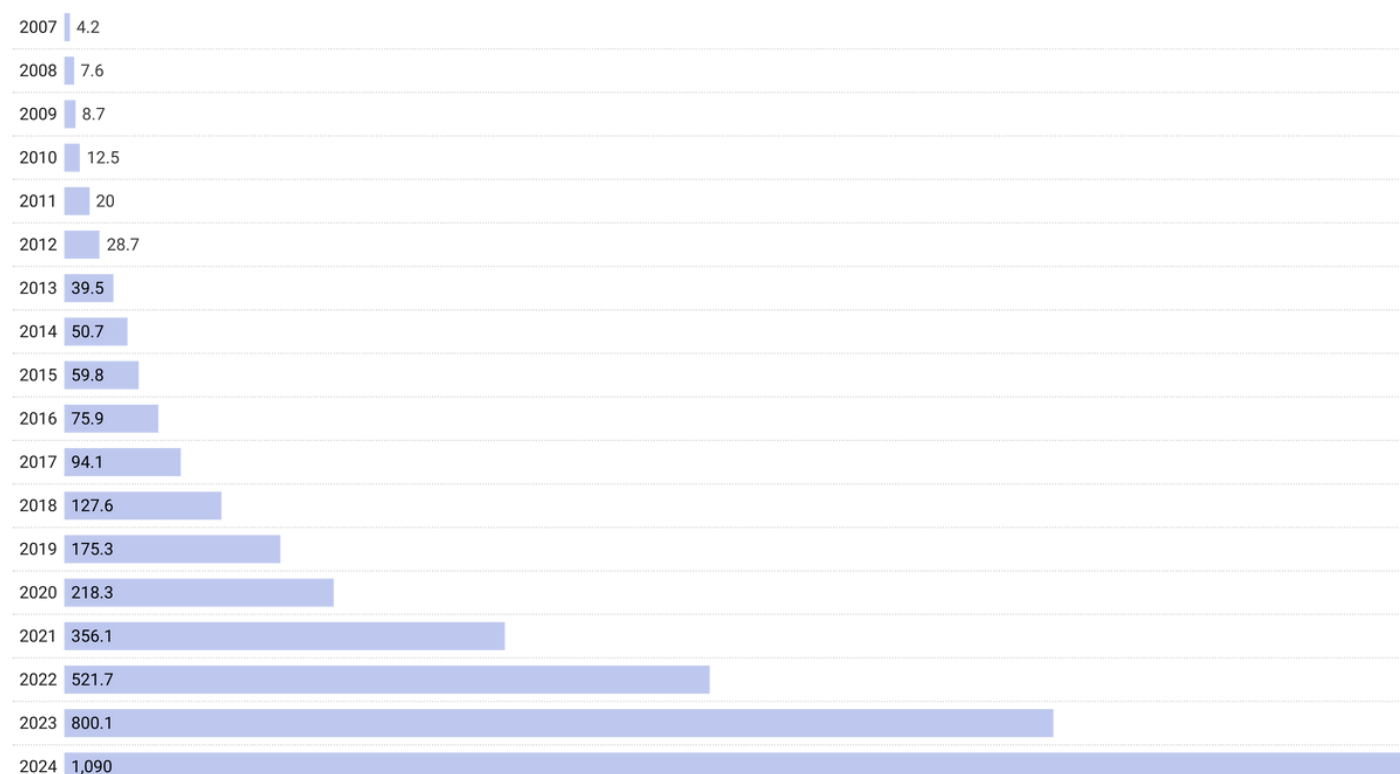
[37] Ekaterina Kinyakina, Anna Ustinova. (2024). Кто и почему купил «Яндекс» (Who and why bought Yandex). 5 February 2024. Vedomosti. <https://www.vedomosti.ru/technology/articles/2024/02/05/1018472-gruppa-zagadochnih-investorov>; Valeriya Pozychanyuk, Svetlana Reiter, Irina Malkova. (2023). Кремлевский кастинг. Как Сергей Кириенко ищет покупателей для «Яндекса» (Kremlin Casting: How Sergei Kiriyenko is Looking for Buyers for Yandex). 16 July 2023. The Bell. <https://thebell.io/kremlivskiy-kasting-kak-sergey-kiriyenko-ishchet-pokupateley-dlya-yandeksa>.

[38] The Bell. (2023). Основатель «Яндекса» Аркадий Волож осудил войну (Yandex founder Arkady Volozh condemned the war). 10 August 2023. <https://thebell.io/osnovatel-yandeksa-osudil-voynu>.

Yandex’s transformation from a relatively apolitical tech pioneer to a politically entangled infrastructure provider was gradual but ultimately unavoidable. For years it enjoyed a semi-autonomous status, tolerated by the state as long as it avoided overt dissent. That implicit bargain unraveled in the 2010s, as information became increasingly securitized in Kremlin strategy. Yandex’s prominence meant it could no longer function as an “invisible infrastructure”: it had to either comply or exit politically sensitive domains.

Despite these political entanglements and internal upheavals, Yandex’s financial performance remained strong. In 2024, the company reported revenues of over 1.09 trillion rubles (approximately \$12 billion), a 37% year-on-year increase. Adjusted EBITDA reached 188.6 billion rubles, and net profit exceeded 100.9 billion rubles.[39] These results underscore Yandex’s resilience as an infrastructural monopoly—a position further entrenched by state-imposed bans and restrictions on foreign competitors.

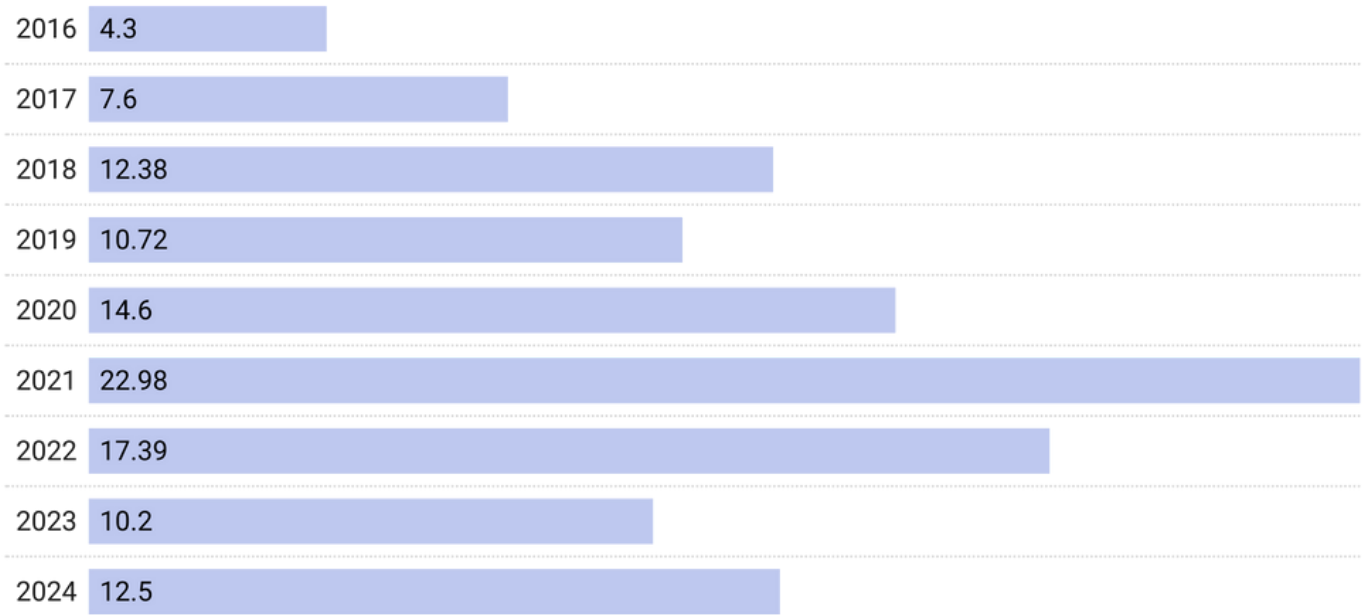
Yandex revenue (in billion Russian rubles)



Source: Statista, Yandex • Created with Datawrapper

[39] Interfax. (2025). Yandex reaffirms forecast for revenue to grow more than 30% in 2025, adjusted EBITDA to top 250 bln rubles. 29 July 2025. <https://www.interfax.com/newsroom/top-stories/112928/>.

Yandex market capitalization (in billion dollars US)



Source: Forbes • Created with Datawrapper

In the end, Yandex’s trajectory illustrates the limits of digital autonomy under authoritarian rule. Its transformation from innovative startup to state-aligned infrastructural giant was not a single rupture but the cumulative result of sustained pressure, negotiated compromise, and systemic co-optation. What remains today is a technologically sophisticated and economically successful yet politically subordinated entity—emblematic of the broader convergence between Russian digital capitalism and state power.

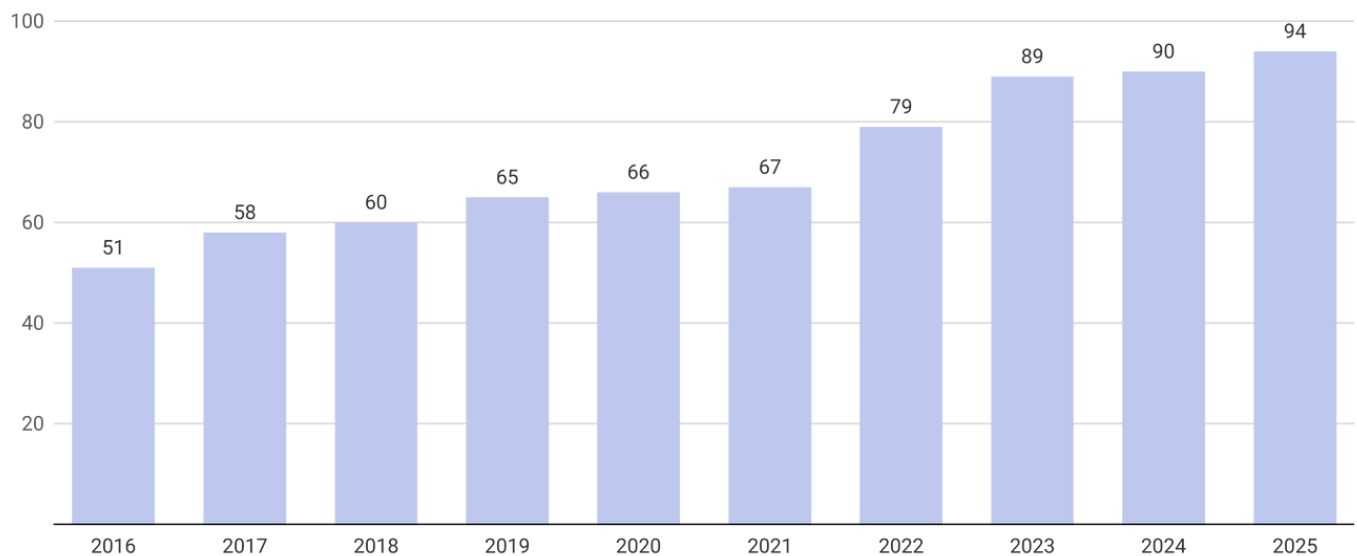
VK

VK Group is one of Russia’s most influential digital conglomerates, combining a legacy of entrepreneurial innovation, aggressive corporate consolidation, and deepening political alignment. Today, it operates a wide array of services spanning social media, content platforms, cloud computing, e-commerce, and enterprise solutions. The company serves simultaneously as a driver of digital engagement and as a key instrument of state information control.

The origins of VK Group date back to the late 1990s, with the creation of Mail.ru, initially launched as an email service during the early Russian Internet boom. In 2001, Mail.ru merged with NetBridge under the leadership of Yuri Milner and Dmitry Grishin, who transformed it into a broader Internet holding company.[40] This provided the foundation for rapid diversification into instant messaging (ICQ), gaming, and eventually social networking.[41]

VKontakte (VK), launched in 2006 by Pavel Durov, quickly became Russia's most popular social network, especially among younger audiences.[42] Often described as the "Russian Facebook," VK evolved into a cultural phenomenon, valued for its free access to music, light-touch moderation, and expansive community features.

VK active users monthly (millions)



Source: Statista, Mediascope • Created with Datawrapper

During the 2011–2012 protests, VK's infrastructure was actively utilized by the opposition to organize mass demonstrations. At that time, the Russian authorities made their first known attempts to exert pressure on the social network, sending a request to VK's management to remove opposition communities, including the pages associated with Alexei Navalny, which had hundreds of thousands of followers. Pavel Durov refused to comply with this demand, after which he faced pressure from the state. Following a visit from armed police officers to his home, he began to contemplate secure methods of communication – a process that marked the beginning of Telegram's story. As he later noted in his interview with Lex Fridman, at that time he saw no safe way to warn his brother about possible state actions against him in connection with the ongoing situation.[43]

[40] Andrey Loshak. (2019). История рунета. Бизнес: ОК, ВК и все-все-все (History of the Runet. Business: OK, VK and all-all-all). 16 October 2019. Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty. <https://www.svoboda.org/a/30219424.html>.

[41] Secretmag. (2019). Как выжить основателей из стартапа – рецепт Юрия Мильнера. История Mail.ru (How to drive founders out of a startup – Yuri Milner's recipe. History of Mail.ru). 22 November 2019. <https://secretmag.ru/stories/kak-vyzhit-osnovatelei-iz-startapa-recept-yuriya-milnera-istoriya-mail-ru.htm>.

[42] Alyona Sokolova. (2020). Как «ВКонтакте» стала главной соцсетью России – и почему перестала ей быть (How VKontakte Became Russia's Main Social Network – and Why It Stopped Being It). 10 October 2020. Secretmag. <https://secretmag.ru/stories/vkontakte-14.htm>.

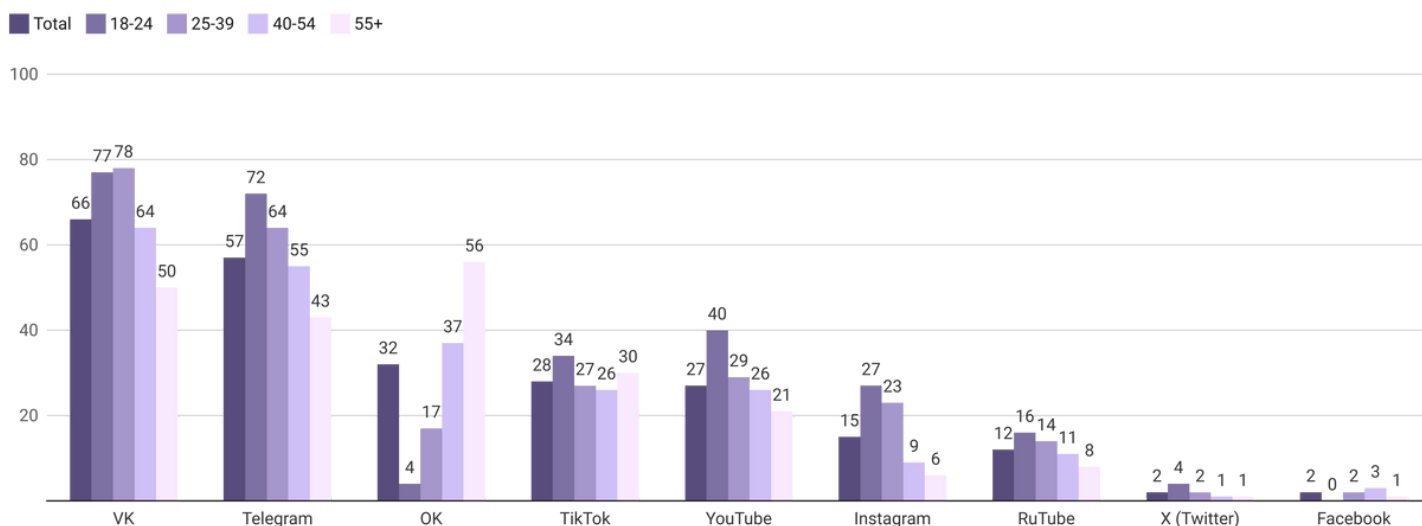
[43] Meduza. (2025). “У меня был странный сосед, он что-то оставил у двери. Через час я почувствовал себя очень плохо и понял — это конец”. Павел Дуров дал большое интервью американскому подкастеру Лексу Фридману — об уходе из «ВКонтакте», блокировке телеграма и покушении в 2018 году (“I had a strange neighbor; he left something at the door. An hour later, I felt really sick and realized it was the end.” Pavel Durov gave a lengthy interview to American podcaster Lex Fridman about leaving VKontakte, the Telegram block, and the 2018 assassination attempt). 1 October 2025. <https://meduza.io/feature/2025/10/01/u-menya-byl-strannyi-sosed-on-chto-to-ostavil-u-dveri-cherez-chas-ya-pochuvstvoval-sebya-ochen-ploho-i-ponyal-eto-konets>.

Ultimately, VK's independence came under intense pressure during the 2014 Euromaidan protests in Ukraine. After founder Pavel Durov refused to hand over user data to the Russian security services (FSB), he faced the threat of criminal prosecution.[44] He fled Russia in April 2014, and his remaining shares were first acquired by the investment fund UCP and soon after by Mail.ru Group.[45] Conducted under mounting political pressure, this acquisition marked the end of VK's autonomy. Durov went on to establish Telegram, now one of the world's most popular messaging platforms and a rare example of a Russian-origin tech company operating outside state control.[46]

In December 2021, Vladimir Kiriienko, the son of Sergey Kiriienko, First Deputy Chief of Staff of the Presidential Administration, was appointed CEO of VK Group.[47] His appointment symbolized the company's deepening political alignment and the Kremlin's determination to bring strategic digital infrastructure under loyalist control. VK's largest shareholder is Sogaz, a state-aligned insurance conglomerate with close ties to Russia's ruling elite.[48] Operational decisions and strategic priorities increasingly reflect state media policy rather than market logic.

As of 2025, VK Group controls Russia's two largest social networks: VKontakte, still dominant among younger users, and Odnoklassniki (OK), popular with older demographics. Beyond social networking, the company operates VK Messenger, VK Music, VK Cloud, email services, gaming platforms, and enterprise tools. In 2022, VK acquired Yandex.Zen, Yandex.News, and Yandex's homepage—a key traffic funnel. This acquisition dramatically expanded VK's reach, especially among less tech-savvy users who rely on pre-installed browser start pages for access to news and content.

Social media audience (survey data, March 2025, %)



Source: Levada • Created with Datawrapper

[44] Vitaliy Kropman. (2014). ФСБ требует от "В контакте" данные авторов групп Евромайдана (FSB demands data of Euromaidan group authors from VKontakte). 17 April 2014. DW. <https://tinyurl.com/yuaunm4p>

[45] Forbes Russia. (2014). Mail.ru приобрела 48% «ВКонтакте» за \$1,47 млрд (Mail.ru Acquires 48% of VKontakte for \$1.47 Billion). 16 September 2014. <https://www.forbes.ru/news/267787-mailru-priobrela-48-vkontakte-za-147-mlrd>.

[46] Kristina Zhukova. (2020). История Telegram и TON от первого лица: что Павел Дуров рассказал адвокату SEC в Дубае (The History of Telegram and TON in the First Person: What Pavel Durov Told the SEC Lawyer in Dubai). 18 January 2020. Forbes Russia. <https://www.forbes.ru/tehnologii/391431-istoriya-telegram-i-ton-ot-pervogo-lica-chto-pavel-durov-rasskazal-advokatu-sec-v>.

[47] Meduza. (2021). «Ни рыба ни мясо» Новым главой VK стал Владимир Кириенко – сын того самого Кириенко. «Медуза» рассказывает, кто он такой – и как участвовал в создании «суверенного интернета» ("Neither fish nor fowl" Vladimir Kiriienko, the son of that same Kiriienko, has become the new head of VK. Meduza explains who he is and how he participated in the creation of the "sovereign internet"). 13 December 2021. <https://meduza.io/feature/2021/12/13/ni-ryba-ni-myaso>.

[48] Igor Terentyev. (2019). Загадка «Согаз»: кого, кроме миллиардера Ковальчука и двоюродного племянника Путина, обогатил страховщик «Газпрома» (The Mystery of Sogaz: Who, Besides Billionaire Kovalchuk and Putin's Second Cousin, Has Gazprom's Insurer Enriched). 2 September 2019. Forbes Russia. <https://www.forbes.ru/milliardery/382745-zagadka-sogaza-kogo-krome-milliardera-kovalchuka-i-dvuyrodnogo-plemyannika-putina-obogatil-strahovshchik-gazproma>.

One of VK Group's most ambitious ventures is VK Video, launched as a state-backed alternative to YouTube amid ongoing restrictions and throttling of foreign platforms. [49] The Russian government invested more than 10 billion rubles to subsidize creators and promote the service. Yet the project has struggled: by 2024, VK Video's average daily reach was under 4%, compared with YouTube's pre-throttling reach of nearly 47%. Users cite poor design, limited monetization opportunities, and opaque algorithms as major obstacles to adoption.[50]

VK has also become a central pillar of the Kremlin's digital censorship apparatus. The platform routinely complies with state requests for takedowns, account bans, and content removal.[51] Investigative reports reveal direct cooperation with law enforcement to monitor political activity, flag dissident content, and assist in the identification and prosecution of users.[52] Numerous criminal cases have been initiated on the basis of VK posts, particularly under laws targeting "fake news" and "discrediting the army." [53]

Since acquiring Yandex.Zen, VK's news aggregator has been fully integrated into the state's censorship ecosystem. Independent outlets have been delisted, while pro-government sources dominate user feeds. Communities, events, and public pages linked to opposition figures or protests are routinely blocked or downranked. As a result, VK functions simultaneously as a social platform and a surveillance infrastructure—a dual role that has drawn sharp criticism from digital rights groups.

VK Group remains a top-tier player in the Russian digital economy, though its financial performance has been uneven. According to its most recent filings, the company posted modest revenue growth in 2024, driven largely by advertising and service subscriptions. Profit margins, however, have narrowed due to rising infrastructure costs and the inefficiencies of politically motivated projects such as VK Video. Advertising revenue has also been hit by the exit of foreign brands and the overall contraction of Russia's online ad market.[54] Even so, VK continues to benefit from quasi-monopolistic control over key digital channels and from indirect state subsidies through public contracts and preferential regulation.

[49] Oleg Voronin. (2024). «VK Видео» должно было заменить нам YouTube, но этого даже близко нет. Почему импортозамещения не случилось? ("VK Video" was supposed to replace YouTube for us, but it's not even close. Why didn't import substitution happen?). 18 December 2024. IGuides.

https://www.iguides.ru/main/other/vk_video_dolzno_bylo_zamenit_nam_youtube_no_etogo_dazhe_blizko_net_pochemu_importozameshcheniya_ne_/.

[50] Mediascope. (2025). Рейтинги (Ratings). <https://mediascope.net/data/>.

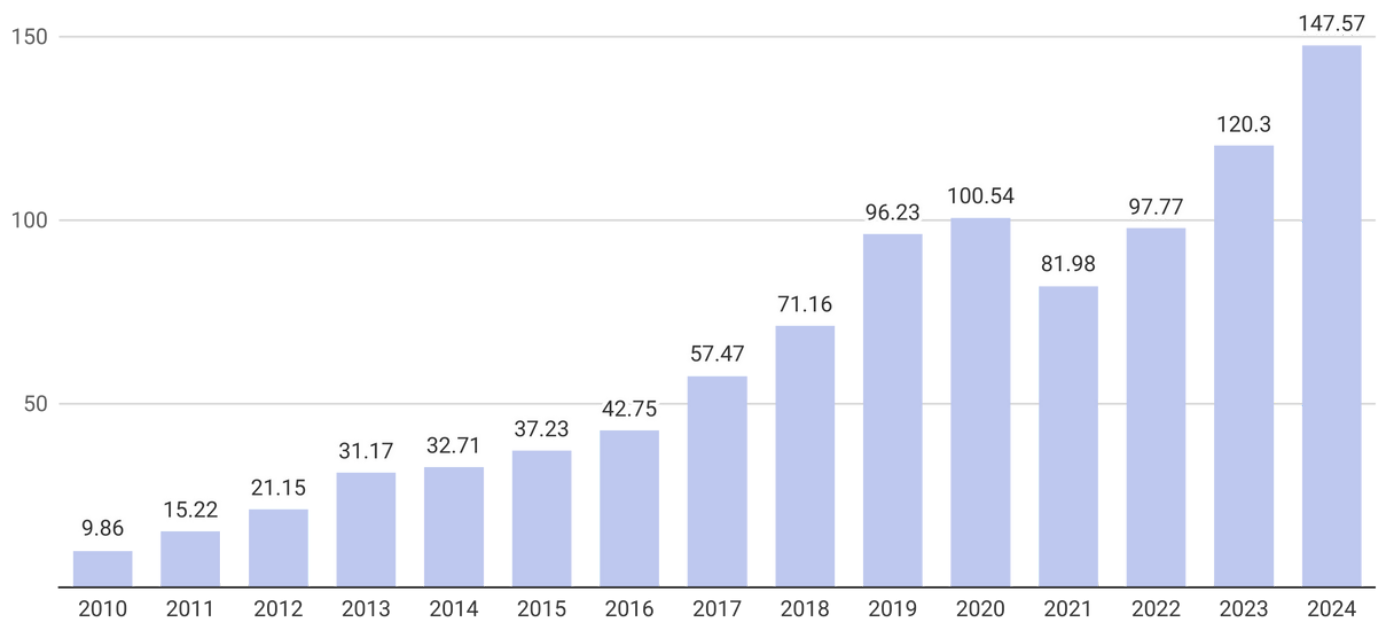
[51] Valeriya Pozychanyuk, Svetlana Reiter, Irina Pankratova, Andrey Pertsev. (2023). Фабрика накруток. Как VK превращает рунет в телевизор с помощью комиков, троллей и блогеров (Factory of cheating. How VK turns RuNet into TV with the help of comedians, trolls and bloggers). 25 December 2023. The Bell. <https://thebell.io/fabrika-nakrutok-kak-vk-prevrashchaet-runet-v-televizor-s-pomoshchyu-komikov-trolley-i-blogerov?ysclid=mdsz9iuz4r986811865>.

[52] Proekt.Media. (2018). Втесномконтакте. Рассказ о том, как «ВКонтакте» сотрудничает с российскими силовиками (Inclosecontact. A story about how VKontakte cooperates with Russian security forces). 31 October 2018. <https://www.proekt.media/narrative/delo-extremizm-vkontakte/>; Lilit Sarkisyan. (2018). Прозрачность по запросу. «ВКонтакте», за лайки в котором сажают, теряет аудиторию и принимает экстренные меры (Transparency on Demand: VKontakte, Where Likes Can Get You Jailed, Is Losing Its Audience and Taking Emergency Measures). 10 October 2018. Novaya Gazeta. <https://novayagazeta.ru/articles/2018/10/10/78140-prozrachnost-po-zaprosu>.

[53] Darya Talanova. (2024). Лайк, шер, срок. В России завели более 30 тысяч дел за посты и мемы в соцсетях. Исследование «Новой-Европы» (Like, share, jail time. In Russia, more than 30 thousand cases have been opened for posts and memes on social networks. Investigation by Novaya Evropa). 2 December 2024. Novaya Gazeta Europe. <https://novayagazeta.eu/articles/2024/12/02/laik-sher-srok>.

[54] VK. (2025). Единый годовой отчет VK за 2024 год (VK Unified Annual Report 2024). https://corp.vkcdn.ru/media/files/VK_AR2024_Book.pdf.

VK revenue (in billion Russian rubles)



Source: Statista • Created with Datawrapper

VK Group today stands as Russia's second-largest digital ecosystem, after Yandex, though the line between market-driven innovation and state-directed control has grown increasingly blurred. While the company aspires to build comprehensive "sovereign" alternatives to global tech platforms, its long-term trajectory is constrained by political oversight, limited competition, and mounting reputational costs. In the near term, VK is likely to maintain its central role in Russian digital life—as a hub for entertainment, communication, and state messaging. Over the longer term, however, its entanglement with censorship and political control may stifle innovation and alienate younger users who continue to seek freer, more global alternatives.

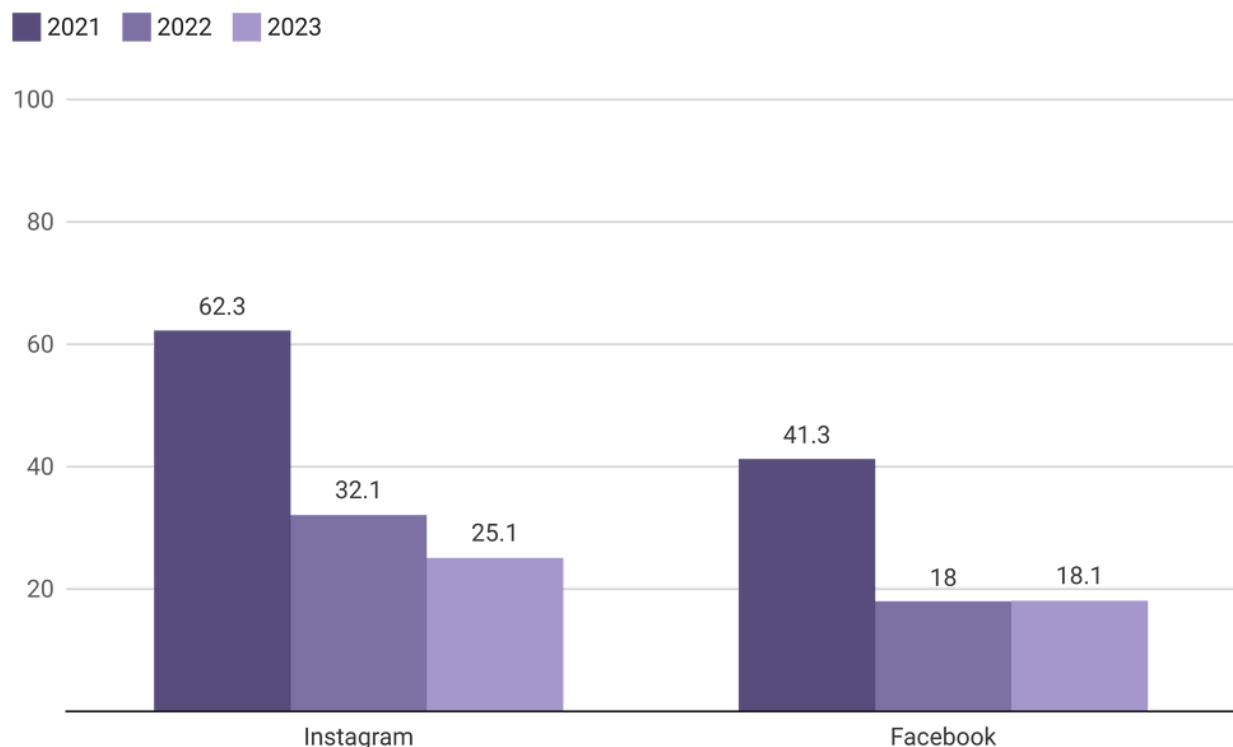
Other Players and Platforms in the Internet

Meta (Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp)

Before 2022, Meta's platforms were central to Russia's digital and social landscape. Instagram had more than 80 million users, functioning not only as a lifestyle platform but also as critical infrastructure for influencers, small businesses, and e-commerce. It was especially dominant among younger demographics, with strong uptake in fashion, beauty, food, and tourism. Facebook, though less ubiquitous, played an outsized role in political discourse, civil society, and independent media, serving as a digital public sphere for opposition figures and activists.

This landscape shifted dramatically in March 2022, following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. A Moscow court designated Meta an "extremist organization," citing its temporary relaxation of content-moderation policies on Ukraine-related posts.[55] Both Facebook and Instagram were subsequently blocked, cutting off tens of millions of Russians from platforms they relied on daily. The ban was justified in the language of national security, but its broader consequence was the erasure of Meta from Russia's digital ecosystem.

Changes in Instagram and Facebook monthly audience in the years before and after the ban in Russia (in millions)

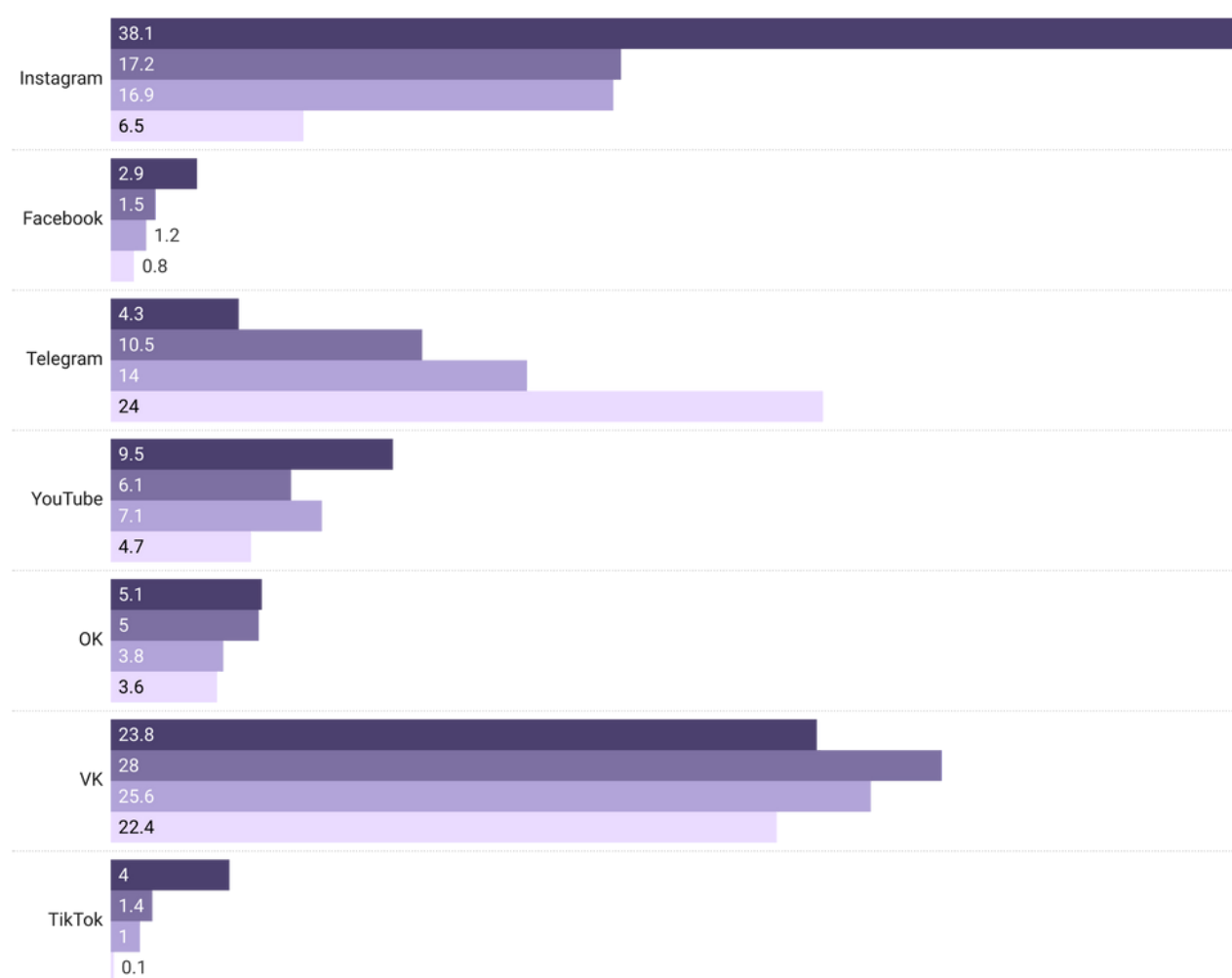


Source: Mediascope • Created with Datawrapper

[55] TASS. (2022). Россия запретила Instagram и Facebook за экстремизм. Главное (Russia Bans Instagram and Facebook for Extremism. Main). 21 March 2022. <https://tass.ru/obschestvo/14135927>.

Content creators by social media in Russia (in millions)

2021 2022 2023 2024



Source: Brand Analytics • Created with Datawrapper

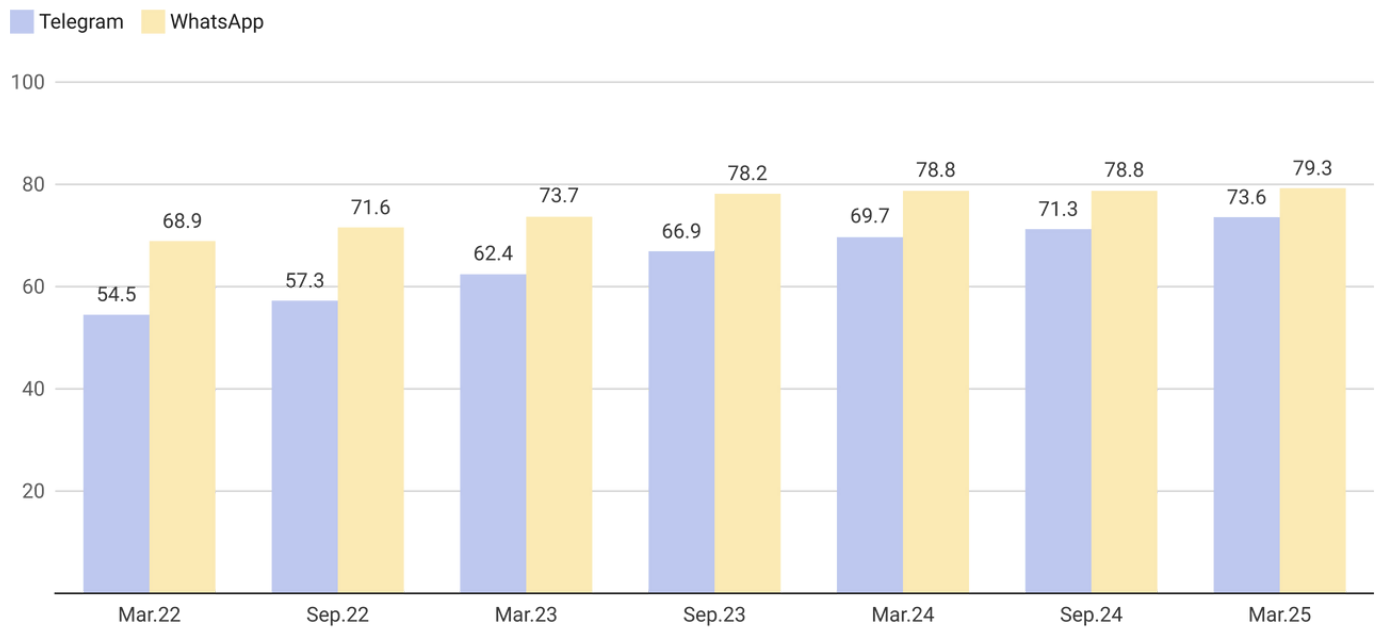
Unlike other Meta platforms, WhatsApp has not been blocked in Russia—not for political reasons, but because of its deep integration into daily life. With more than 70 million users, WhatsApp functions as a critical layer of social infrastructure: it links school groups, neighborhood communities, families, and workplaces. Banning it would have caused immediate disruption to everyday communication routines nationwide. Much like Telegram, WhatsApp is now embedded in Russia’s digital fabric—not as a public forum for discourse, but primarily as a private, utilitarian tool essential to the smooth functioning of social life.

Nevertheless, Russian authorities are actively developing a domestic replacement, the Max messenger[56], and persistent rumors of a future WhatsApp ban circulate widely. Officials deny such plans so emphatically that many observers see it as confirmation that a ban is only a matter of time.[57]

[56] Meduza. (2025). У приложения Max от VK есть все шансы стать российским национальным мессенджером. Оно работает уже три месяца, но внутри одни баги и нет людей. А слежка за пользователями возмутила даже Z-блогеров (The Max app from VK has every chance of becoming Russia’s national messenger. It has been working for three months, but inside there are only bugs and no people. And even Z-bloggers are outraged by the surveillance of users). 2 July 2025. <https://meduza.io/feature/2025/07/02/u-prilozheniya-max-ot-vk-est-vse-shansy-stat-rossiyskim-natsionalnym-messendzherom-ono-rabotaet-uzhe-tri-mesyatsa-no-vnutri-odni-bagi-i-net-lyudey>.

[57] Meduza. (2025). Власти России собираются заблокировать самый популярный мессенджер – WhatsApp. Telegram, судя по всему, блокировки (пока) избежит (Russian authorities are going to block the most popular messenger – WhatsApp. Telegram, apparently, will avoid blocking (for now)). 18 July 2025. <https://meduza.io/feature/2025/07/18/vlasti-rossii-sobirayutsya-zablokirovat-samyi-populyarnyy-messendzher-whatsapp-telegram-sudya-po-vsemu-blokirovki-poka-izbezhit>.

Audience of the two most popular messengers in Russia - Telegram and WhatsApp (in %)



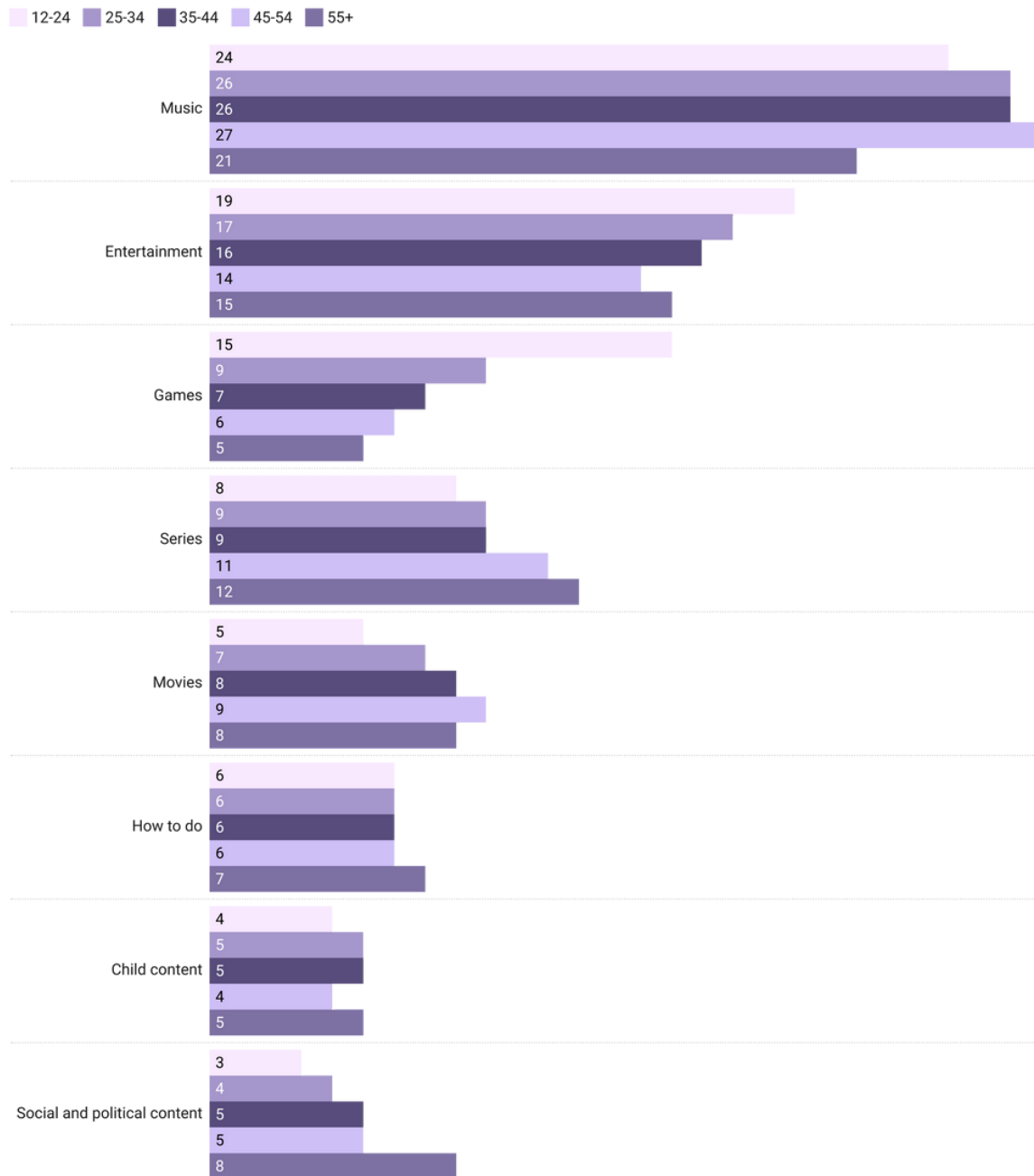
Source: Mediascope • Created with Datawrapper

Meta's forced exit reflects the Kremlin's broader strategy of "digital sovereignty"—replacing foreign platforms with state-aligned or domestically controlled alternatives. The designation of a major U.S. tech company as an "extremist organization" set a precedent and marked a decisive break from the global Internet model. The result is a fragmented digital landscape in which Western platforms are not merely foreign but criminalized.

Google (YouTube)

YouTube has occupied a uniquely central position in Russia's digital landscape throughout the 2010s and early 2020s. As the dominant online video platform, it met an exceptionally wide range of user needs—education, entertainment, music, gaming, DIY tutorials, and content creation. With tens of millions of monthly users, it became deeply woven into everyday digital routines across age groups, regions, and income levels. For many Russians, YouTube functioned not only as a search engine but also as a replacement for television: a space to learn, relax, follow creators, and explore niche interests beyond the reach of traditional media.

Search categories in YouTube in Russia (% of all searches)



Source: Mediascope • Created with Datawrapper

YouTube also sustained a vast creator economy. Thousands of Russian-language channels, ranging from comedians and educators to beauty bloggers and game streamers, built viable businesses through the platform's monetization tools. For small and mid-size creators, YouTube provided revenue streams, visibility, and audience reach that no domestic competitor could match. Neither Rutube nor VK Video has been able to replicate its recommendation algorithms, user interface, or global integration.

Top YouTube-channels by average monthly audience, breakdown by age in March-May 2024

The type of content distributed by the YouTube channels is indicated in brackets

12-24	25-34	35-44	45-54	55+
Дима Масленников (blogging)	A4 (blogging)	A4 (blogging)	Уральские Пельмени (television content)	Наши истории (audiostories)
Kuplinov ► Play (blogging)	Маша и Медведь (child content)	Comedy Club (television content)	Comedy Club (television content)	Садоводство с Еленой (home and gardening)
СТС (television content)	Comedy Club (television content)	Маша и Медведь (child content)	Star Media (movies and series)	Истории Навсегда (audiostories)
MrBeast (blogging)	СТС (television content)	СТС (television content)	Киноконцерт "Мосфильм" (movies and series)	Здоровье и Долголетие (health)
Marmok (blogging)	Get Movies (child content)	ТНТ (television content)	СТС (television content)	Семена Алтая (home and gardening)

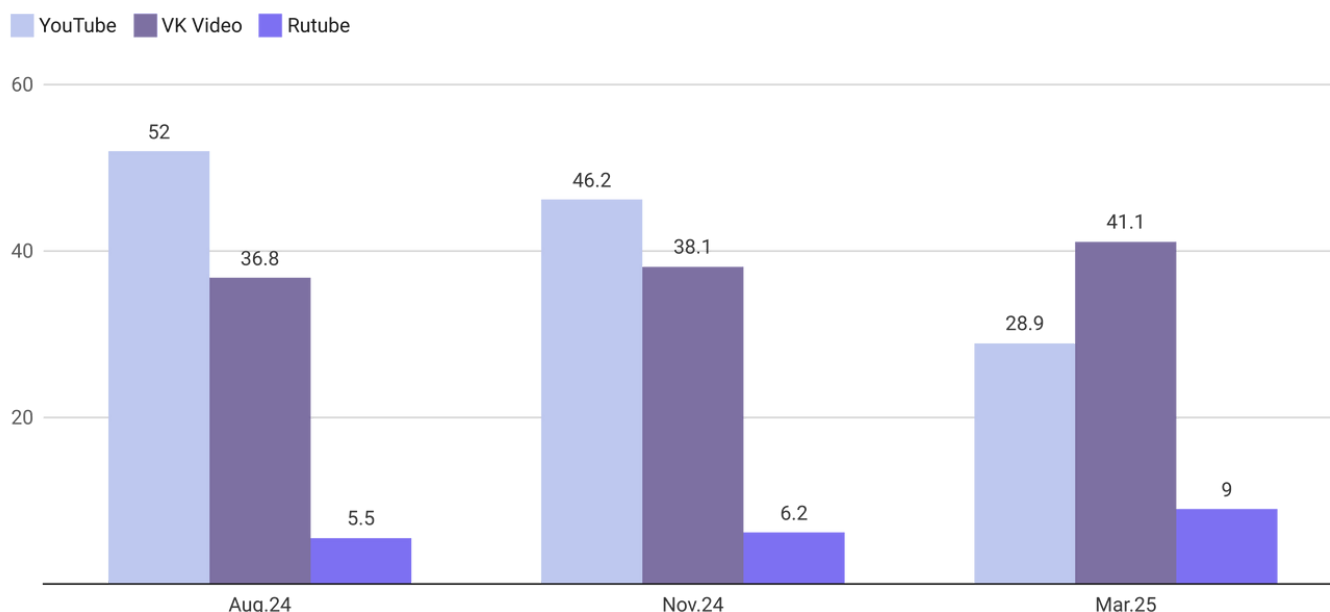
Source: Mediascope • Created with Datawrapper

At the same time, YouTube assumed an increasingly important role in Russia’s media sphere. As television grew more restricted and independent outlets were marginalized, many journalists, opposition figures, and NGOs migrated to the platform. Channels such as Dozhd (TV Rain), Navalny LIVE, and later exiled media collectives used YouTube to reach audiences inside Russia. By 2021, it had become the country’s de facto last open video space—a rare arena for political content not curated by the state.

Yet the share of explicitly social and political content remained modest: in most age groups, less than 5% of YouTube searches fell into this category, as noted earlier. Even so, the authorities began a concerted campaign against the platform. Although YouTube remained accessible longer than other major Western services, pressure intensified after 2022. By 2024, regulators had imposed throttling via deep packet inspection (DPI) and reduced platform visibility through search-engine downranking. [58] Despite these measures, user engagement remained relatively strong, declining only gradually.

[58] Computerra. (2024). Российские видеохостинги вытесняют YouTube из поисковой выдачи (Russian video hosting sites are pushing YouTube out of search results). 29 August 2024. <https://www.computerra.ru/300989/rossijskie-videohosting-i-vytesnyayut-youtube-iz-poiskovoj-vydachi/>; Meduza. (2024). В России, как заявил источник «Медузы», начали замедлять YouTube. «Ростелеком» утверждает, что возникли проблемы в работе оборудования Google (In Russia, as a source told Meduza, YouTube has begun to slow down. Rostelecom claims that problems arose with Google equipment). 12 July 2024. <https://meduza.io/feature/2024/07/12/v-rossii-kak-zayavil-istochnik-meduzy-nachali-zamedlyat-youtube-rostelekom-utverzhaet-chto-voznikli-problemy-v-rabote-oborudovaniya-google>.

Daily audience of the top-3 video platforms in Russia after the start of YouTube slowdown in July 2024 (in millions)



Source: Mediascope • Created with Datawrapper

By late 2024, throttling of YouTube traffic had become more frequent and severe, particularly during politically sensitive periods. Although a full nationwide block was widely rumored, and reportedly prepared[59], it was never officially implemented. Authorities accused YouTube of violating data-localization laws, failing to remove “extremist” content, and taking “hostile” actions against Russian media and politicians[60], but stopped short of banning the platform outright. Even so, many creators saw dramatic declines in reach, with traffic losses of up to 80%.[61] This accelerated the migration of content toward platforms such as Telegram, VK Video, and subscription-based services like Boosty.

The de facto loss of YouTube was more than the disappearance of a popular service: it marked the collapse of a globally connected content infrastructure and the closure of one of the last open spaces in Russia’s increasingly sovereign and restricted Internet. Despite state-backed efforts, domestic substitutes have yet to replicate either the technical sophistication or the legitimacy once commanded by YouTube.

[59] Roman Kildyushkin. (2024). В России планируют осенью заблокировать YouTube (Russia plans to block YouTube in the fall). 12 July 2024. [Gazeta.ru](https://www.gazeta.ru/tech/news/2024/07/12/23447353.shtml). <https://www.gazeta.ru/tech/news/2024/07/12/23447353.shtml>.

[60] Ixht.com. (2024). «YouTube и Google должны соблюдать наши законы, а Роскомнадзор всё правильно делает». Путин заявил, что американцы сами создали себя проблемы (“YouTube and Google must comply with our laws, and Roskomnadzor is doing everything right.” Putin said that the Americans created their own problems). 19 December 2024. <https://www.ixht.com/news/2024/12/19/youtube-i-google-dolzhny-sobljudat-nashi-zakony-a-roskomnadzor-vsjo-pravilno-delaet-putin-zajavil-chto-amerikancy-sami.html>; TASS. (2023). В Госдуме заявили, что у российских контентмейкеров на YouTube нет будущего (The State Duma stated that Russian content makers on YouTube have no future). 17 September 2023. <https://tass.ru/obschestvo/18770417?ysclid=mdufjfkxtl386535270>.

[61] IStories. (2024). «Самая настоящая блокировка». Трафик YouTube из России сократили на 80% (“A Real Blocking”: YouTube Traffic from Russia Cut by 80%). 23 December 2024. <https://istories.media/news/2024/12/23/samaya-nastoyashchaya-blokirovka-trafik-youtube-iz-rossii-sokratili-na-80/>.

Rutube is one of Russia's earliest domestic video-hosting platforms, originally launched in 2006 by Oleg Volobuev and Mikhail Paulkin.[62] Despite its early start, Rutube struggled to gain significant traction, overshadowed by YouTube's global dominance and superior user experience. In 2008, the state corporation Gazprom acquired a controlling stake[63], later consolidating its ownership in 2020 and relaunching the platform in 2021.[64]

Amid rising geopolitical tensions and intensifying confrontation with Western tech companies, Russian state actors and major media conglomerates have stepped up efforts to develop and promote domestic digital infrastructure. Rutube's relaunch was framed not only as a domestic competitor to YouTube but also as a platform for "patriotic content" and a vehicle for safeguarding informational sovereignty.[65] Its growth has been supported by state-backed grants, particularly from the Institute for Internet Development, which has sought to attract creators through financial incentives, promotional support, and exclusive partnerships with Russian media outlets.[66]

Despite these efforts, Rutube continues to face significant challenges. Until recently, its interface was outdated and sluggish compared to competitors, with subpar upload speeds and weak search functionality undermining the user experience.[67] These technical shortcomings have limited its ability to build a broad creator base beyond state media and affiliated journalists. Nevertheless, following the outbreak of the war in Ukraine and the subsequent crackdown on foreign platforms, Rutube has demonstrated steady and significant audience growth, buoyed by state support and the narrowing of user alternatives.[68]

[62] Aleksandr Malakhov. (2007). Положение вне интернет-игры. Создатели "Дозоров" лишились долей в компании (Position outside the Internet game. The creators of "Dozory" lost their shares in the company). 17 September 2007. Kommersant. <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/805282>.

[63] Lenta.ru. (2008). Холдинг "Газпром-медиа" купил RuTube (Gazprom-Media Holding bought RuTube). 19 November 2008. <https://lenta.ru/news/2008/11/19/rutube/>.

[64] Darya Shchyokina. (2021). «Газпром-медиа» перезапустил Rutube. Сервис обещали сделать «не хуже YouTube» (Gazprom-Media Relaunches Rutube. They Promised to Make the Service "No Worse Than YouTube"). 2 April 2021. Secretmag. <https://secretmag.ru/news/gazprom-media-perezapustil-rutube-servis-obeshali-sdelat-ne-khuzhe-youtube.htm?ysclid=mdufv20zvu199895388>; Alina Goncharova. (2022). Rutube запустил программу поддержки блогеров (Rutube Launches Blogger Support Program). 11 March 2022. Lenta.ru. https://lenta.ru/news/2022/03/11/rutube_blog/.

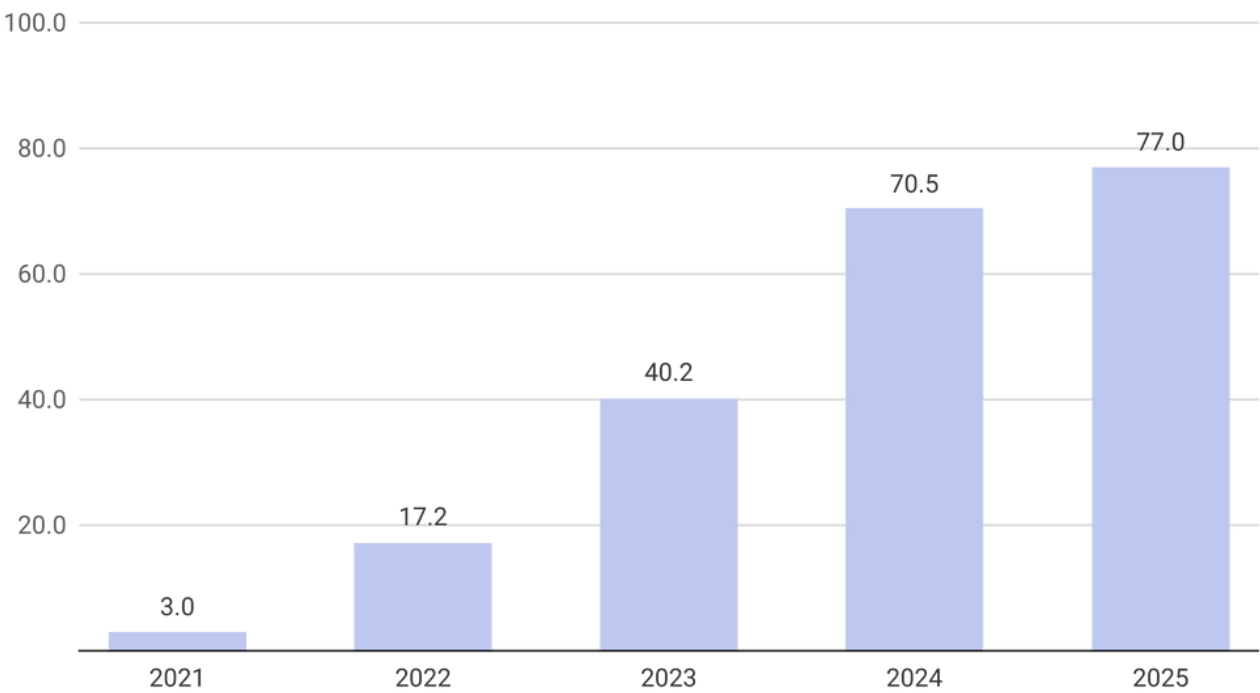
[65] Kseniya Churmanova. (2022). Боты, патриотизм, госфинансирование и никакой войны. Как в России создают соцсети и сервисы взамен западных (Bots, Patriotism, State Funding, and No War: How Russia Creates Social Networks and Services to Replace Western Ones). 2 May 2022. BBC News Russian. <https://www.bbc.com/russian/features-61277715>.

[66] Katya Arenina, Anastasiya Kuts, Dmitriy Sukharev, Galina Sakharevich, Roman Badanin. (2022). Секс, ложь и видео. Рассказ о том, как Кремль хотел построить собственный Youtube, а получилось как всегда (Sex, Lies, and Video. The Story of How the Kremlin Wanted to Build Its Own YouTube, But It Turned Out as Always). 9 February 2022. Proekt.Media. <https://www.proekt.media/narrative/rutube-kremlin/>.

[67] Valeriya Pozychanyuk. (2024). Семейные ценности. Расследование о том, кто и почему решил отключить YouTube в России (Family Values: An Investigation into Who and Why Decided to Shut Down YouTube in Russia). 24 December 2024. The Bell. <https://thebell.io/semeynnye-tsennosti-rassledovanie-o-tom-kto-i-pochemu-reshil-otklyuchit-youtube-v-rossii>.

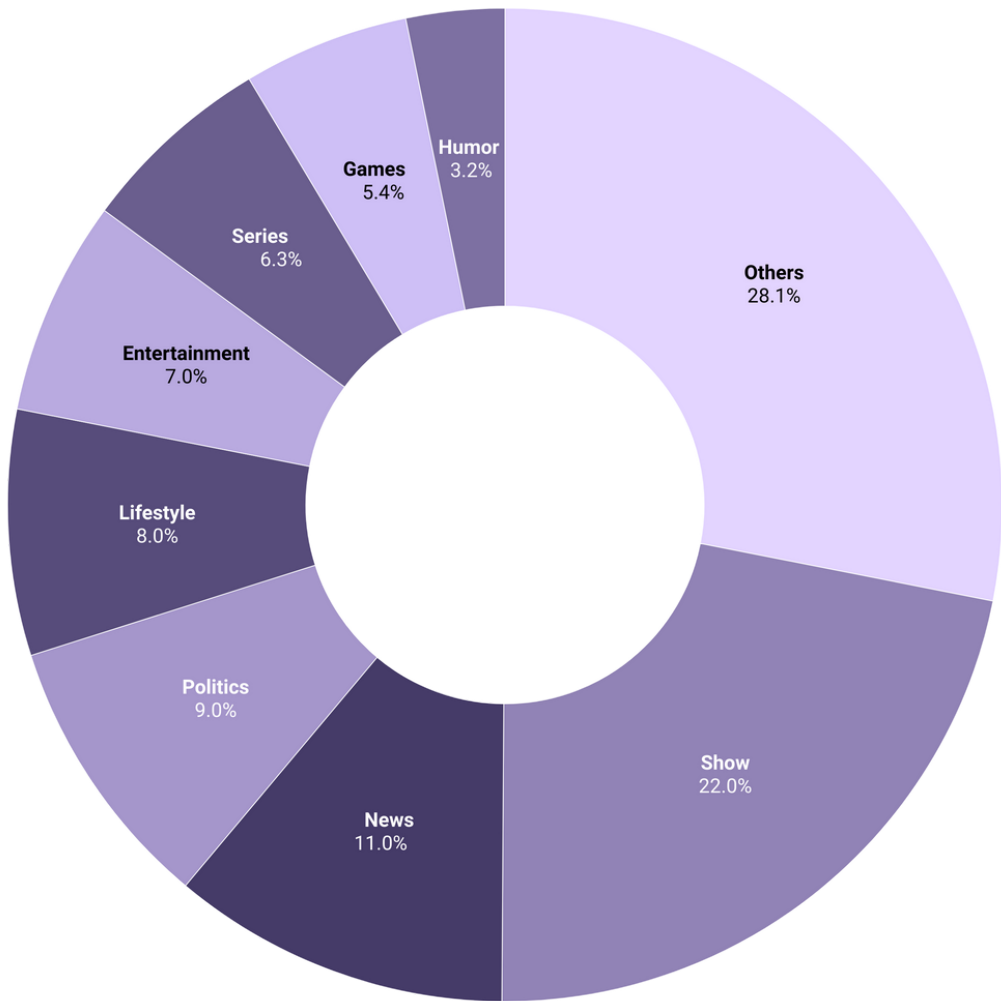
[68] Mediascope. (2025). Рейтинги (Ratings). <https://mediascope.net/data/>; Anton Abdullin. (2022). Канальное отверстие. Чем Rutube хочет заманивать к себе пользователей YouTube? Мы отправили нашего корреспондента изучать отечественный видеохостинг вместо вас (Channel hole. How does Rutube want to lure YouTube users? We sent our correspondent to study the domestic video hosting instead of you). 16 May 2022. Novaya Gazeta Europe. <https://novayagazeta.eu/articles/2022/05/16/kanalnoe-otverstie>.

Rutube monthly average per year audience (in millions)



Source: Rutube, TASS, Sostav • Created with Datawrapper

Most popular content on Rutube in 2023



Source: Sostav • Created with Datawrapper

At the same time, Rutube remains far from securing the role of a true “Russian YouTube.” By 2024, platforms such as VK Video—despite not being VK Group’s flagship product—drew daily audiences more than four times larger than Rutube’s, underscoring its relatively limited reach within Russia’s digital video market.

Overall, Rutube represents a significant state-backed attempt to build a sovereign video platform within Russia’s media ecosystem. It operates both as a cultural and political project and as an emerging piece of digital infrastructure intended to diversify and secure the country’s media environment. Yet to evolve into a genuinely competitive player, Rutube must overcome persistent technological shortcomings and broaden its appeal beyond its current base of primarily state-affiliated content producers.

Telegram

Telegram, launched in 2013 by Pavel Durov before his departure from VKontakte, was conceived as a secure, encryption-based messaging app—a response to mounting concerns about surveillance and censorship in Russia. Designed with an emphasis on privacy, speed, and decentralized cloud infrastructure, Telegram quickly gained traction among tech-savvy users and those seeking alternatives to traditional messaging services.

After Durov’s exile from Russia in 2014 and his refusal to cooperate with Russian authorities, Telegram became closely linked with digital resistance.[69] In 2018, Roskomnadzor, Russia’s media regulator, attempted to block the app after it refused to hand over encryption keys to the FSB.[70] The blockade, however, was largely ineffective: Telegram’s cloud-based architecture, domain-hopping tactics, and broad public support allowed it to remain accessible.[71] The failed censorship effort became a symbolic defeat for the Russian state and cemented Telegram’s reputation as a platform of defiance.

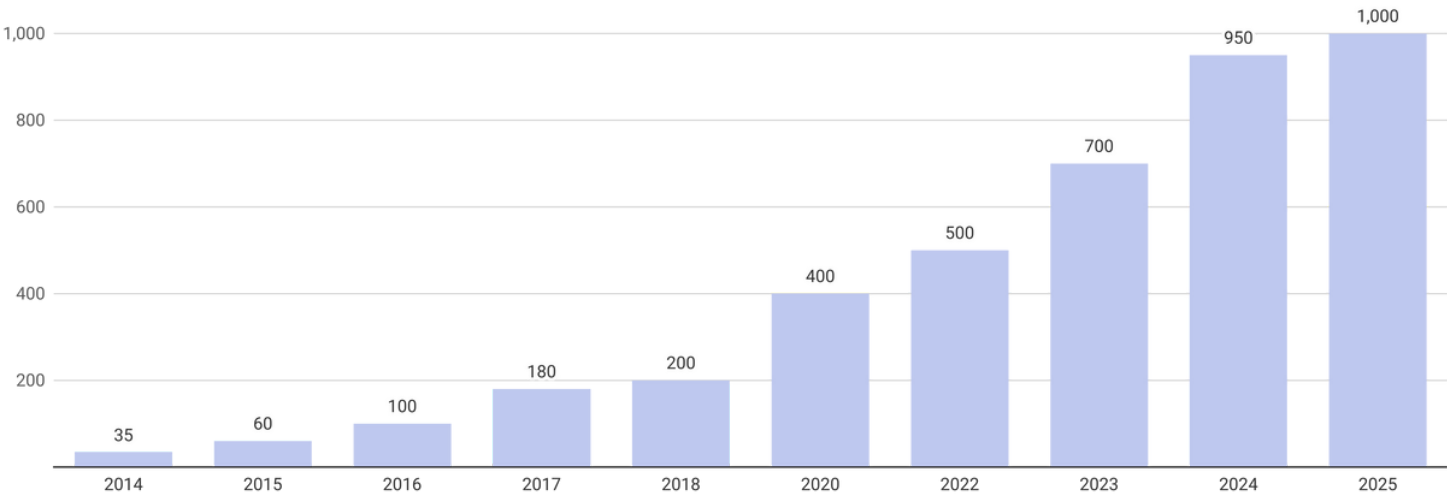
[69] Aleksandr Plyushchev. (2019). Telegram – год цифрового неповиновения (Telegram – A Year of Digital Disobedience). 16 April 2019. DW. <https://tinyurl.com/2zywpwr3>.

[70] Meduza. (2023). Пять лет назад власти блокировали Telegram, а после начала войны это одно из главных приложений в РФ. Как пользоваться им безопасно? (Five years ago, the authorities blocked Telegram, and after the war began, it is one of the main applications in the Russian Federation. How to use it safely?). 16 April 2023. <https://meduza.io/feature/2023/04/16/pyat-let-nazad-vlasti-blokirovali-telegram-a-posle-nachala-voyny-eto-odno-iz-glavnyh-prilozheniy-v-rf-kak-polzovatsya-im-bezopasno>.

[71] Nikita Batalov. (2018). Почему провалилась блокировка Telegram? (Why did the Telegram blocking fail?). 21 July 2018. DW. <https://tinyurl.com/bdfrvvd5>.

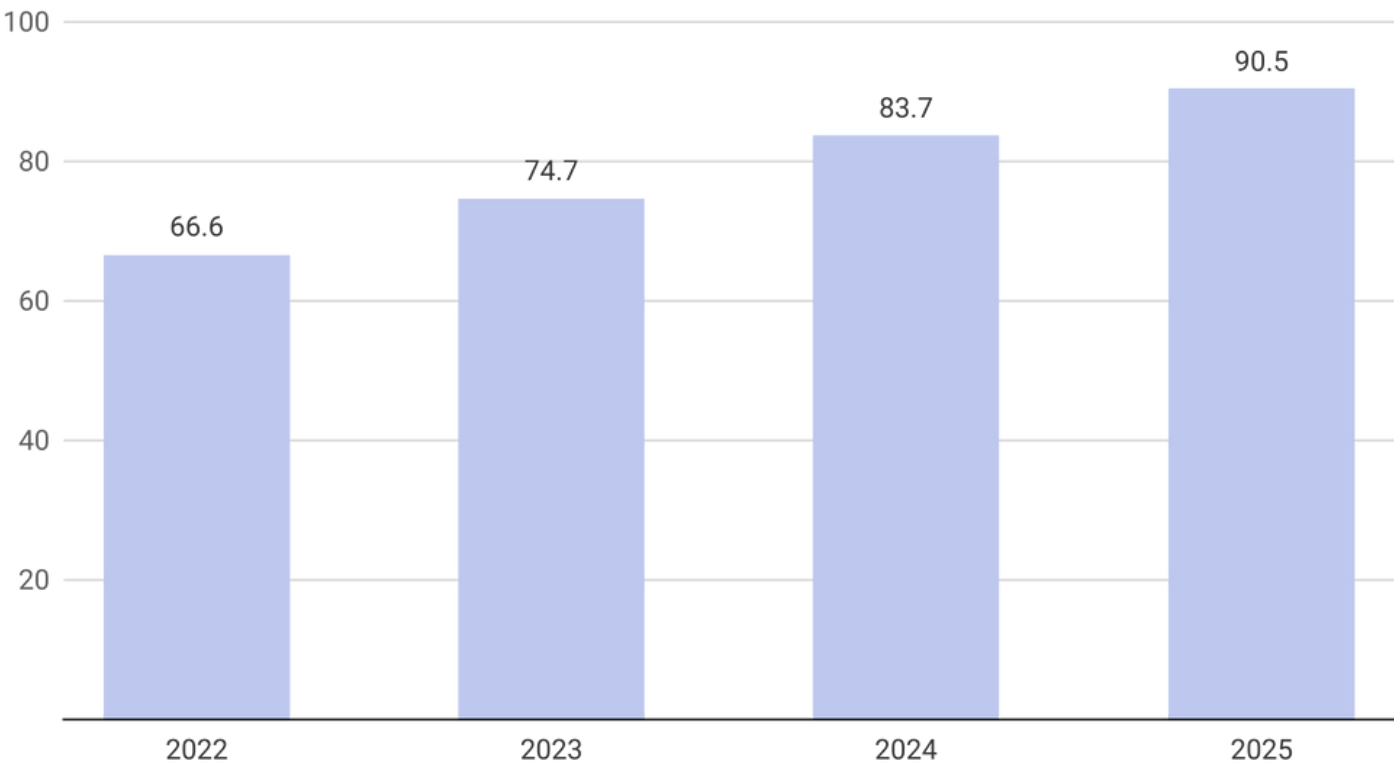
Telegram users in the world (monthly average per year, in millions)

Note: Data for years 2019 and 2021 not available



Source: Statista • Created with Datawrapper

Telegram users in Russia (monthly average per year, in millions)



Source: Mediascope • Created with Datawrapper

Although nominally blocked, Telegram's usage continued to expand. In 2020, Roskomnadzor quietly lifted restrictions, citing "constructive cooperation," though without disclosing details.[72] Since then, Telegram has evolved far beyond its original role as a messaging service to become a central node in Russia's digital communication and media ecosystem. By 2025, it had surpassed 90 million monthly active users in Russia, making it one of the country's most widely used platforms for news consumption, political discussion, entertainment, and commerce.

Telegram's dual identity is what makes it both indispensable and controversial. On one hand, it hosts official propaganda channels such as Soloviev Live, RT, the Ministry of Defense, and the so-called Z-bloggers. On the other, it remains the primary outlet for independent journalism and exiled media, including channels run by Meduza, Novaya Gazeta Europe, Important Stories (iStories), as well as a broad spectrum of grassroots reporting and activism.

In 2025, iStories published an investigation alleging that the same contractors who service the secret surveillance complexes of Russia's security services are also responsible for parts of Telegram's infrastructure.[73] Telegram responded that it "has contracts with dozens of different service providers around the world" and that "only Telegram employees have access to Telegram servers." [74]

On August 13, 2025, Roskomnadzor announced the beginning of a ban on calls in the Telegram and WhatsApp messengers. According to the official version, this is due to the need to "counter criminals in accordance with materials from law enforcement agencies." [75] At the same time, active efforts to promote the national messenger Max, which is fully controlled by the Russian authorities and accessible to law enforcement, suggest that the real reason is an attempt to force people to use the available services—among which, coincidentally, is the Max messenger. Supporting this version is the fact that Google Meet, which became the second most downloaded app in the Russian App Store amid the call restrictions in Telegram and WhatsApp, also experienced disruptions. As with the early period of the crackdown on YouTube, Russian authorities explained this malfunction as "problems on Google's side," the very possibility of which the corporation itself denies.[76]

Despite such controversies, and despite the slowdown of YouTube, Telegram remains the last major platform in Russia where oppositional content is broadly accessible without VPNs. Its architecture, based on decentralized channels rather than a single feed, combined with anonymity features, makes it structurally resistant to some forms of censorship, even as soft pressure and behind-the-scenes moderation reportedly grow. For independent journalists, activists, and politically engaged users, Telegram is both a vital communication tool and a contested space.

[72] RosBusinessConsulting. (2020). Роскомнадзор решил снять ограничения на работу Telegram в России (Roskomnadzor has decided to lift restrictions on Telegram in Russia). 18 June 2020. <https://www.rbc.ru/society/18/06/2020/5eeb378c9a7947208c4e62e3>.

[73] Roman Anin, Nikita Kondratyev. (2025). Как «Телеграм» связан с ФСБ (How Telegram is connected to the FSB). 10 June 2025. iStories. <https://istories.media/stories/2025/06/10/kak-telegram-svyazan-s-fsb/>.

[74] BBC News Russian. (2025). «Важные истории» выпустили расследование о связи Telegram с ФСБ. Что в нем говорится и как отреагировал мессенджер? ("Important Stories" published an investigation into Telegram's connection with the FSB. What does it say and how did the messenger react?). 10 June 2025. <https://www.bbc.com/russian/articles/cy4ezxnjy0ko>.

[75] Meduza. (2025). Роскомнадзор официально объявил о «частичном ограничении» звонков в Telegram и WhatsApp (Roskomnadzor officially announced a "partial restriction" on calls to Telegram and WhatsApp). 13 August 2025. <https://meduza.io/news/2025/08/13/roskomnadzor-ob-yavil-o-chastichnom-ogranichenii-zvonkov-v-telegram-i-whatsapp>.

[76] Meduza. (2025). В Google заявили, что проблемы с Google Meet в России — не на стороне компании (Google says problems with Google Meet in Russia are not on the company's side). 27 August 2025. <https://meduza.io/news/2025/08/27/v-google-zayavili-cto-problemy-s-google-meet-v-rossii-ne-na-storone-kompanii>.

In line with the Kremlin's broader strategy of digital sovereignty and infrastructure nationalization, the Russian government is developing Max, a state-backed "super-app" designed to integrate messaging, identification, payments, and media into a single controlled environment.[77] First introduced in late 2024 and still in beta as of mid-2025, Max is explicitly modeled on China's WeChat, with the aim of consolidating everyday digital interactions under a unified, state-aligned platform.[78]

Officially, Max is presented as a secure domestic alternative to foreign messengers and commercial platforms. Unofficially, it reflects a long-term strategy to re-engineer the Russian Internet along vertical lines, reducing reliance on decentralized, hard-to-regulate tools such as Telegram and WhatsApp.[79]

At its core, Max is envisioned as a multi-functional environment: encrypted (but state-accessible) messaging, biometric user identification via integration with Gosuslugi (Russia's e-government portal), SPFS-based payment systems (Russia's alternative to SWIFT), personalized content feeds, and social networking functions. The overarching goal is to create a "one-stop digital environment" that embeds the user within a closed, regulated ecosystem—with seamless links to both administrative services and state-run media.

By 2025, internal government memos suggest a coordinated push toward mandatory adoption.[80] Starting September 1, 2025, all smartphones sold in Russia are required to come pre-installed with, among other software, the Max messenger and the RuStore app marketplace.[81] Several regional administrations have already instructed departments to begin pilot testing Max for interdepartmental communication.[82]

Integration with biometric and digital ID systems has raised particular concern. Analysts warn that Max could become the technical backbone of centralized social profiling, especially if tied to credit histories, legal records, or movement databases. Its anticipated architecture would enable real-time surveillance, automated content moderation, and instant reporting—concentrated in a single administrative interface. [83]

[77] Vladislav Novyy. (2025). Приложение к государству: как в России создают национальный мессенджер (An Appendix to the State: How Russia is Creating a National Messenger). 9 July 2025. Forbes Russia. <https://www.forbes.ru/tekhnologii/539497-prilozenie-k-gosudarstvu-kak-v-rossii-sozdaut-nacional-nyj-messendzer>.

[78] TASS. (2025). Эксперты: мессенджер Max может превзойти WeChat и стать "мягкой силой" России (Experts: Messenger Max Can Surpass WeChat and Become Russia's "Soft Power"). 6 July 2025. <https://tass.ru/ekonomika/24441275>.

[79] Newizv. (2025). WhatsApp и Telegram через VPN или русский MAX. Власть грозит прикрыть мессенджеры (WhatsApp and Telegram via VPN or Russian MAX. Authorities threaten to shut down messengers). 18 July 2025. <https://newizv.ru/news/2025-07-18/whatsapp-i-telegram-cherez-vpn-ili-russkiy-max-vlast-grozit-prikryt-messendzhery-437457>.

[80] RosBusinessConsulting. (2025). Путин подписал закон о создании в России национального мессенджера (Putin signs law on creation of national messenger in Russia). 24 June 2025. <https://www.rbc.ru/rbcfreenews/685a9aec9a794732463a623d>; DOXA. (2025). Власть продолжают заставлять россиян перейти на Max. Теперь туда могут перенести домовые и родительские чаты, а также переведут чиновников (The authorities continue to force Russians to switch to Max. Now, home and parent chats may be transferred there, and officials will also be transferred). 31 July 2025. <https://doxa.team/news/2025-07-31-max>.

[81] On Consumer Protection art. 4, Law of the Russian Federation No. 2300-1 (1992).

[82] Igor Lavrenkov, Nadezhda Yarmula, Andrey Prakh. (2025). Губернатор присоединился к чату. Кемеровские власти переходят в мессенджер MAX (The Governor Joins the Chat. Kemerovo Authorities Switch to MAX Messenger). 28 July 2025. Kommersant. <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/7923784>; Pyotr Valarenko. (2025). Курганские власти переходят на российский мессенджер (Kurgan authorities switch to Russian messenger). 30 July 2025. BezFormata. <https://kurgan.bezformata.com/listnews/messendzher/149130263/>.

[83] Vc.ru. (2025). Вся правда про мессенджер Max! (The whole truth about the Max messenger!). 28 June 2025. <https://vc.ru/life/2069180-messendzher-max-bezopasnost-i-uiazvimosti>; SecurityLab. (2025). Мессенджер MAX под огнем критики: что не так с «национальным» решением (Messenger MAX under fire: what's wrong with the "national" solution). 1 July 2025. <https://www.securitylab.ru/blog/personal/Bitshield/355756.php>.

Max, therefore, represents more than just another messenger: it is a cornerstone of Russia's emerging model of digital authoritarianism. By collapsing communication, financial transactions, identity, and media consumption into one state-controlled platform, the government would acquire unprecedented visibility into, and control over, the digital lives of its citizens.

RuStore

RuStore, launched in 2022 under VK Group with backing from the Ministry of Digital Development, is Russia's state-supported mobile application marketplace.[84] It was created in direct response to the exclusion of Russian developers from Google Play and the App Store following Western sanctions after the full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Intended as a pillar of Russia's "sovereign Internet" strategy, RuStore functions not only as a technical replacement but also as a regulatory instrument for governing the mobile ecosystem.[85]

By 2025, RuStore is pre-installed by default on all Android devices sold in Russia under government mandate.[86] Both domestic manufacturers and foreign vendors operating in the Russian market are legally required to include it. This policy reflects a broader effort to reroute user behavior through domestic channels, insulating mobile users from international app markets.

As of late 2024, RuStore reported more than 50 million users[87], though adoption has been driven largely by regulatory compulsion rather than consumer demand. Its market penetration depends heavily on hardware-level defaults, exclusivity agreements for public-sector services, and financial incentives to Russian developers, particularly in education, healthcare, and media.

[84] Evgeniy Fedunenkov. (2022). Запущен российский магазин приложений RuStore (Russian app store RuStore launched). 25 May 2022. Kommersant. <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/5368106>.

[85] Roskomsvoboda. (2023). Предустановка RuStore на все продаваемые в России устройства стала обязательной (Pre-installation of RuStore on all devices sold in Russia has become mandatory). 29 August 2023. <https://roskomsvoboda.org/en/post/rustore-obязalovka/>.

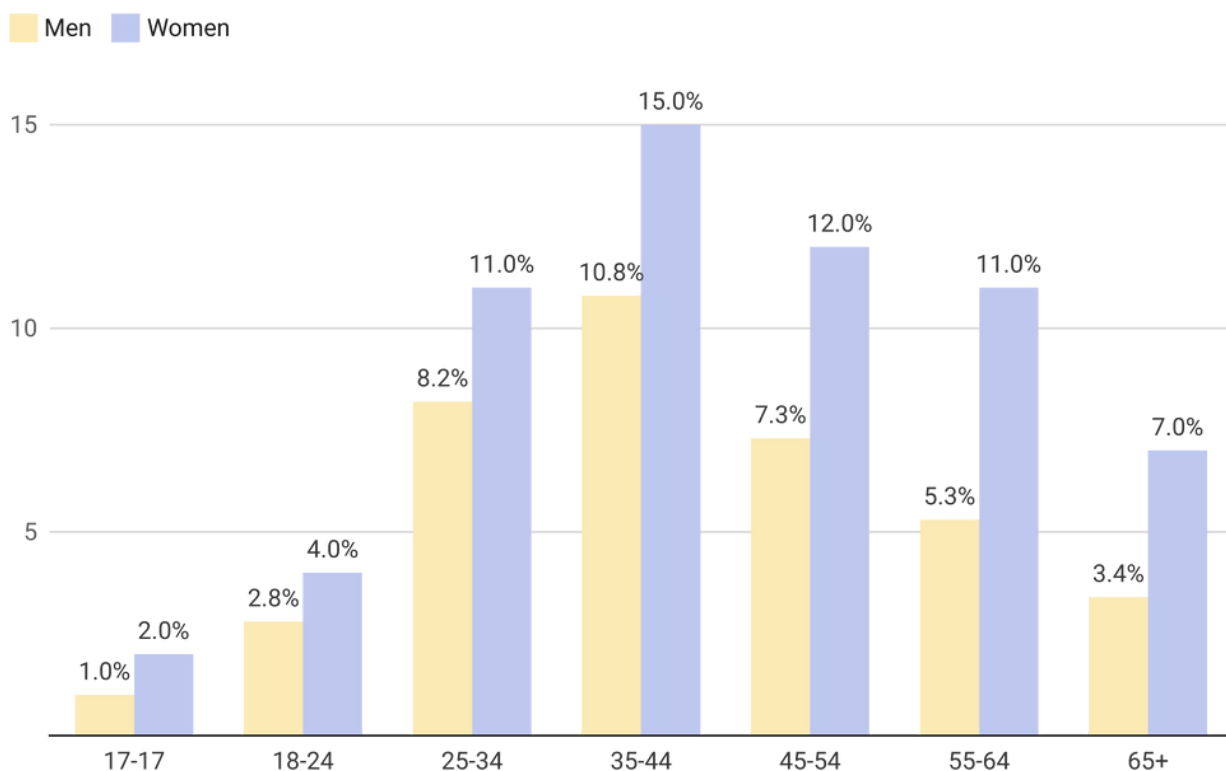
[86] Kseniya Kindeeva. (2025). Госдума приняла закон об обязательной установке RuStore на новые смартфоны (The State Duma has adopted a law on mandatory installation of RuStore on new smartphones). 24 June 2025. Fontanka.ru. <https://www.fontanka.ru/2025/06/24/75630182/>.

[87] App2Top. (2025). Mediascope: By the end of 2024, RuStore surpassed most stores in terms of the size of its monthly active audience in Russia. 21 January 2025. <https://app2top.com/news/mediascope-by-the-end-of-2024-rustore-surpassed-most-stores-in-terms-of-the-size-of-its-monthly-active-audience-in-russia-276686.html>.

Owned by VK Group, Odnoklassniki (OK) remains one of Russia's major social media platforms, particularly popular among users aged 40 and older as well as residents of rural and small urban areas. Unlike VKontakte, which primarily attracts younger, urban audiences, Odnoklassniki serves as a social connector for demographics less active on alternative platforms, offering photo sharing, messaging, and community engagement features that sustain high levels of user activity.

The platform holds strategic importance in the state's efforts to maintain influence outside metropolitan centers: around 40% of users live in towns with fewer than 100,000 residents^[88]—and the service also retains a following among Russian-speaking communities abroad.^[89] Odnoklassniki has become a key channel for disseminating patriotic messaging, cultural programming, and pro-government narratives, often integrated into broader campaigns of public education, electoral mobilization, and municipal communication.

OK users by gender and age groups (%)



Source: OK • Created with Datawrapper

Given its user base, characterized by lower digital literacy and less frequent access to independent or opposition media, Odnoklassniki has become a critical instrument in the Kremlin's regional information strategy. Its distinctive demographic and geographic footprint makes it indispensable within Russia's information ecosystem, functioning simultaneously as a space for social interaction and as a vehicle of state influence and monitoring.

[88] Pavel Ivanov. (2022). Оdnoklassniki: неочевидная соцсеть, продвижение в которой стоит попробовать (Odnoklassniki: An Unobvious Social Network That's Worth Trying to Promote). 26 April 2022. [blog.click.ru. https://blog.click.ru/target/odnoklassniki/](https://blog.click.ru/target/odnoklassniki/).

[89] Oazu Nantoi, Alexandru Platon, Aliona Cristei. (2018). Russian propaganda on "Odnoklassniki." The case of Republic of Moldova. Chişinău: Institute for Public Policy; ISANS. (2022).

«Оdnoklassniki»: топ-20 токсичных пабликов Беларуси растворились в «русском мире» (Odnoklassniki: Top 20 toxic public pages in Belarus have dissolved into the "Russian world"). 29 September 2022. <https://isans.org/ru/social-networks/odnoklassniki-top-20-toksichnyh-pablikov-belarusi-rastvorilis-v-russkom-mire.html>.

III. Tech and Government: The “Sovereign” Internet and the Architecture of Control

Russia’s trajectory from digital liberalization to systemic control over its Internet infrastructure and platforms has unfolded gradually but decisively over the past two decades. What began in the 2000s as a period of enthusiastic state support for domestic innovation has evolved into a centralized and coercive model of digital governance. This transformation reflects the broader logic of authoritarian adaptation: co-opt technological progress early, neutralize threats through law and infrastructure, and ultimately assert comprehensive control under the banner of national sovereignty.

The first signs of state intervention in the digital sphere emerged in the late 2000s. Amid the rise of Russian tech giants such as Yandex, Mail.ru, and VKontakte, the Kremlin came to view online platforms not only as engines of modernization but also as potential sources of political instability. In 2008, the Internet was formally added to Russia’s list of “strategic industries,” alongside television and radio.[90] That same year, officials began pressing Yandex to modify its editorial practices, especially the content featured on its influential homepage and news aggregator.[91] One former Yandex.News manager recalled that the presidential administration could call at any hour with demands to adjust headlines, treating the aggregator as a media outlet rather than a neutral tool.[92] Though informal, these early interventions signaled a turning point: the recognition that controlling the digital information flow was becoming a key lever of political power.

By the early 2010s, the concept of “digital sovereignty” had entered official discourse. Policymakers sought to ensure that core Internet infrastructure, hosting, DNS, routing, remained on Russian soil and subject to national jurisdiction.[93] The 2011–2012 mass protests, organized and amplified through social media, catalyzed the first major legislative crackdown.[94]

[90] Stoletie. (2008). Кремль монополизирует интернет (The Kremlin is monopolizing the Internet). 5 March 2008. https://www.stoletie.ru/lenta/kreml_monopoliziruet_internet.htm.

[91] Svetlana Reiter. Мы замучились бороться..., cit.

[92] Olga Chumakova, Mikhail Rubin, Roman Badanin. (2020). Разговорчики в строю. Рассказ о том, как Кремль делал «Яндекс» послушным (Chatting in the Line: A Story of How the Kremlin Made Yandex Obedient). 26 February 2020. Proekt.Media. <https://www.proekt.media/narrative/yandex-i-kreml/>.

[93] Mitya Lebedev. (2017). На сетевой передовой: цифровой суверенитет а la russe (On the Network Frontline: Digital Sovereignty a la Russe). 25 December 2017. OpenDemocracy. <https://www.opendemocracy.net/ru/zifrovoy-suverenitet/>.

[94] Ilya Klishin. (2016). Кремль против интернета: подготовка к прошлой войне (The Kremlin vs. the Internet: Preparing for the Last War). 21 April 2016. Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. <https://carnegie.ru/commentary/2016/04/21/ru-63383/ixdw>.

A 2012 law authorized extrajudicial blacklisting of websites accused of promoting extremism, suicide, or drug use. While framed as a public safety measure, the law provided the scaffolding for expansive and opaque censorship.[95] In 2014, a new “blogger law” required anyone with more than 3,000 daily readers to register with Roskomnadzor, effectively transforming popular independent voices into regulated media entities.[96] These measures laid the groundwork for what would become a full-fledged strategy of digital authoritarianism.

The annexation of Crimea in 2014 and rising tensions with the West marked an escalation. That year, Russia enacted data-localization laws requiring foreign companies to store Russian user data domestically.[97] The rationale was national security; the practical consequence was accessibility, as law enforcement and intelligence agencies could now physically seize or compel access to stored data.[98] Google and Apple ultimately complied, while companies like Meta and Twitter resisted and faced throttling and fines.[99] LinkedIn became the first major casualty[100], blocked in 2016 for non-compliance. At the same time, domestic firms came under intensifying pressure: the forced ouster of VK founder Pavel Durov and the transfer of control to Kremlin-aligned entities[101] sent a clear signal that platform independence would not be tolerated.

By 2016, surveillance capacities expanded dramatically with the passage of the so-called Yarovaya laws. These required telecom providers to store metadata for three years and content for six months, while granting the FSB access to encryption keys on demand.[102] While technically infeasible for full compliance, the legislation worked as a powerful tool of intimidation and selective enforcement.

[95] Sergey Romashenko. (2012). В РФ вступил в силу закон о “черном списке” сайтов (Law on “blacklist” of websites comes into force in Russia). 30 July 2012. DW. <https://tinyurl.com/9frhw6nf>

[96] Sergey Berets. (2014). Чем компенсируют строгость закона о блогерах в России (How do they compensate for the strictness of the law on bloggers in Russia?). 1 August 2014. BBC News Russian. https://www.bbc.com/russian/russia/2014/08/140731_russia_bloggers_law.

[97] Sergey Satanovskiy. (2021). Почему IT-гиганты не хотят хранить данные россиян в России (Why IT giants don't want to store Russians' data in Russia). 2 July 2021. DW. <https://www.dw.com/ru/pochemu-it-giganty-ne-hotjat-hranit-dannye-rossijan-v-rossii/a-58137834>.

[98] Mariya Epifanova, Darya Khachatryan. (2014). Порвать Сеть и приручить. Чиновники и депутаты пытаются превратить интернет из территории свободы в послушный им инструмент (Tear the Network and Tame It. Officials and MPs are trying to turn the Internet from a territory of freedom into an obedient tool). 13 December 2014. Novaya Gazeta. <https://novayagazeta.ru/articles/2014/12/13/62345-porvat-set-i-priruchit>.

[99] Kirill Martynov. (2015). Facebook на крючке (Facebook on the hook). 27 August 2015. Novaya Gazeta.

<https://novayagazeta.ru/articles/2015/08/27/65385-facebook-na-kryuchke/>; Aleksandr Pyatin. (2020). Facebook заплатил 4 млн рублей за отказ перенести серверы в Россию (Facebook paid 4 million rubles for refusing to move servers to Russia). 26 November 2020. Forbes Russia. <https://www.forbes.ru/newsroom/biznes/414733-facebook-zaplatil-4-mln-rublej-za-otkaz-perenesti-servery-v-rossiyu>; Novaya Gazeta. (2019). Роскомнадзор составил протокол в отношении Twitter и Facebook за неисполнение закона о хранении данных россиян (Roskomnadzor has drawn up a protocol against Twitter and Facebook for failure to comply with the law on storing Russian citizens' data). 21 January 2019. <https://novayagazeta.ru/articles/2019/01/21/148517-roskomnadzor-vozbudil-administrativnye-dela-protiv-twitter-i-facebook-za-neispolnenie-zakona-o-hranenii-dannyh-rossiyan>.

[100] Novaya Gazeta. (2016). Роскомнадзор внес соцсеть LinkedIn в реестр нарушителей закона о персональных данных (Roskomnadzor Adds LinkedIn to Register of Violators of Personal Data Law). 17 November 2016.

<https://novayagazeta.ru/articles/2016/11/17/126661-roskomnadzor-vnes-sotsset-linkedin-v-reestr-narushiteley-zakona-o-personalnyh-dannyh>.

[101] Deyzi Sindelar. (2014). Кремль наступает на интернет, активисты приспосабливаются (Kremlin Cracks Down on Internet, Activists Adapt). 28 April 2014. Krym.Realii. <https://ru.krymr.com/a/25364886.html>.

[102] Meduza. (2016). «Пакет Яровой» принят. И это очень плохо (“Yarovaya Law” has been adopted. And this is very bad). 24 June 2016. <https://meduza.io/feature/2016/06/24/paket-yarovoy-prinyat-i-eto-ochen-ploho>.

Telegram's refusal to provide encryption keys^[103] led to an attempted ban in 2018. ^[104] The effort failed, as Telegram's decentralized architecture and widespread use of proxy technologies rendered the blockade ineffective.^[105] Public mobilization in defense of the platform further embarrassed the state, which quietly lifted the ban in 2020.^[106]

The turning point came in 2019 with the adoption of the Sovereign Internet Law. It mandated the creation of a national Domain Name System (DNS) and required Internet service providers to install Deep Packet Inspection (DPI) equipment. This gave Roskomnadzor the capacity to monitor, filter, and reroute traffic in real time and to seize centralized control during vaguely defined "threats to national security."^[107] By 2025, independent watchdogs reported widespread DPI penetration across federal and regional networks, enabling granular state oversight of online communications. ^[108]

Parallel to infrastructure control, the state dismantled digital anonymity. Between 2018 and 2025, successive measures required SIM card registration tied to passports^[109], mandatory identification for public Wi-Fi^[110], and proposals for biometric identification of online gamers.^[111] Biometric data has been increasingly integrated into the Unified Biometric System and linked with apps for banking, healthcare, and communication, particularly state-backed platforms like Max.^[112]

Pressure on foreign platforms also intensified. Twitter resisted data localization and refused thousands of takedown requests, many of which involved politically sensitive accounts. Officially justified as efforts to combat child pornography, suicide content, and drug references, these demands also targeted opposition outlets such as MBK Media and Open Russia.^[113] After years of throttling^[114], Twitter was banned outright in 2022, ostensibly for war-related content.^[115]

[103] Ekaterina Venkina. (2018). Дуров отказался передавать ФСБ ключи шифрования Telegram (Durov refused to hand over Telegram encryption keys to the FSB). 20 March 2018. DW. <https://tinyurl.com/4kwzty3m>.

[104] Meduza. (2018). В России начали блокировать Telegram (Telegram has begun to be blocked in Russia). 16 April 2018. <https://meduza.io/news/2018/04/16/v-rossii-nachali-blokirovat-telegram>.

[105] Vladislav Novyy. (2018). Telegram без адреса. Почему Роскомнадзор не может заблокировать мессенджер (Telegram without an address. Why Roskomnadzor can't block the messenger). 18 May 2018. <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/3630983?ysclid=mdvojyou5b745065477>.

[106] Svetlana Povoraznyuk, Kseniya Krivotulova. (2020). В России разблокировали Telegram. Роскомнадзор два года боролся с мессенджером, но миллионы россиян все равно им пользовались (Telegram unblocked in Russia. Roskomnadzor fought the messenger for two years, but millions of Russians still used it). 18 June 2020. Lenta.ru. https://lenta.ru/brief/2020/06/18/telegram_unlock/.

[107] Meduza. (2019). Законопроект об изоляции российского сегмента интернета представили в окончательной редакции. Вот как это будет работать (The bill on isolating the Russian segment of the Internet has been presented in its final version. Here's how it will work). 11 April 2019. <https://meduza.io/feature/2019/04/11/zakonoproekt-ob-izolyatsii-rossiyskogo-segmenta-interneta-predstavili-v-okonchatelnoy-redaktsii-vot-kak-eto-budet-rabotat>.

[108] Diwen Xue, Benjamin Mixon-Baca, ValdikSS, Anna Ablove, Beau Kujath, Jedidiah R. Crandall, Roya Ensafi. (2022). TSPU: Russia's Decentralized Censorship System. 2 November 2022. Censored Planet. <https://censoredplanet.org/tspu/>; Elizaveta Yachmeneva, Maria Xynou, Mehul Gulati, Arturo Filastò. (2024). Censorship Chronicles: The systematic suppression of independent media in Russia. 9 December 2024. OONI. <https://ooni.org/post/2024-russia-report/>.

[109] RosBusinessConsulting. (2024). Россиян при покупке сим-карт обяжут подтверждать личность (Russians will be required to verify their identity when purchasing SIM cards). 13 September 2024. <https://www.rbc.ru/society/13/09/2024/66e482e19a794785ee2c8266>.

[110] RosBusinessConsulting. (2014). Доступ к Wi-Fi в публичных местах потребует ввода личных данных (Access to Wi-Fi in public places will require entering personal data). 8 August 2014. <https://www.rbc.ru/society/08/08/2014/570420669a794760d3d40937>.

[111] Roskomsvoboda. (2024). Геймеров в России обяжут проходить идентификацию через «Госуслуги» и биометрию (Gamers in Russia will be required to undergo identification via "Gosuslugi" and biometrics). 12 December 2024. <https://roskomsvoboda.org/en/post/gamers-mandatory-identification-gosuslugi-biometrics-russia/>.

[112] Pyotr Rushaylo. (2025). Биометрические технологии расширяют ареал обитания (Biometric technologies expand habitat). 27 May 2025. Vedomosti. <https://www.vedomosti.ru/technologies/trendsru/articles/2025/05/27/1112220-rasshirayut-areal-obitaniya>.

[113] Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty. (2021). Роскомнадзор потребовал от Twitter удалить аккаунт "МБХ медиа" (Roskomnadzor demands Twitter to delete MBK Media account). 17 March 2021. <https://www.svoboda.org/a/31155077.html>.

[114] RosBusinessConsulting. (2021). Роскомнадзор начал замедлять скорость работы Twitter в России (Roskomnadzor has begun to slow down Twitter in Russia). 10 March 2021. https://www.rbc.ru/technology_and_media/10/03/2021/604870309a794715b5a93cd5.

[115] Rinat Tairov. (2022). В России вслед за Facebook заблокировали Twitter (Russia Blocks Twitter Following Facebook). 4 March 2022. Forbes Russia. <https://www.forbes.ru/tehnologii/458149-v-rossii-vsled-za-facebook-zablokirovali-twitter>.

Alongside repression of foreign platforms, the state actively promoted domestic alternatives. Certain services, including Yandex, VK, state media, and e-government portals, were made accessible without mobile credit, ensuring privileged reach.[116] From 2020, Roskomnadzor began experimenting with artificial intelligence to police online content.[117] The MIR and Oculus systems were deployed to scan text and images; by 2023, officials claimed they could detect “illegal” material within three hours at 80% accuracy. In 2024, plans emerged to integrate AI into the official registry of blocked sites.[118]

The campaign against VPNs also intensified. From 2021, Roskomnadzor deployed DPI-based fingerprinting[119] to identify and block non-compliant VPNs. Popular providers such as ProtonVPN and Outline became inaccessible without complex workarounds.[120] After the invasion of Ukraine, VPN suppression became a strategic priority, with officials in 2024 announcing plans to target heavy VPN users individually in order to train systems to better detect and block encrypted traffic.[121]

The full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 marked a new phase of digital repression. Sweeping laws criminalized “fake news” (Article 207.3) and “discrediting the army” (Article 280.3), punishable by fines or prison sentences of up to 15 years. These provisions were applied indiscriminately—to ordinary users, journalists, bloggers, and even forum commentators. Existing statutes on “rehabilitating Nazism,” “extremism,” and “calls for sanctions” were also weaponized against online dissent.[122]

In the spring of 2022, an unprecedented wave of blocking began. In a short time, the following platforms were completely or partially restricted: Meta and its services—recognized as “extremist organizations”[123]; Google News, TikTok, Spotify, Euronews—blocked or forced to leave the market[124]; and many independent media outlets (Meduza, Dozhd, Current Time, BBC, Deutsche Welle, etc.)—inaccessible without a VPN.[125] At the same time, Roskomnadzor has continued to actively use DPI to filter traffic and block unwanted services. The authorities not only prohibit access to sites but also carry out targeted interventions, slowing down or deanonymizing users.[126]

[116] Igor Korolyov. (2020). Россиянам дадут бесплатный доступ к 400 сайтам. Список (Russians will be given free access to 400 sites. List). 7 April 2020. CNews. https://www.cnews.ru/news/top/2020-04-07_rossiyanam_dadut_besplatnyj.

[117] Roskomsvoboda. (2020). Роскомнадзор использует ИИ для поиска в Сети незаконного контента (Roskomnadzor uses AI to search the Internet for illegal content). 30 December 2020. <https://roskomsvoboda.org/en/68088/>.

[118] Yuriy Litvinenko. (2024). По интернету пройдут с нейросетью. Роскомнадзор использует ИИ для блокировок сайтов (The Internet will be crawled with a neural network. Roskomnadzor uses AI to block websites). 10 April 2024. Kommersant. <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/6635402>.

[119] David Frenkel, Aleksandr Borodikhin. (2021). «Интернет в России будет все хуже, хуже и хуже». Чем война Роскомнадзора с VPN грозит россиянам (“The Internet in Russia Will Become Worse, Worse, and Worse.” How Roskomnadzor’s War with VPNs Threatens Russians). 13 September 2021. Mediazona. <https://zona.media/article/2021/09/13/rknvsvpn>.

[120] Roskomsvoboda. (2024). Блокировке подверглись сайты Lantern, Proton VPN, Outline и Red Shield VPN (Lantern, Proton VPN, Outline and Red Shield VPN sites were blocked). 2 May 2024. <https://roskomsvoboda.org/ru/post/blokirovka-izvestnyh-vpn/>.

[121] Meduza. (2024). Роскомнадзор будет собирать данные об оборудовании интернет-пользователей для борьбы с VPN (Roskomnadzor to collect data on internet users’ equipment to combat VPN). 21 December 2024. <https://meduza.io/cards/roskomnadzor-budet-sobirat-dannye-ob-oborudovanii-internet-polzovateley-dlya-borby-s-vpn>.

[122] Leonardo Ingannamorte. Media regulation..., cit.

[123] BBC News Russian. (2022). Россия признала экстремистской деятельность компании Meta и принадлежащих ей соцсетей Facebook и Instagram (Russia has recognized the activities of Meta and its affiliates Facebook and Instagram as extremist). 21 March 2022. <https://www.bbc.com/russian/news-60821583>.

[124] Yuliya Kotova, Irina Yuzbekova. (2022). Роскомнадзор заблокировал сервис News.Google в России (Roskomnadzor Blocks News.Google Service in Russia). 23 March 2022. Forbes Russia. <https://www.forbes.ru/tekhnologii/460097-roskomnadzor-zablokiroval-servis-news-google-v-rossii>; Interfax. (2022). В России заблокировали сайт Euronews (Euronews website blocked in Russia). 21 March 2022. <https://www.interfax.ru/russia/830473>; TheCity. (2022). TikTok, Netflix и Spotify ограничили свою работу в России (TikTok, Netflix and Spotify have restricted their work in Russia). 7 March 2022. <https://thecity.m24.ru/news/4379>.

[125] Leonardo Ingannamorte. Media regulation..., cit.

[126] Verstka.Media. (2024). Самый чёрный год в истории российского интернета: главные результаты цифровой цензуры и сопротивления (The Blackest Year in the History of the Russian Internet: The Main Results of Digital Censorship and Resistance). 24 December 2024. <https://verstka.media/kak-rossiyskiye-vlastsh-borolis-protiv-interneta>.

Since the start of the war in 2022, Russia has faced rapidly growing technological isolation. Western sanctions have dealt a serious blow to the infrastructure of the Russian Internet: supplies of telecommunications equipment have ceased, the largest cloud providers have withdrawn, and updates and licenses for critical software solutions, including cybersecurity systems, have been restricted.[127] Products from companies such as Cisco, Juniper, and Ericsson, as well as the previously more neutral Huawei, have become difficult or impossible to access.[128] Against this backdrop, the authorities have sought to accelerate import substitution. Domestic processors such as Elbrus and Baikal[129] have been actively promoted, while state cloud infrastructures have been developed in parallel. In many government and educational institutions, foreign software has been replaced by Russian operating systems, email clients, and office suites.[130] Yet despite ambitious statements, neither domestic developments nor parallel imports have been able to offset the scale of the technological gap. The quality of solutions remains unstable, and dependence on inaccessible foreign technologies is palpable, even acknowledged by officials.[131] This, in turn, has only reinforced the authorities' drive for technological autonomy and isolation.

In parallel with the deterioration of the technical base, cases of Internet shutdowns have become more frequent in 2025.[132] According to the "Na Svyazi" project, more than 2,000 internet access disruptions were recorded in July 2025, which, according to another project by the Internet Protection Society, resulted in losses exceeding 25 billion rubles (over 300 million US dollars).[133] The authorities increasingly resort to such measures under the pretext of drone attacks and the need to maintain security. This explanation is dubious, since there are cases where the Internet was disabled without any attack.[134] Shutdowns are especially frequent in the national republics and border regions, including Dagestan, Yakutia, and the Belgorod and Kursk regions. According to digital rights activists, such restrictions are introduced both by administrative decision and with the assistance of telecom operators, often without explanation.[135]

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- [127] Skillbox. (2022). Российским компаниям не хватает серверов: как это повлияет на разработчиков (Russian companies lack servers: how will this affect developers). 16 May 2022. <https://skillbox.ru/media/code/rossijskim-kompaniyam-ne-khvataet-serverov-kak-eto-povliyaet-na-razrabotchikov/>; Katerina Terekhova, Aleksey Dertev. (2022). Запрет на развитие: как российские технологии выживут без полупроводников (Development Ban: How Russian Technologies Will Survive Without Semiconductors). 4 March 2022. Forbes Russia. <https://www.forbes.ru/tehnologii/457563-zapret-na-razvitie-kak-rossijskie-tehnologii-vyzivut-bez-poluprovodnikov>; Darya Fomenko. (2024). Санкции скрывают облака. Как будут работать новые ограничения в сфере ПО (Sanctions Hide Clouds: How New Software Restrictions Will Work). 13 June 2024. Kommersant. <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/6762929>; Roman Rozhkov. (2024). Кольцо сжимается: чем грозит IT-отрасли новые санкции США (The Ring is Tightening: What New US Sanctions Threaten the IT Industry). 13 June 2024. <https://www.forbes.ru/tehnologii/514646-kol-co-szimaetsa-cem-grozat-it-otrasli-novye-sankcii-ssa>.
- [128] Olga Lebedeva. (2023). Запрещенную продукцию поставляют в РФ через Марокко и Турцию (Banned products are supplied to Russia via Morocco and Turkey). 19 December 2023. DW. <https://www.dw.com/ru/nyt-podsankcionnoe-oborudovanie-postavlyaut-v-rf-cerez-porty-marokko-i-turcii/a-67770868>.
- [129] Sergey Mingazov. (2022). Разработчиков «Эльбрусов» и «Байкалов» предложили сделать системообразующими (The developers of Elbrus and Baikals were proposed to be made systemically important). 21 March 2022. Forbes Russia. <https://www.forbes.ru/tehnologii/459639-razrabotchikov-el-brusov-i-bajkalov-predlozili-sdelat-sistemoobrazuusi>.
- [130] RosBusinessConsulting. (2024). Как госкомпании и ведомства переходят на отечественный софт (How state companies and departments are switching to domestic software). 29 October 2024. <https://companies.rbc.ru/news/tzfgPNWfGL/kak-goskompanii-i-vedomstva-perehodyat-na-otechestvennyj-soft/?ysclid=mdvralc8us450423350>; RosBusinessConsulting. (2023). Как вузы переходят на отечественное ПО (How Universities Are Switching to Domestic Software). 18 October 2023. <https://www.rbc.ru/industries/news/651fc16d9a79476386445666?ysclid=mdvr9ah9vj923083219>.
- [131] Zoom CNews. (2024). Власти: Российское ПО дороже иностранного, а его качество хуже (Authorities: Russian software is more expensive than foreign software, and its quality is worse). 19 September 2024. https://zoom.cnews.ru/soft/news/top/2024-09-19_rossijskie_vlasti_otechestvennoe.
- [132] Aleksey Strelnikov. (2025). Жизнь при шатдауне: в РФ стали отключать мобильный интернет (Life During Shutdown: Mobile Internet Shutdowns in Russia). 28 May 2025. DW. <https://www.dw.com/ru/zizn-pri-satdaune-v-rossii-vse-case-otklucat-mobilnyj-internet/a-72690364>.
- [133] Na Svyazi. (2025). 2099 шатдаунов: июль в Рунете (2099 shutdowns: July in RuNet). 31 July 2024. Telegram. https://t.me/na_svyazi_helpdesk/691.
- [134] Meduza. (2025). В России в июле более двух тысяч раз отключали мобильный интернет. Такого еще не было никогда (In Russia, mobile internet was disconnected more than two thousand times in July. This has never happened before). 1 August 2025. <https://meduza.io/news/2025/08/01/na-svyazi-v-iyule-v-rossii-bolee-dvuh-tysyach-raz-otklyuchali-mobilnyj-internet-eto-rekord>.
- [135] Roskomsvoboda. (2025). Россия входит в эпоху региональных мобильных ограничений (Russia enters era of regional mobile restrictions). 19 June 2025. <https://roskomsvoboda.org/ru/post/russia-enters-mobile-restriction-era/>.

Internet (RuNet) shutdowns in Russia in 2025

January	5
February	2
March	1
April	2
May	69
June	662
July	2,099
August	2,129

Source: Na Svyazi • Created with Datawrapper

In August 2025, media reports revealed that the relevant ministry, in cooperation with telecommunications companies, had agreed upon a “technical framework” whereby access to a number of digital services would be maintained during Internet outages. [136] These services include government websites and electronic public services, online marketplaces, delivery platforms, taxi services, and others. This development—coupled with the growing frequency of disruptions—may indicate a further refinement of the “sovereign Runet” architecture. Even with occasional disconnections from the global network, Russian citizens would retain access to familiar domestic services, with connectivity issues becoming apparent only when attempting to use global platforms. Given the high degree of digitalization in Russian society, a complete shutdown of the network can, and often does [137], lead to significant consequences, ranging from everyday inconveniences to the inoperability of banking and payment systems. The proposed “technical framework” hypothetically mitigates many of these effects by transforming what is now a disruptive Internet shutdown into a relatively seamless isolation of the Russian segment—functionally preserving societal operations while nonetheless carrying substantial political implications.

[136] Meduza. (2025). В России появится «белый список» сервисов, к которым будет доступ во время отключений интернета. В него войдут «ресурсы, нужные для жизни» Russia to Launch 'White List' of Services Accessible During Internet Outages. It Will Include 'Resources Necessary for Life'. 7 August 2025. <https://meduza.io/news/2025/08/07/v-rossii-poyavitsya-belyy-spisok-servisov-k-kotorym-budet-dostup-vo-vremya-otklyucheniy-interneta-v-nego-vojdut-resursy-nuzhnye-dlya-zhizni>.
[137] Roman Rozhkov. (2025). Шатдаун, плиз: как бизнес и жители России переживают отключения мобильного интернета (Shutdown, please: how Russian businesses and residents are coping with mobile internet shutdowns). 31 July 2025. Forbes Russia. <https://www.forbes.ru/tekhnologii/542902-satdaun-pliz-kak-biznes-i-ziteli-rossii-perezivaut-otklucenia-mobil-nogo-interneta>.

List of online resources that will remain accessible in case of Internet outages:[138]

- government websites and e-government services, portals for electronic remote voting and elections
- Yandex ecosystem services, including Kinopoisk
- Mail.ru ecosystem services, including the Zen portal
- Ozon and Wildberries marketplaces
- banking services and the National Payment Card System (NSPK)
- VK and Odnoklassniki social networks
- web-services of the largest mobile operators
- Avito private sales and services platform
- Rutube video hosting
- Magnit supermarket website

On September 1, 2025, one of the darkest days for internet freedom in Russia unfolded as a new law came into force criminalizing the very act of “searching for extremist materials” online. In clear contradiction to Article 29 of the Russian Constitution[139], this legislation marked a step toward the “criminalization of reading”: not only participation in the creation, distribution, or financial support of independent media or their materials deemed extremist in Russia, but even intentionally seeking out such information became illegal.[140] On the same day, additional laws took effect, making the use of VPN services an aggravating factor in crimes[141], including “spreading fake news” about the Russian army or “discrediting” it, while advertising VPNs that do not comply with Roskomnadzor’s requirements was banned altogether.[142] Furthermore, new restrictions prohibited placing ads on internet platforms associated with organizations labeled as “undesirable,” “extremist,” or “terrorist,”[143] many of which are in fact independent media outlets targeted for contradicting official narratives. [144]

Since 2022, the Russian Internet has increasingly lost the features of a global, open infrastructure and has been transformed into an instrument of total surveillance and digital subordination. The accelerated militarization of digital policy, the growth of censorship, technological isolation, and the suppression of anonymity have created a landscape in which the state seeks not only to filter information but also to restrict citizens’ digital behavior to the utmost. Under these conditions, even the basic mechanisms of free expression, privacy, and access to information are at risk of disappearing.

[138] RosBusinessConsulting. (2025). Появился список сайтов, которые будут работать при отключении интернета (A list of sites that will work when the Internet is disconnected has appeared). 5 September 2025.

https://www.rbc.ru/technology_and_media/05/09/2025/68bab3579a79472a69e13def.

[139] Constitution of the Russian Federation art. 29, § 4.

[140] Code of the Russian Federation on Administrative Offences art. 13.53.

[141] Criminal Code of the Russian Federation art. 63.

[142] On Advertising art. 5, § 5, Federal Law No. 38-FZ (2006).

[143] On Advertising art. 5, § 5, Federal Law No. 38-FZ (2006).

[144] Leonardo Ingannamorte. Media regulation..., cit.

IV. Tech and Media: Choosing a Platform is Choosing a Side

Since 2022, the distribution of Russian media across digital platforms has followed a clear logic of political alignment. VK has become the principal venue for pro-government outlets such as RIA Novosti, TASS, RT, Channel One, and VGTRK. While entertainment media like STS and TNT dominate in terms of subscriber numbers, major state-aligned players still command large audiences: RIA Novosti has more than 3 million subscribers, Channel One over 2 million, and both Rossiya 1 and RT more than 1.5 million each.

Independent media also maintain a presence, but their reach is far smaller: Meduza has fewer than 500,000 subscribers, while Novaya Gazeta's following is closer to 100,000. The predominance of state-aligned actors on VK reflects several factors—domestic ownership, strict compliance with federal content regulations, and integration into state-led digital governance initiatives. Unlike independent platforms, VK does not host significant opposition or critical media, owing to its extensive use of post removals and account bans, particularly since the outbreak of the full-scale war in Ukraine.^[145]

Number of subscribers to media communities in VK (as of August 3, 2025)

TNT	6,586,424
STS	3,645,384
RIA News	3,320,536
Life.ru	2,672,863
Channel One	2,347,123
Russia 1	1,571,899
RT News	1,542,329
Ren TV	1,374,481
Kp.ru	1,257,791
Tsargrad	1,079,293
TASS	1,069,928
RBC	1,000,149
Forbes Russia	981,962
Lenta.ru	892,464
NTV	747,310
Vedomosti	601,641
Kommersant	551,111
Meduza	486,279
Solovyov Live	458,614
Rossiyskaya Gazeta	457,481
Novaya Gazeta	131,216
The Insider	25,000

Source: VK • Created with Datawrapper

[145] Roskomsvoboda. Слепое пятно..., cit.; Roskomsvoboda. (2022). «Эхо Москвы» и «Дождь»: первая ночь под блокировкой (Ekho Moskyv and Dozhd: First Night Under Blockade). 2 March 2022. <https://roskomsvoboda.org/en/post/echo-i-tvrain-banyat/>.

By contrast, YouTube remains the dominant platform for independent Russian media, including TV Rain, BBC News Russian, and DW Russian. This is not accidental: YouTube's U.S. jurisdiction, decentralized hosting, and relative resistance to Russian takedown demands have made it the only large-scale platform where investigative reporting, war documentation, and anti-Kremlin analysis remain consistently accessible.

The pressure on YouTube, however, is far from theoretical. It has included de facto attempts to block access^[146], criminal cases against journalists publishing on the platform^[147], and the legal designation of media outlets as "foreign agents," which restricts their ability to operate inside the country.^[148] While YouTube has blocked certain state-backed channels such as RT and Sputnik, these measures were largely responses to the dissemination of violent propaganda and wartime disinformation.^[149] Russian officials and state journalists, in turn, have repeatedly framed such actions as evidence of Western "censorship."^[150]

[146] BBC News Russian. (2024). «YouTube де-факто заблокирован в РФ». Трафик видеохостинга снизился до 20% ("YouTube is de facto blocked in Russia." Video hosting traffic has dropped to 20%). 20 December 2024. <https://www.bbc.com/russian/articles/c30nvn6ngepo>.

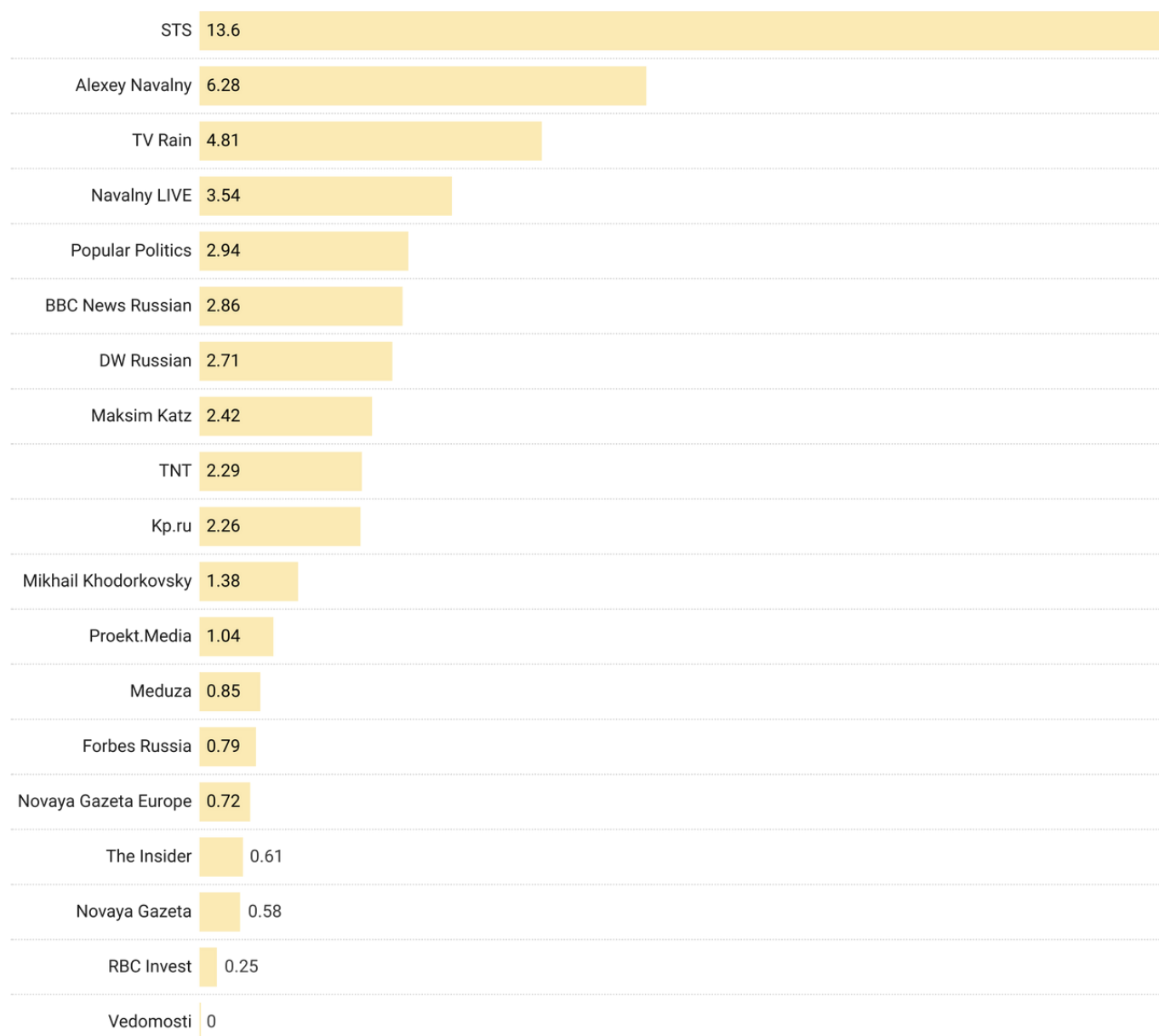
[147] Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty. (2025). В Екатеринбурге арестовали журналиста и блогера за ролики на Youtube (Journalist and blogger arrested in Yekaterinburg for YouTube videos). 7 February 2025. <https://www.svoboda.org/a/v-ekaterinburge-arestovali-zhurnalista-i-blogera-za-roliki-na-youtube/33307200.html>; Zhan Rofo. (2025). Против журналистки Татьяны Фельгенгауэр возбудили новое дело (New case opened against journalist Tatyana Felgenhauer). 14 May 2025. DW. <https://www.dw.com/ru/protiv-zurnalistki-tatany-felgengauer-vozbudili-novoe-ugolovnoe-delo/a-72539227>.

[148] Leonardo Ingannamorte. Media regulation..., cit.

[149] Ivan Boyko. (2022). YouTube заблокировал каналы российских СМИ по всему миру (YouTube Blocks Russian Media Channels Around the World). 11 March 2022. UNIAN. <https://www.unian.net/world/youtube-blokiruet-kanaly-rossiyskih-smi-po-vsemu-miru-novosti-mira-11740258.html>.

[150] TASS. (2024). YouTube заблокировал более 200 каналов российских СМИ и деятелей с 2020 года (YouTube has blocked over 200 Russian media channels and figures since 2020). 10 July 2024. <https://tass.ru/obschestvo/21327629>.

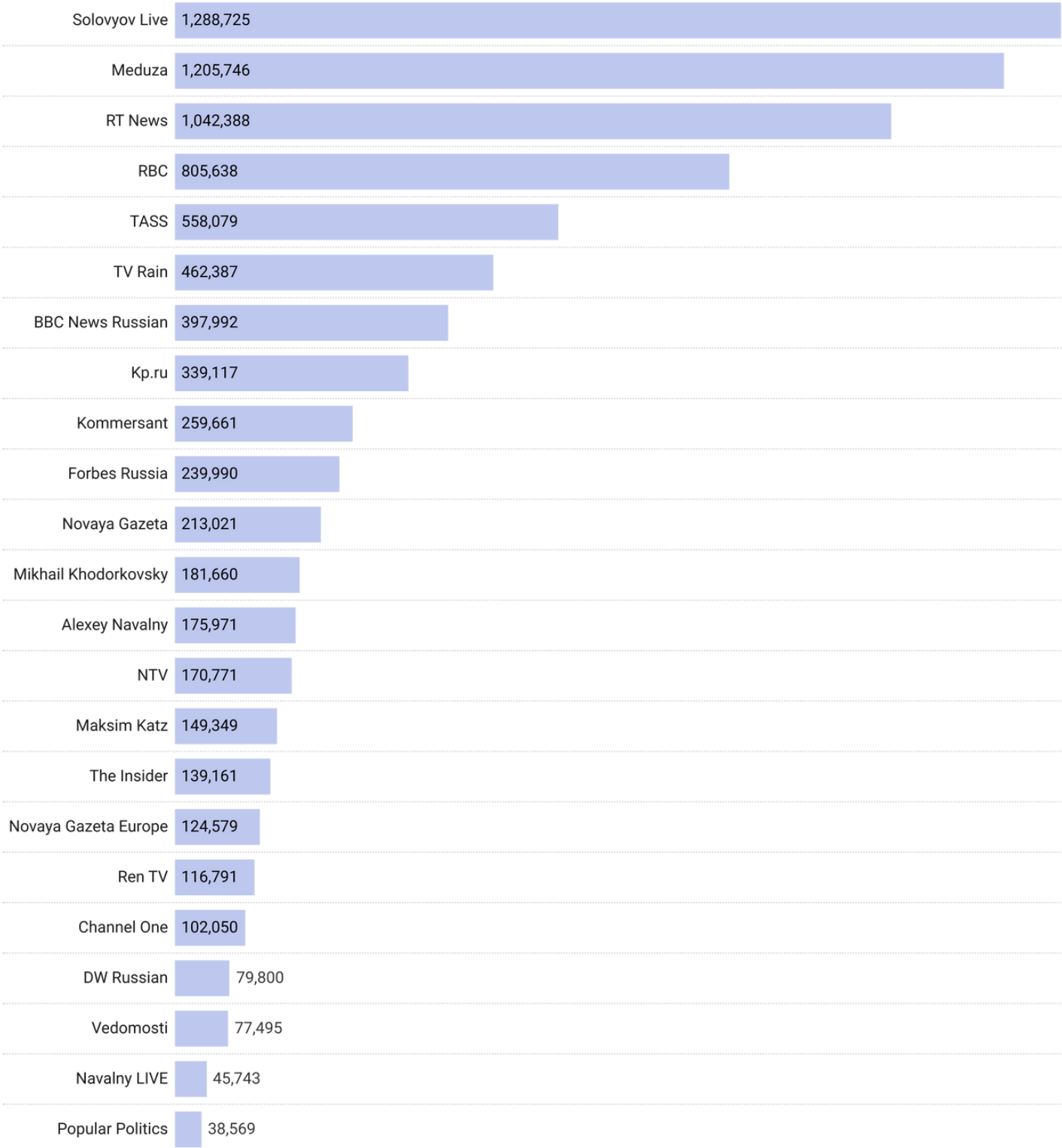
Number of subscribers to media YouTube channels (as of August 3, 2025, in millions)



Source: YouTube • Created with Datawrapper

Telegram functions as the only major platform where both pro-government and independent media coexist at scale. State media and affiliated journalists maintain channels with large followings—Solovyov and RT each have more than 1 million subscribers, while TASS has around 500,000. Independent outlets also sustain significant audiences: Meduza with roughly 1.2 million, TV Rain with about 500,000, and BBC News Russian with around 400,000.

Number of subscribers to media Telegram channels (as of August 3, 2025)



Source: Telegram • Created with Datawrapper

Russian media subscribers by platform (as of August 3, 2025)

	VK	YouTube	Telegram	Total
STS	3,645,384	13,600,000		17,245,384
TNT	6,586,424	2,290,000		8,876,424
Alexey Navalny		6,280,000	175,971	6,455,971
TV Rain		4,810,000	462,387	5,272,387
Kp.ru	1,257,791	2,260,000	339,117	3,856,908
Navalny LIVE		3,540,000	45,743	3,585,743
RIA News	3,320,536			3,320,536
BBC News Russian		2,860,000	397,992	3,257,992
Popular Politics		2,940,000	38,569	2,978,569
DW Russian		2,710,000	79,800	2,789,800
Life.ru	2,672,863			2,672,863
RT News	1,542,329		1,042,388	2,584,717
Maksim Katz		2,420,000	149,349	2,569,349
Meduza	486,279	852,000	1,205,746	2,544,025
Channel One	2,347,123		102,050	2,449,173
RBC	1,000,149	254,000	805,638	2,059,787
Forbes Russia	981,962	788,000	239,990	2,009,952
Solovyov Live	458,614		1,288,725	1,747,339
TASS	1,069,928		558,079	1,628,007
Russia 1	1,571,899			1,571,899
Mikhail Khodorkovsky		1,380,000	181,660	1,561,660
Ren TV	1,374,481		116,791	1,491,272
Tsargrad	1,079,293			1,079,293
Proekt.Media		1,040,000		1,040,000
Novaya Gazeta	131,216	583,000	213,021	927,237
NTV	747,310		170,771	918,081
Lenta.ru	892,464			892,464
Novaya Gazeta Europe		718,000	124,579	842,579
Kommersant	551,111		259,661	810,772
The Insider	25,000	609,000	139,161	773,161
Vedomosti	601,641	13,000	77,495	692,136
Rossiyskaya Gazeta	457,481			457,481

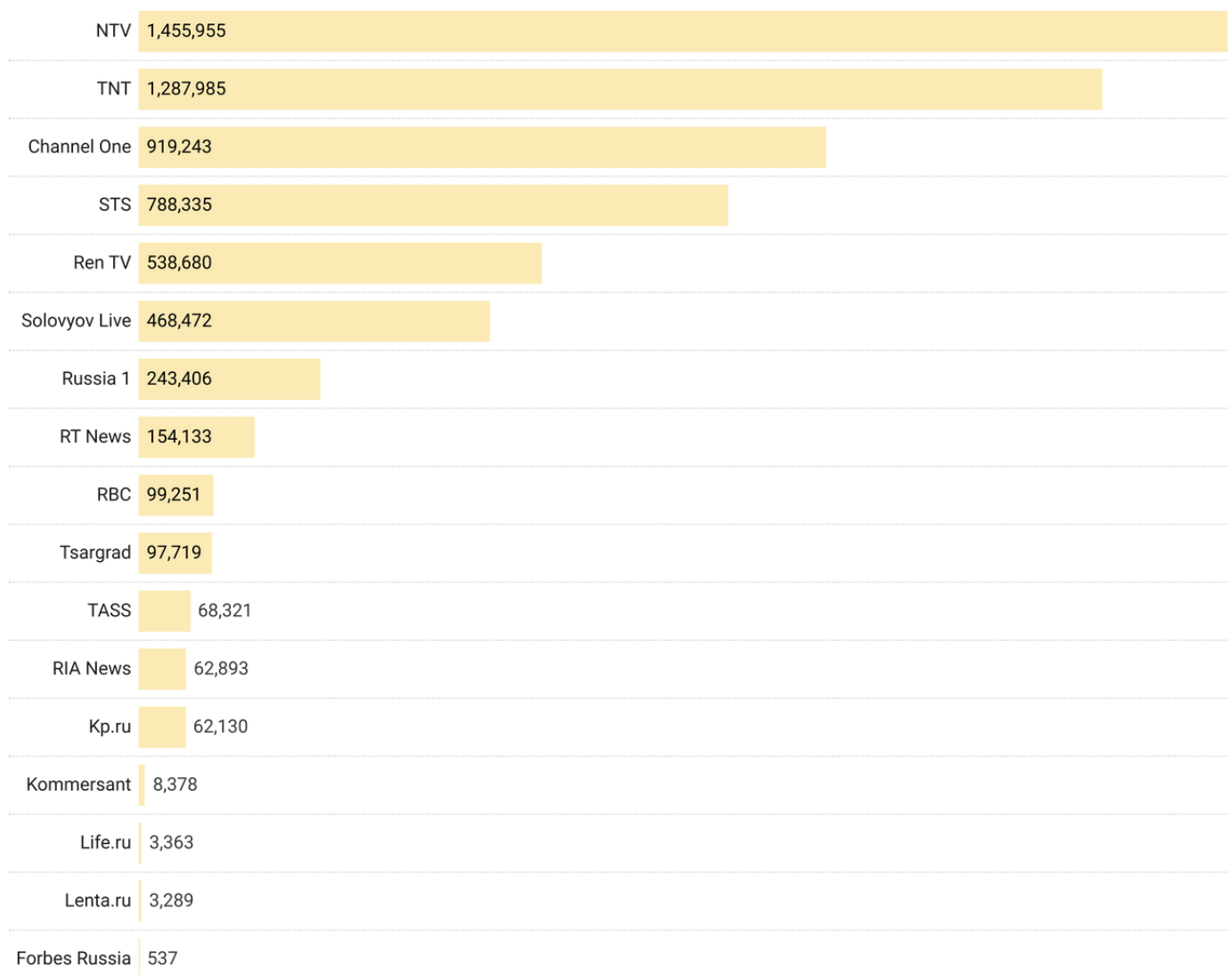
Source: VK, Telegram, YouTube • Created with Datawrapper

Comparative data on the subscriber shares of Russian media across platforms reveals much about their specialization and political positioning. The largest outlets by total subscribers, TNT and STS, are active on both VK and YouTube. Their focus on entertainment video content explains their broad presence: they are welcome on the politically sensitive VK while also fitting within YouTube’s guidelines, which exclude military propaganda. Telegram, however, holds little appeal for them, as it lacks sufficient tools for distributing video content at scale.

In third and fourth place are Alexei Navalny’s blog and TV Rain, both absent from VK due to their opposition stance. By contrast, relatively balanced outlets such as KP.ru are able to maintain a presence on all major platforms simultaneously.

The next platform, Rutube, is Russia’s primary state-backed video service and is positioned as a substitute for YouTube. While nominally a media and video-hosting platform, its role in journalism is limited, as it remains secondary to YouTube. Rutube mainly hosts state and pro-government accounts, particularly those that have been banned or restricted on YouTube.

Number of subscribers to media Rutube channels (as of August 3, 2025)



Source: Rutube • Created with Datawrapper

In conclusion, the functional division of platforms has entrenched editorial silos within the Russian media landscape. State media dominate VK and RuTube, operating under conditions of technical compliance and political loyalty. Independent outlets, by contrast, survive largely on YouTube and Telegram, where partial insulation from Russian jurisdiction still permits relative freedom. This platform fragmentation has sharply curtailed the circulation of dissenting content inside Russia and made cross-cutting narratives nearly impossible. For Russian journalism, whether in exile or operating in-country, platform choice now determines not only visibility and reach but also content form, tone, and legal risk.

For more information about the project:

Media Influence Matrix

<http://journalismresearch.org>

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Artificial Intelligence (AI) Disclosure Statement

In this report, ChatGPT was used for translations from Russian to English.