

**PLEASE BE DEMOCRATIC AROUND THE WORLD,
NOT JUST IN CALIFORNIA**

**Report on the YouTube
approach in Russia**

PREFACE

Our research regarding Google/YouTube practices in non-democratic countries was developed between September 2021 and February 2022 by a group of Internet activists, vloggers (video bloggers), and media analysts from Russia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Latvia, and Estonia. We have used data provided both by experts and pro-democracy vloggers in these countries.

Unfortunately, in February 2022, our region and the whole world changed dramatically due to the invasion of Vladimir Putin's Russia into Ukraine and the resulting outbreak of war. For example, commercial YouTube in Russia has already been stopped as a result of Google's decision to stop the monetization of videos and ads in the Russian segment of YouTube.

Therefore, the findings of this study are relevant for the global situation before February 24, 2022. However, we believe that the problems and trends we have revealed still exist. Although in the context of the possible ban of YouTube in Russia and Belarus in 2022, these trends may lose their relevance for these two countries, they will remain relevant for other countries where similar Google /YouTube practices are still used.

We understand that since 2014, and especially since 2020, Google and YouTube access in Russia have been in a very ambiguous situation. The Russian authorities, through their media agency Roskomnadzor, have constantly put pressure on Google to limit freedom of speech by prioritizing content produced by pro-Kremlin propagandists. As there always were concerns about banning YouTube in Russia, the tech giant was afraid of losing money in Russia and being fined. For Google/YouTube, Russia was their fifth-largest market, and, as for any business, commercial interests have always been a priority. Therefore, Google/YouTube always sought to compromise with the Russian authorities when possible.

However, we believe that honest deals with Putin and people with a KGB background are not possible. We are now witnessing the complete exit of the Russian market by many tech giants. Similar challenges exist in Belarus and Kazakhstan. This is the result of all the compromises companies have made to non-democracies. Voices in the national languages of Belarus and Kazakhstan have suffered from these compromises for years as well, and things are likely to get worse in the current circumstances.

We will continue to try to follow all of these developments. Unfortunately, in the current circumstances, it is not possible to finalize this report, as the situation is changing not just every day, but every hour. So, we are going to make updates to this study in the upcoming months, when the situation hopefully becomes clearer, more stable and more predictable.

Although it is difficult to predict anything now, it is already clear that the Russian war against Ukraine is having dire consequences not only in Ukraine, but also in Russia itself, where all free and alternative voices are being suppressed. The worst aspect of this is that it appears that Russian society in general is supporting the war against Ukraine, still believing the lies of propagandists who say it was the only way to defend compatriots in Eastern Ukraine and protect Russia from a planned invasion of Western-backed Ukraine.

The Kremlin purposefully and gradually developed a strong trust of the people in Russian propaganda, pushing all alternative channels out of the information space; but the question is: what was done to prevent this situation? And who contributed to this situation?

We believe that Google/YouTube was a contributor to this. Based solely on profit considerations, it supported Russian propagandists and weakened pro-democracy bloggers in Russia. Social media giants were always looking for a compromise with the Kremlin's criminal structures, being indifferent to defending the values of the free world.

These big tech companies were a factor in helping Donald Trump come to power, because they were guided mainly by profit considerations. They also helped the Kremlin strengthen Russian public support for aggressive activities, including the war, by these compromises with the Russian government.

INTRODUCTION

This report focuses on analyzing unclear or contradictory policies and actions of global technology companies, particularly Google/YouTube, regarding the activities of pro-democracy bloggers in Russia. In this regard, it focuses on YouTube's impact upon democracy in the Russian Federation. The case of removing an anti-government tactical voting app developed by Alexei Navalny's team is explored in detail. Then we highlight the experience of 23 pro-democracy bloggers in promoting democratic and anti-authoritarian content, and the problems that their channels face in the Russian-language segment of YouTube.

All of this analysis was performed in the context of more extensive existing research (and criticism) on the harmful impact of YouTube in the areas of misinformation, violent or graphic content, COVID-19 misinformation, hate speech, harassment, cyberbullying, animal abuse, and other such subjects.

The report includes data both from publicly available sources, and unique data that we will collect using our personal connections.

EXISTING STUDIES ON A HARMFUL YOUTUBE: MISINFORMATION, VIOLENT OR GRAPHIC CONTENT, COVID-19 MISINFORMATION, HATE SPEECH, HARASSMENT & CYBERBULLYING, ANIMAL ABUSE, AND SIMILAR SUBJECTS

In July 2021, Mozilla published findings of its “YouTube Regrets” study,¹ a crowdsourced investigation into YouTube’s recommendation algorithm conducted with the participation of 37,380 YouTube users. These users volunteered to be YouTube watchdogs, volunteering data about their regrettable experiences on YouTube for Mozilla for researchers to analyze in order to better understand harmful YouTube recommendations.

Among the findings of the study was the problematic and often harmful operation of the YouTube recommendation algorithm. 71% of all videos recommended by YouTube’s automatic recommendation system to YouTube users in the study had harmful content including general misinformation, violent or graphic content, COVID-19 misinformation, hate speech, harassment & cyberbullying, and animal abuse, among other categories.

Collectively, the research participants flagged 3,362 videos with harmful content, originating from 91 countries, between July 2020 and May 2021. It is interesting that Mozilla researchers found that non-English speakers were most affected by the harmful videos: the rate of these videos was 60% higher in countries that did not have English as a primary language (with Brazil, Germany, and France being particularly high).

In this study, Mozilla’s researchers do not define precisely what they mean by harmful recommendations, recommendation algorithm or automatic recommendation algorithm. After reading through the study, it is clear that by harmful recommendations they mean harmful content – like misinformation or hate speech – shown to a YouTube’s viewer by YouTube’s “recommendation algorithm” or “automatic recommendation system”.

We can assume that in the context of this study, both “recommendation algorithm” and “automatic recommendation system” are used as synonyms to mean the YouTube algorithm that creates the most relevant video list for the viewer. In doing so, the YouTube’s algorithm is highly likely take into account both the user’s previous thematic interests and the keywords that the user is searching for. How this algorithm works is unclear.

According to YouTube’s online Creators’ Academy course,² the platform’s search engine works in a manner similar to Google’s, ranking the most relevant results by various factors. Like Google’s search engine, the YouTube search strives to display the most relevant results according to keyword queries. Videos are ranked based on a variety of factors including how well the title, description, and video content match the viewer’s query. Beyond that, we look at which videos have driven the most engagement for a query. Note that search results are not a list of the most-viewed videos for a given query.

1 <https://foundation.mozilla.org/en/youtube/findings/>

2 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hPxnlx5ExI#strategies-zippy-link-2>

Thus, the YouTube policies on ranking videos, ordering them according to relevance and recommendations for viewing, are not clear and transparent enough. What algorithms and codes the YouTube search engine uses to improve responses to queries is a commercial secret.

WHAT IS MISSING FROM THE MOZILLA STUDY?

Although the findings of the Mozilla research are impressive, many things happened outside of the scope of the study.

The Mozilla report does not address the role of YouTube and big tech companies in strengthening or weakening democratic values. Some experts have serious concerns about this.

For example, the American political scientist, political economist, and writer Francis Fukuyama believes that the business model of these companies does not imply a responsibility for improving the quality of democracy. In a discussion hosted by Tech Policy Press on social media and democracy,³ he argues:

“There are social and privacy harms, because the business model of a company like Facebook is basically to grab as much of your personal data as possible and then to milk every penny of revenue out of it that they can, but the political harms, I think, are the ones that have been of greatest concern especially since the 2016 election. Those really have to do with the platforms’ tremendous ability to disseminate misinformation, conspiracy theories, uncivil abuse and the like that many people have linked to both to the polarization that I think is probably the single biggest political challenge to American democracy right now but also to a general deterioration of deliberation and civil democratic discourse. That’s directly related to the business model of the platforms, who do not have a responsibility for improving the quality of democracy. They have a responsibility to their shareholders to maximize profits. That’s all often related to their ability to accelerate information that is salacious and clickable but not true and not in line with the kind of deliberative mode that you would want in a democratic society.”

Later on, Fukuyama continues to develop this idea, saying that companies like Google, Facebook and Twitter “are not built to be dedicated to the protection of democracy. They are devoted to their own economic self-interest. Secondly, it’s not clear that they’ve got the capacity to make the kinds of complex nuanced political decisions to determine what’s fake news, what’s acceptable political speech, what is not.”

3 <https://techpolicy.press/reconciling-social-media-democracy-fukuyama-keller-marechal-reisman/>

PLEASE BE DEMOCRATIC AROUND THE WORLD, NOT JUST IN CALIFORNIA

YOUTUBE CAN BE HARMFUL TO DEMOCRACY: ARU TV RESEARCH ON RUSSIAN-LANGUAGE YOUTUBE

While there is still a lack of data on YouTube's impact on democracy, there were some smaller studies that sought to answer this question regarding sociopolitical developments in some regions. For example, ARU TV research on several post-Soviet countries confirms Fukuyama's belief that big tech companies do not promote democracy, and it is not clear whether the business model or the inability to moderate the quality of the content is to blame.

ARU TV is both a YouTube channel and a civic initiative bringing together media professionals and civic activists. Their YouTube channel was launched in Estonia in 2015 by two political refugees, Belarusian civic activist Pavel Marozau and Russian rock music critic Artemy Troitsky. It produces mostly anti-authoritarian political content, experimenting with various formats and forms of art like animated music videos, cartoon memes, etc. Its regular format, however, is talking-head-style social commentaries. As of April 18, 2022, ARU TV had about 243,000 subscribers.

In collaboration with the research community, ARU TV analyzed its audience, seeking to establish how different kinds of humor (parody, mimicry, ridicule, irony, nonsense, exaggeration, over-identifying, dramatizing, displacement, etc.) correlate with online behavior patterns and have an impact on performance indicators, such as the various forms of engagement and conversion rates.⁴

The ARU not only analyzed its audience, but also sought to understand the basic trends both in Russian social media and YouTube. At least two studies conducted in the spring and summer of 2020 are particularly relevant: "Analysis: Sexism, homophobia, and anti-Western narratives on Russian social media",⁵ and "COVID-19 news in Russian, as seen through YouTube search results".⁶

Although the first of these studies highlights interesting trends in gender-related hate speech on the popular Russian social media platform VK (VKontakte), in this report, we focus on the second study, regarding the possible harmful effects of YouTube on democracy in Russia.

In this study, ARU TV researchers found that videos produced by large and often state-affiliated media companies, including those overtly promoting a Kremlin agenda, appeared to have a better chance of landing among YouTube's most relevant videos, and thus were more likely to be recommended for viewing.

4 <https://en.ejo.ch/media-politics/press-freedom/how-exiled-russian-activists-created-radical-new-media-in-the-baltics>

5 <https://medium.com/dfrlab/analysis-sexism-homophobia-and-anti-western-narratives-on-russian-social-media-30d1dee5aafd>

6 <https://medium.com/dfrlab/covid-19-news-in-russian-as-seen-through-youtube-search-results-b77952c4aff3>

At the same time, another finding of the research was that the videos produced by anti-Kremlin YouTube channels are more popular and have higher audience engagement than pro-Kremlin channels. This indicates that YouTube recommends videos based not purely on popularity and engagement, but on some other unknown factors.

As will be shown below, the lack of transparency on how YouTube's recommendation algorithm and automatic recommendation system work is a big problem for many pro-democracy bloggers working in the Russian-language YouTube segment. According to YouTube, the platform's search engine works in a manner similar to Google's, displaying the most relevant results according to keyword queries. Videos are ranked based on a variety of factors including how well the title, description, and video content match the viewer's query. Beyond that, it examines which videos have driven the most engagement for a query, but at the same time, search results do not reflect the most-viewed videos for a given query.

Although YouTube admits that the most relevant search results are not a list of the most-viewed videos, ARU TV research shows that search results also do not depend on other social media engagement metrics, including comments, likes, dislikes, etc. These policies for ranking videos are unclear and not transparent enough. Algorithms and codes the YouTube search engine uses to improve responses to queries are a commercial secret.

The ARU TV research is important because it was the first to raise the issue of YouTube's possible concessions to the Kremlin, emphasizing that state-affiliated pro-Kremlin channels dominate the "most relevant" search results in Russia. The ARU TV researchers actually began to pay attention to this more than a year before it became highlighted in the world's leading media, due to events in September 2021, when Alexei Navalny's team and other Russian opposition activists accused Google and Apple of caving to Kremlin pressure after the U.S. tech giants removed an anti-government tactical voting app from their stores on the first day of a parliamentary election.⁷ Navalny allies also accused YouTube and Telegram of censorship in the Russian election.⁸

7 <https://www.reuters.com/article/russia-google-idCNL8N2RF289>

8 <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/navalny-allies-accuse-telegram-censorship-russian-election-2021-09-18/>

THE NAVALNY CASE: REMOVING AN ANTI-GOVERNMENT TACTICAL VOTING APP AND RELEVANT VIDEOS

In September 2021, Russian opposition activists accused Alphabet (Google's parent company) and Apple of caving to Kremlin pressure after these companies removed an anti-government tactical voting app from their stores. The app became unavailable on Apple's AppStore and Google Play for Russian users. Previously downloaded versions of the app did not function, either.

The app, devised by allies of jailed Kremlin critic Alexei Navalny, gives people detailed recommendations on who to vote for in an effort to thwart the ruling United Russia party, which supports President Vladimir Putin. The tech giants removed the app on the first day of a parliamentary election.⁹

Members of the upper house of the Russian parliament met Google and Apple representatives in the run-up to the election to tell them to remove the app, or face consequences including fines and criminal prosecution.¹⁰ State communications regulator Roskomnadzor has also demanded that Apple and Google remove the app, and threatened fines for non-compliance.¹¹

There were rumors that Google decided to remove the app after being told its local staff could otherwise face jail time. However, this information has not been sufficiently substantiated. The big tech companies did not disclose any information about the real reasons for removing the app. This again raises the issue of the transparency and accountability of these companies.

Leonid Volkov, an ally of Navalny, accused Google and Apple of capitulating under what he described as a Kremlin campaign of blackmail. "This shameful day will live long in the memory," Volkov, who is based outside Russia, said on the Telegram messaging service. Ivan Zhdanov, another Navalny ally who is abroad, called the companies' action "a shameful act of political censorship."

The Kremlin, on the other hand, seemed pleased about the action. Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said Moscow welcomed the move and said that the U.S. companies had acted in the "spirit and letter of (Russian) law".¹²

The Russian court outlawed Navalny's political movement as extremist in June 2021, backing complaints from Moscow's prosecutor that its activists were trying to destabilize Russia; a ruling condemned by the West at the time as a blow against freedom.¹³

9 <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/w172xv59bt3bp8h>

10 <https://dig.watch/updates/apple-and-google-meet-russian-legislators-over-navalnys-app>

11 <https://www.washingtonpost.com/technology/2021/09/02/russia-apple-google-censor-navalny/>

12 <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-russia-election-idAFKBN2GD04I>

13 <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-57422346>

A short time later, Navalny's allies also accused YouTube and Telegram of censorship after the video platform and messaging app restricted access to their anti-government voting recommendations for Russia's parliamentary election.

Telegram's founder, Pavel Durov, who has carved out a libertarian image and resisted past censorship, said the platform would block election campaign services, including one used by Navalny's allies to give voter recommendations. He said the decision had been taken because of a Russian ban on campaigning once polls are open, which he considered legitimate and is similar to bans in many other countries.¹⁴

Navalny's spokeswoman Kira Yarmysh condemned the move. "It's a real disgrace when the censorship is imposed by private companies that allegedly defend the ideas of freedom," she wrote on Twitter. Ivan Zhdanov, a political ally of Navalny, said he did not believe Telegram's justification, and that the move appeared to have been made in some kind of agreement with Russia's authorities.

It is interesting that in his statement, Durov said Google and Apple's restrictions of the Navalny app had set a dangerous precedent and meant that Telegram, which is widely used in Russia, was more vulnerable to government pressure. He said Telegram depends on Apple and Google to operate because of their dominant position in the mobile operating system market, and his platform would not have been able to resist a Russian ban from 2018 to 2020 without them. Russia tried to block Telegram in April 2018, but lifted the ban more than two years later after ostensibly failing to block it.

"The app block by Apple and Google creates a dangerous precedent that will affect freedom of expression in Russia and the whole world," Durov said in a post on Telegram.

Navalny's camp later said that YouTube had also taken down one of their videos that contained the names of 225 candidates they had endorsed. "The video presentation of the smart voting recommendations for the constituencies with the nastiest (United Russia candidates) has also been removed," they wrote.¹⁵

These events can be seen as a possible milestone in Russia's crackdown on the internet and its standoff with U.S. tech firms. Russia has for years sought sovereignty over its part of the internet, where anti-Kremlin politicians have followings and media critical of Putin's operations. Navalny's team uses Google's YouTube widely to post anti-corruption videos, and to stream coverage and commentary of anti-Kremlin protests they have staged.

14 <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/navalny-allies-accuse-telegram-censorship-russian-election-2021-09-18/>

15 <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/navalny-allies-accuse-telegram-censorship-russian-election-2021-09-18/>

THE KREMLIN'S PRESSURE ON FOREIGN TECH COMPANIES

Of course, it is not the case that the U.S. big tech companies and the Kremlin act as allies. It seems that the compliance with the Kremlin's demands is the result of pressure from the Russian authorities. Moscow increased pressure on foreign tech companies during 2021, especially in September 2021, as part of a long-running push to assert greater sovereignty over its segment of the internet, including efforts to make companies store Russians' personal data in its territory.

In September 2021, Russian authorities warned social media giant Facebook it faced a fine of up to 10% of its annual turnover in the country unless it deleted content Moscow deems illegal. That could lead to a fine of 5% or 10% of Facebook's annual Russian turnover unless the situation is remedied.¹⁶

In the same month, Russia also threatened to block YouTube and take other retaliatory measures, after YouTube blocked the German-language channels of Russian state broadcaster RT. Russia's foreign ministry accused YouTube of an "unprecedented act of media aggression" which it said was likely aided by German authorities – a claim Berlin denied. The Russian ministry said the adoption of retaliatory measures against German media "seems not only appropriate but also necessary".¹⁷

German chancellor Angela Merkel's spokesperson, Steffen Seibert, responded by saying the German government had "nothing to do with" YouTube's move and warned Moscow against potential retaliation against German media in Russia.¹⁸

Russian media watchdog Roskomnadzor, for its part, threatened to restrict access to YouTube in Russia, accusing the company of "censorship". Roskomnadzor said it had sent a letter to Google (YouTube's owner), "demanding that all restrictions be lifted" from the two channels – RT DE and Der Fehlende Part – "as soon as possible".¹⁹

The regulator said YouTube could be issued with a warning and "the law provides for measures of full or partial restriction of access" if such warnings are ignored.

Kremlin spokesperson Dmitry Peskov later accused YouTube of "censorship" and said Russian laws had been "grossly violated". "There must be zero tolerance for such violations," he said.

16 <https://www.reuters.com/technology/facebook-faces-threat-huge-fine-russia-over-banned-content-report-2021-09-30/>

17 <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2021/sep/29/russia-threatens-to-block-youtube-after-suspension-of-german-rt-channels>

18 <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2021/sep/29/russia-threatens-to-block-youtube-after-suspension-of-german-rt-channels>

19 <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2021/sep/29/russia-threatens-to-block-youtube-after-suspension-of-german-rt-channels>

RT editor-in-chief Margarita Simonyan said on Twitter that Germany had declared a “media war” on Russia. She called on Moscow to ban Deutsche Welle and other German media working in the country – “without delay”.²⁰

The Kremlin has repeatedly accused foreign-owned social media of interfering in Russian politics, including the hosting of content supportive of jailed opposition leader Alexei Navalny. Ahead of parliamentary elections in 2021, Roskomnadzor blocked dozens of websites linked to Navalny, whose organizations were banned in Russia under “extremism” legislation.²¹

Russian courts have punished platforms not complying with Russian law, including Twitter, Google and Facebook, with a series of fines; and in March 2021, they started reducing the speed of Twitter’s services. A Moscow district court assessed Google two more fines totaling 6.5 million rubles (\$89,000) for failing to remove banned content.²²

Google has already been punished with several fines for similar charges. It has also been penalized for breaching a controversial law passed in 2014 that requires the personal data of Russian users to be stored inside the country.²³

Given that the real war of restrictions began in 2021, and especially in September 2021, it is not possible to conclude that the Kremlin and the U.S. big tech are acting in a coordinated and unified manner. Big tech companies most likely just succumbed to the pressure from the Kremlin because of financial and commercial considerations, but both the quality of democracy in Russia itself and pro-democracy Russian bloggers suffer from the Kremlin’s victories in this war.

20 <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2021/sep/29/russia-threatens-to-block-youtube-after-suspension-of-german-rt-channels>

21 <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2021/07/26/russia-blocks-49-navalny-linked-websites-allies-say-a74618>

22 <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2021/sep/29/russia-threatens-to-block-youtube-after-suspension-of-german-rt-channels>

23 <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2021/sep/29/russia-threatens-to-block-youtube-after-suspension-of-german-rt-channels>

STUDY ON PRO-DEMOCRACY YOUTUBE BLOGGERS OPERATING IN RUSSIAN-LANGUAGE YOUTUBE SEGMENT: RESEARCH ASPECTS AND METHODOLOGY

YouTube has always had a set of Community Guidelines that outline what type of content is not allowed on YouTube. This content includes spam, deceptive practices, scams, fake engagement, and impersonation; it strongly regulates sensitive content related to child safety, nudity and sexual content, suicide, self-harm and vulgar language, as well as violent, harmful, dangerous, and graphic content. YouTube punishes harassment, cyberbullying and hate speech, and does not allow dissemination of violent criminal organizations' content and regulates information about regulated goods like firearms. Finally, YouTube prohibits misinformation on topics such as elections, COVID-19, vaccines, etc.

At the same time, all these rules are defined quite broadly, and the criteria are vague. For example, although YouTube and Mozilla themselves use the term "harmful," neither YouTube nor its content explorer Mozilla defines this term clearly and precisely.

In our research and report, we highlight several important aspects that have not been sufficiently addressed so far.

Given that neither Russia nor Belarus was considered in previous research, including the Mozilla report, we believe the cases of these countries can shed some light on YouTube's impact on the quality of democracy in the post-Soviet era and beyond.

Existing studies on the harmful impact of YouTube have revealed that this platform recommends videos with misinformation, violent or graphic content, COVID-19 misinformation, hate speech, harassment and cyberbullying, animal abuse, and some other categories. No one has analyzed a specific category that is definitively considered harmful: namely, the recommendation of content produced or promoted by non-democracies, i.e., authoritarian regimes and their supporting groups.

In this report, we will provide some findings in the field.

In January 2021, we started the survey among 23 pro-democracy bloggers. Most of these bloggers are from Russia, but one of them is from Kazakhstan, which was included because his channel focuses on audiences in both Russia and Kazakhstan; and one from Estonia, which targets audiences in Russia and Belarus. The content of these bloggers' channels is political and involves the popularization of anti-authoritarian ideas and criticism of undemocratic regimes, mostly in Russia. In terms of formats, all these channels mostly use the genre of social commentary.

Our survey consisted of four questions:

1. Do you think that, starting from 2020, it has become more difficult to promote democratic and anti-authoritarian content / ideas in the Russian-speaking segment of YouTube due to the policies of YouTube itself (lack of transparency, strange work of algorithms and moderators, lack of communication from YouTube, etc.)?

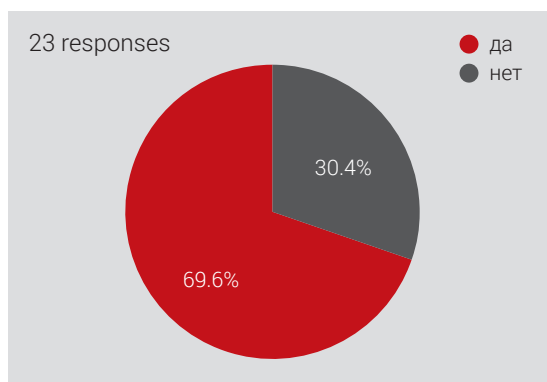
2. Do you think that, starting in 2020, YouTube is more favorable towards content promoted in the Russian-speaking YouTube space by non-democratic forces (for example, pro-government propaganda channels or state media channels serving authoritarian power) than anti-authoritarian content created in the Russian-speaking space by YouTube opposition bloggers?
3. Have you experienced any of the following issues with your YouTube channel:
 - Videos disappear from the list of recommended videos
 - Subscribers stopped receiving notifications of new videos
 - The number of views has decreased significantly for no objective reason
 - YouTube algorithms or moderators unsubscribed subscribers
 - YouTube office does not explain anything, does not answer questions sent to them
4. If there are any issues other than those mentioned that are related to internal YouTube politics and that prevent the spread of democratic and anti-authoritarian content / ideas in the Russian-language segment of YouTube, please name them.

STUDY FINDINGS

Question 1

Do you think that, starting from 2020, it has become more difficult to promote democratic and anti-authoritarian content / ideas in the Russian-speaking segment of YouTube due to the policies of YouTube itself (lack of transparency, strange work of algorithms and moderators, lack of communication from YouTube, etc.)?

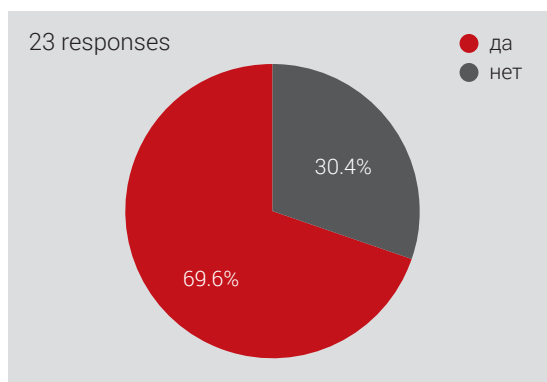
69.6% of respondents answered "Yes" to this question, while 30.4% responded with "No". This means that more than two-thirds of blogger respondents believe that, starting from 2020, it has become more difficult to promote democratic and anti-authoritarian content in the Russian-speaking YouTube segment.



Question 2

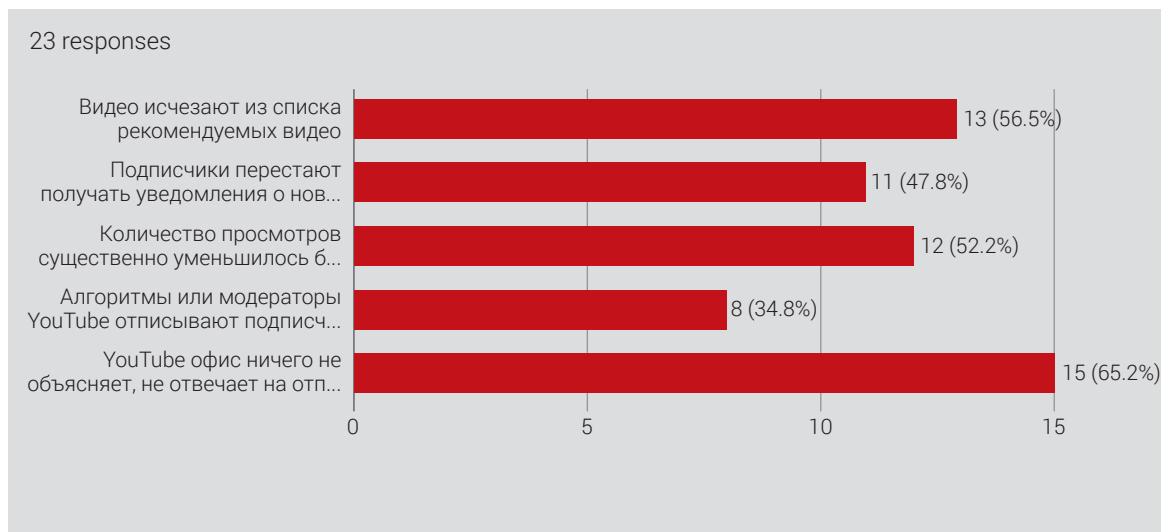
Do you think that, starting in 2020, YouTube is more favorable towards content promoted in the Russian-speaking YouTube space by non-democratic forces (for example, pro-government propaganda channels or state media channels serving authoritarian power) than anti-authoritarian content created in the Russian-speaking space by YouTube opposition bloggers?

The percentage distribution of answers was the same as in the first question, with 69.6% saying Yes, and 30.4% saying No. Thus, more than two-thirds of blogger respondents believe that, starting from 2020, YouTube is more favorable towards content promoted by non-democratic forces like pro-Kremlin and pro-Alexander Lukashenko (president of Belarus) propagandists.



Question 3

In answering the third question “Have you experienced any of the following issues with your YouTube channel”, respondents pointed to the following problems that their channels face in the Russian-language segment of YouTube: videos disappear from the list of recommended videos (56.5%), subscribers stopped receiving notifications of new videos (47.8%), the number of views decreased significantly for no objective reason (52.2%), YouTube algorithms or moderators unsubscribe subscribers (34.8%), and YouTube office does not explain anything, does not answer questions sent to them (65.2%).



Question 4

If there are any issues other than those mentioned that are related to internal YouTube politics and that prevent the spread of democratic and anti-authoritarian content / ideas in the Russian-language segment of YouTube, please name them.

The bloggers provided several answers to this question. Some of them pointed to blocking of political content and ads without explanation, removal from monetization, imposed restrictions and other problems:

- “ Ads are regularly blocked without explanation if the video contains political content (pro-democracy).”
- “ The channel was under the threat of blocking several times without a detailed explanation of the reasons, they indicated ‘materials requiring a delicate attitude’, and that it violates rules.”
- “ Regular blocking of ads without explanation. Formally, reasons not related to our content are indicated.”
- “ Videos are removed from monetization without explanation of the reasons, they fall into the category ‘not suitable for all advertisers’. In this case, the author not only loses money, (but) such videos are (also) not promoted by YouTube. On-demand verification takes a long time (I suspect intentionally) - up to 10 days or even several weeks, which for news content is the same as deletion.”

“ In my channel, up to 60% of the content falls under the 18+ restriction. But in fact, there should not be restrictions. Contacted technical support, apologized, promised to solve the problem. On February 5, the problem will be one year old.”

Other bloggers mentioned the possible pressure by the Russian authorities on the tech giants and operations of Kremlin-sponsored bots as sources of problems. A “troll farm” or “troll factory” is an institutionalized group of internet users that seeks to interfere in political opinions and decision-making by posting online and in social media. There are so-called “Russian web brigades” (also called Russian trolls, Russian bots, Kremlin Bots, or Kremfins), which are state-sponsored anonymous Internet political commentators and “trolls” linked to the Russian government. They are organized into teams and groups of commentators that participate in Russian and international political blogs and Internet forums using “sock-puppets” (extra accounts created to agree with one’s own online posts); social bots; large-scale, orchestrated trolling; and disinformation campaigns to promote pro-Putin and pro-Russian propaganda.²⁴

A social bot is an agent that communicates autonomously on social media. The messages (e.g., tweets, comments) it distributes can be simple, and can be operated in groups and various configurations with only partial human control. Social bots can also use artificial intelligence to express messages in more natural human dialogue. Technologically, bots are algorithms acting in social media networks. But to the outside world, they seem like real users.²⁵

“ Perhaps the pressure of the Russian authorities and the desire to be on the Russian market is forcing Google YouTube to do as they do.”

“ The point here is not in YouTube itself, I think, but in the fact that bot farms (groups of automated social media posting agents) have learned and understood how the algorithms work. It is they who are pushing propaganda channels into the trends, and not only Solovyov and 60 Minutes, but also small and no-names. Their tactics are as follows: first, the channel appears at the end of trends, for example, Solovyov’s video, and then it abruptly goes to the top 10 at least. Observed repeatedly. It is at this moment that they somehow overestimate and increase his popularity. Oppositional channels are the opposite, they underestimate such channels and thereby deceive the algorithms. Recently, I had a video trending around 20th place, but after a few hours it flew out completely. In general, the algorithms have been studied by bots and adapted, because there are a thousand bots, and now they decide who will watch what.”

24 Stukal, Denis; Sanovich, Sergey; Bonneau, Richard; Tucker, Joshua A. (February 2022). “Why Botter: How Pro-Government Bots Fight Opposition in Russia”. American Political Science Review. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press on behalf of the American Political Science Association. 116 (1): 1–15.

25 <https://www.forbes.com/sites/lutzfinger/2015/02/17/do-evil-the-business-of-social-media-bots/#5ffe3e801104>

FOCUS GROUP RESULTS: CASE STUDIES

Several YouTube channel hosts pointed to similar problems in detail during focus group interviews that have been conducted in addition to the survey.

One of the focus group participants shared his experience:

“ *The problem started on September 10, 2020. Before August 2020, channel's videos were gaining an average of 400 thousand views and easily gaining more than half a million, and sometimes even a million. Then, since September 10, 2020, the views have sharply decreased. The channel author had been running the channel for three years and had not changed anything and therefore it was not the case that one day it became just uninteresting.*

The process and the related problem are as follows: Every day by 1 pm Moscow time, a video comes out on the channel. At 9 pm the traffic freezes, sometimes it happens in the morning at 9 am or 10 am. This is a regular problem. Each of the videos, 9 hours after release, faces a freeze in views. The number of likes and comments grows, but the number of views stands. The freezing takes about 3 hours. If a video faces such problem, it is no longer ranked, which means that the number of views no longer grows.

As mentioned, before this problem, videos were gaining from 450,000 to 1,000,000 views. Now there is a maximum of 300,000 views and sometimes 250,000 and 170,000. About 40%-60% of normal traffic is lost. This can only be explained by purposeful work against the channel.

The same is true about many political pro-democracy channels. For example, Navalny's channel videos are frozen immediately after an hour.”

Another blogger stated:

“ *After the introduction of the anti-cheat system, some of the YouTube channels faced the problem of unsubscriptions of the audience, which manifests itself in the following: YouTube systematically unsubscribes people from channels, claiming that these accounts are bots or inactive. But this list of unsubscribed includes a lot of active accounts, and quite often YouTube unsubscribes the most active viewers of channels. On my channel, YouTube unsubscribes 550 people monthly, the list of unsubscribed ones includes active viewers, as well as moderators and channel admins.*

I very often received messages from viewers saying that they were unsubscribed by YouTube. YouTube itself admitted that it did it. I wrote to the author support service many times. And received the answer: yes, we unsubscribe, but only inactive accounts. When I showed that they unsubscribed quite active users, YouTube just didn't answer.

Mass unsubscriptions from the channel, as well as from other oppositional channels, occurred after the video popularizing YouTube oppositional channels such as the Alexander Balu channel, Sergey Voronov, Zhukov's Blog, MyGap channel, Svobodnie channel, Superpower News, Pro FV, Storm Herald Originals, Stanislav Morozov, the channel of Mikhail Svetov, Alexander Nevzorov, and Dmitry Novikov. I was preparing this video for a very long time and after it, many YouTube viewers learned about the existence

of these pro-democracy channels. The growth on the channels began, but not for long. Literally a couple of days later, YouTube began to unsubscribe thousands of people from all these channels. On some channels, more people were unsubscribed than came.

The second significant problem of YouTube is the lack of notifications. In addition to unsubscriptions, YouTube has stopped sending notifications about new videos of my channel. Moreover, notifications have stopped coming precisely to the old, loyal, and active part of the audience.

The third problem is incorrect display of videos on the channel. YouTube, in response to a request for this fact, argues that a problem arises on the part of the user (viewer). But the root of the problem is in the 'safe mode' of the site itself. The point is that when this mode is enabled, the viewer does not see the last 9 videos of the channel. I observed the same situation when the mode was turned off, but the YouTube technical support staff shifts the responsibility to the viewer."

The blogger also mentioned the problem of monetization. To "monetize" means to earn monetary profit from YouTube clips. YouTube has its own monetization program for creators, which is called the YouTube Partner program. To monetize a YouTube account, one needs to be a verified YouTube Partner.

YouTube offers different monetization options for users that are part of the YouTube Partner program. The monetization program is very simple. Content producers in the Google AdSense Network create ads that are placed at any moment in the video. Each time a viewer watches the entire ad, a content producer get paid.

The ads can be placed at the start of the video (so called "pre-roll" ads). When the video uploaded is longer than 10 minutes, a content producer can also enable ads during the video (mid-roll ads). Thus, content producers get revenue from ads placed on their channels.

Talking about the problem with monetization, the blogger points out:

“ *Throughout 2020, it was almost impossible to get a green monetization mark (YouTube approval for monetization) for videos. The approval of monetization took up to a week, which made it impossible to quickly release video news. Today, the algorithm has been changed, and now the channel receives a green monetization mark if the video is shorter than 8 minutes, or more than an hour. If the video is more than 8 minutes but less than an hour, the monetization mark automatically turns yellow and the approval request takes up to 4 days.*

This problem is observed among almost all authors with whom I have contacts (all politics-related content). Also, such factors as 18+ and 'violation of community rules' are quite common among pro-democracy YouTube bloggers, even though there is nothing in the videos that could violate these rules, since all bloggers in the area have their own self-censorship.

I noticed and recorded the direct intervention of a 'Google moderator'. On one of the streams, my comment was deleted by a Google moderator, which I wrote directly in the chat during the broadcast."

The third focus group participant talked about his experience:

"The channel has many subscribers, many viewers, and this number grew and grew all the time, and then somehow suddenly it began to decrease. And by December 2020, the number of views had decreased by about two to three times.

Without paid ads, there is a problem of getting organic traffic for every new video. Even the most popular videos don't grow organically well after a certain point, and they don't rank. About 40%-60% of normal traffic is lost.

YouTube support office cannot explain what it is. They said the problem probably is because of suspicious traffic type. If it is the case, then perhaps it is the result of Kremlin institutions' activity that directs or redirects to pro-democracy YouTube channels such suspicious 'thrash' traffic in order the YouTube algorithm punishes these channels.

The problems other blogger faced were as follows:

“ The channel suddenly stopped getting into the recommendations section. Many of its subscribers wrote to the host that they didn't see the notifications and that they found new videos only if they went to the channel.

The demand for political content, judging by the trends for news sites, remains high, so the channel author doesn't think that his videos have simply become uninteresting. But, if the algorithms and rules change, then he would be happy to at least receive the information from YouTube about how these rules changed and how his own approach should change so as not to lose the audience.”

Other focus group participant pointed to his problems:

“ Videos disappeared from the list of recommended videos, people stopped receiving notifications from them about new videos. Traffic for such videos collapsed by 70 or 80%.

What is important, this story touched only those who criticize the regime of Vladimir Putin, while Putin's propagandists with thousands and even hundreds of thousands of fake subscribers feel great.”

The experience other blogger had was as follows:

“ In 2020, the channel was not monetized, which means that YouTube did not promote the relevant videos well, and channel's audience just didn't see some of the videos in the recommended video list. The videos of the channel are seen by no more than 10% of its subscribers, views are being frozen, comments are turned off and massive unsubscriptions take place on the day the video is released. At the same time, the user is not notified that she/he has been unsubscribed from my channel. Technical support does not work. The platform rules are vague.”

Other focus group participant said:

“ In the fall 2021, the channel encountered strange behavior of YouTube algorithms in relation to the channel. With a good starting reaction and decent commenting, videos stopped being recommended to people who were not subscribed to the channel. In addition, from the messages of subscribers, it turned out that even among users subscribed to the channel, the videos did not pop up in notifications (even when all the bells were pressed/enabled).

Correspondences with technical support staff did not result in anything (the channel host sent them all the screenshots confirming the cases). However, there was only one answer: 'everything is OK'.

The attitude to 'sensitive', but socially important content also deserves special attention. The video about the 'Kazan shooter' and the analysis of the problem of 'suicides' in Kazakhstan is automatically sent by algorithms to the 'yellow' monetization (status). (On May 11, 2021, a mass school shooting occurred in Kazan, Tatarstan, in the western part of Russia). This returns to normal after a couple of days (sometimes it reaches a week), but, of course, the video is already losing its starting reaction and relevance, so it no longer falls into any recommendations."

Thus, all focus group participants faced such trends since September 2020:

- Videos are disappearing from recommended videos;
- Subscribers stop receiving notifications;
- Number of views decrease; traffic collapses;
- YouTube unsubscribes subscribers;
- YouTube does not explain things nor answer bloggers' questions.

These are the same problems that the survey participants pointed to.

In our focus groups, we also found that YouTube algorithms likely prioritize pro-Kremlin content over anti-Kremlin content in the Russian-language YouTube segment. The propagandistic pro-Kremlin channels do not face the problems that Russian-speaking pro-democracy bloggers face.

On the case the focus group mentioned is the one of the propagandistic Solovyov channel (Соловьёв LIVE). On November 18, 2020, Roskomnadzor turned to YouTube with a claim that the channel of the Russia's main propagandist Solovyov did not fall into trends (To block or not to block. Will Roskomnadzor actually restrict access to major sites like YouTube for 'censoring' Russian content? Meduza. <https://meduza.io/en/feature/2020/11/20/to-block-or-not-to-block>). A week later, each of Solovyov's videos reached the top ranks in YouTube trends, and each of his videos and programs (both television and YouTube) remained in the Top 5 rankings. That is, if a channel has a state support, it can be promoted, and this violates the principle of equality between authors, because other channels that are not promoted by Roskomnadzor not only do not fall into trends, but are also weakened by different means.

Other problems focus group participants mentioned are as follows:

“ *It is impossible to get information for what exactly a particular video was blocked, a particular video was deleted, a warning about violations of the community rules was received, monetization was removed (for which quote or preview). Many channel restrictions are for a period (3 months), which is unfair for news channels that operate on a daily basis. I propose to set up the algorithms as follows: restrictions, a warning about the community rules, manual monetization assessment will be removed if there are no new violations for 3 months, or if there are no violations on 15 videos (each at least 5,000 views with a hold above 2 minutes). This will create a fair balance between channels that make 1-2 videos per month (for 3 months, problems with monetization and promotion of 3-6 videos) and daily channels (for 3 months, problems with hundreds of videos)."*

CONCLUSIONS

- The existing research shows that YouTube distributes harmful content including misinformation, violent or graphic content, COVID-19 misinformation, hate speech, harassment, cyberbullying, and animal abuse, among other categories.
- At the same time, many aspects of YouTube's controversy remain understudied. In addition, some regions and segments – such as the post-Soviet space and the Russian-language segment of YouTube – are also underexplored.
- There are important debates on the role of YouTube and Big Tech companies in strengthening or weakening democratic values. Although some experts have serious concerns about this, there is still a lack of data on the impact of YouTube on the quality of democracy.
- In 2019, the ARU TV team was the first to start researching the possible harmful effects of YouTube on democracy in Russia, seeking to understand the specifics of YouTube's activities in the post-Soviet space and YouTube's Russian-language segment.
- In a study conducted in the spring and summer of 2020, ARU TV researchers found that videos produced by large and often state-affiliated media companies, including those overtly promoting a Kremlin agenda, appeared to have a better chance of landing among YouTube's most relevant videos, and thus were more likely to be recommended for viewing.
- In September 2021, Alexei Navalny's team and other Russian opposition activists accused Google and Apple of caving to Kremlin pressure after the U.S. tech giants removed an anti-government tactical voting app from their stores on the first day of a parliamentary election. After this, allegations that YouTube may act in the interests of non-democratic regimes, including the Kremlin, have begun to be discussed in the world's major media.
- Despite these media debates, there is still a lack of systematic data on the impact of YouTube on strengthening democratic values. This study and report contribute to understanding this problem by exploring the experience of 23 pro-democracy bloggers in promoting democratic and anti-authoritarian content in the Russian-speaking segment of YouTube. The research methods used in this study are online survey, focus group discussions and online semi-structured interviews.
- More than two-thirds (almost 70%) of blogger respondents said that, starting from 2020, it has become more difficult to promote democratic and anti-authoritarian content in the Russian-speaking YouTube segment, and that YouTube is more favorable towards content promoted by non-democratic forces like pro-Kremlin and pro-Lukashenko propagandists.
- The majority of respondents pointed to the following problems that their channels face in the Russian-language segment of YouTube: videos disappear from the list of recommended videos (56.5% of respondents), subscribers stopped receiving notifications of new videos (47.8%), the number of views has decreased significantly for no objective reason (52.2%), YouTube algorithms or moderators unsubscribe subscribers (34.8%), YouTube office does not explain anything, does not answer questions sent to them (65.2%).
- The data from this study suggest that YouTube's impact on the quality of democracy may be detrimental and harmful, at least to some countries of the post-Soviet space.

- Of course, further research and data collection are needed to better substantiate this finding. Moreover, it is not clear whether the business model, the inability to moderate the quality of the content, pressure from the non-democratic media supervision institutions like Roskomnadzor, secret agreements with authoritarian regimes' officials, or other factors are to blame.
- Given that the Kremlin increased pressure on foreign tech companies during 2021, especially in September 2021, as part of a long-running push to assert greater sovereignty over its segment of the internet, it does not appear that U.S. big tech companies and the Kremlin act as allies. It seems that the compliance with the Kremlin's demands is rather a result of pressure from the Russian authorities.

UPDATES DURING THE WAR: MARCH-APRIL 2022

Soon after the Russian invasion of Ukraine, because of the pressure of public opinion in the West and increasing censorship in Russia, Google/YouTube decided to halt monetization opportunities and shut down advertising mechanisms for Russian YouTube channels.

This decision affected all Russian actors: government institutions and NGOs, commercial and nonprofit, public and private organizations. This contributed to the following new trends:

- Movement of Russian bloggers and commercial organizations to domestic Russian platforms like RuTube, VK, Yandex Dzen, and Telegram;
- Difficulties in paid promotion-driven dissemination of any content created by Russians, regardless of creators' political stances.

The second trend negatively affected Russian pro-democracy bloggers as well. Moreover, this created difficulties for democratic bloggers from Belarus and Kazakhstan, who used Russian platforms for promoting their content because these countries do not have their own domestic YouTube advertising mechanisms.

At the same time, in March 2022, some Russian pro-democracy YouTube channels unexpectedly experienced substantial – two or even two-and-a-half times – increases in views and subscriptions. Some indicators returned to those before autumn of 2020, when many democratic Russian-language YouTube channels experienced the first drop in traffic.

There may be several explanations for this:

- The shutdown of monetization and advertising mechanisms led to the release of space in the general traffic, which until March 2020 was redistributed to commercial channels;
- Western intermediary companies, which previously limited traffic, refused to continue their business in Russia.

There is no single clear answer, and further research is needed to explore this issue, especially considering that this trend has not affected all Russian pro-democracy YouTube channels, but only some of them.

ANNEX. SUMMARY OF SOME TRENDS IN NUMBERS

There is a summary of some data used in this report that provides evidence that YouTube algorithms probably prioritized pro-Kremlin content over anti-Kremlin content in Russian-language segment of YouTube.

Channel: Novosti Sverhderzhavy (Новости СВЕРХДЕРЖАВЫ)

 <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCt6nsWw2kQNszywpuuHoxBLA>

The problem started on September 10, 2020. Before August 2020, channel's videos were gaining an average of 400 thousand views and easily gaining more than half a million, and sometimes even a million. Then, since September 10, 2020, the views have sharply decreased. The channel author had been running the channel for three years and had not changed anything and therefore it was not the case that one day it became just uninteresting.

The process and the related problem are as follows: Every day by 1 pm Moscow time a video comes out on the channel. At 9 pm the traffic freezes, sometimes it happens in the morning at 9 am or 10 am. This is a regular problem. Each of the videos, 9 hours after release, faces a freeze in views. The number of likes and comments grows, but the number of views stands. The freezing takes about 3 hours. If a video faces such problem, it is no longer ranked, which means that the number of views no longer grows.

As mentioned, before this problem, videos were gaining from 450,000 to 1,000,000 views. Now there is a maximum of 300,000 views and sometimes 250,000 and 170,000. About 40% -60% of normal traffic is lost. This can only be explained by purposeful work against the channel.

The same is true about many political pro-democracy channels. For example, Navalny's channel videos are frozen immediately after an hour.

Channel: Voronov

 <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCMBHv1373q3BSjx8EzkJKfw>

After the introduction of the anti-cheat system, some of the YouTube channels faced the problem of unsubscriptions of the audience, which manifests itself in the following: YouTube systematically unsubscribes people from channels, claiming that these accounts are bots or inactive. But this list of unsubscribed includes a lot of active accounts, and quite often YouTube unsubscribes the most active viewers of channels. On the Voronov channel, YouTube unsubscribes 550 people monthly, the list of unsubscribed ones includes active viewers as well as moderators and channel admins.

The host of the Voronov channel very often receives messages from viewers saying that they were unsubscribed by YouTube. YouTube itself admitted that it did it. He wrote to the author support service many times. And received the answer: yes, we unsubscribe, but only inactive accounts. When the host showed that they unsubscribed quite active users, YouTube just didn't answer.

Mass unsubscriptions from the channel, as well as from other oppositional channels, occurred after the video popularizing YouTube oppositional channels such as the Alexander Balu channel, Sergey Voronov, Zhukov's Blog, MyGap channel, Svobodnie channel, Superpower News, Pro FV, Storm Herald Originals, Stanislav Morozov, the channel of Mikhail Svetov, Alexander Nevzorov, and Dmitry Novikov. Voronov's channel was preparing this video for a very long time and after it, many YouTube viewers learned about the existence of these pro-democracy channels. The growth on the channels began, but not for long. Literally a couple of days later, YouTube began to unsubscribe thousands of people from all these channels. On some channels, more people were unsubscribed than came.

The second significant problem of YouTube is the lack of notifications. In addition to unsubscriptions, YouTube has stopped sending notifications about new videos of the channel. Moreover, notifications have stopped coming precisely to the old, loyal, and active part of the audience.

The third problem is incorrect display of videos on the channel. YouTube, in response to a request for this fact, argues that a problem arises on the part of the user (viewer). But the root of the problem is in the "safe mode" of the site itself. The point is that when this mode is enabled, the viewer does not see the last 9 videos of the channel. The host of the channel observed the same situation when the mode was turned off, but the YouTube technical support staff shifts the responsibility to the viewer.

One more point. In the creative studio of YouTube there is a section "academy of authors" aimed at strengthening collaboration with other authors to attract a new audience. But, according to the answers of the YouTube technical support staff, this method, which the platform itself recommends, is perceived by the staff as a cheating practice, or the creation of a closed ecosystem. And the channel that has an increase in the audience in this way receives an "immune response" from the site, and almost all the audience coming to the channel in this way, as a result, is unsubscribed from the channel by the site itself. In this context, the host observed and documented the most massive unsubscription process about a year ago, because it was a part of his project of uniting bloggers.

Throughout 2020, it was almost impossible to get a green monetization mark for videos. The approval of monetization took up to a week, which made it impossible to quickly release video news. Today, the algorithm has been changed, and now the channel receives a green monetization mark if the video is shorter than 8 minutes, or more than an hour. If the video is more than 8 minutes but less than an hour, the monetization mark automatically turns yellow and the approval request takes up to 4 days.

This problem is observed among almost all authors with whom the Voronov channel host have contacts (all politics-related content). Also, such factors as 18+ and "violation of community rules" are quite common among pro-democracy YouTube bloggers, even though there is nothing in the videos that could violate these rules, since all bloggers in the area have their own self-censorship.

The host of the channel noticed and recorded the direct intervention of a "Google moderator". On one of the streams, his comment was deleted by a Google moderator, which he wrote directly in the chat during the broadcast.

Channel: ARU TV

 <https://www.youtube.com/user/arutv2>

The channel has 242 000 subscribers, about 350 000 -1 000 000 monthly viewers, and this number grew and grew all the time, and then somehow suddenly it began to decrease. And by December 2020 the number of views had decreased by about two to three times.

Without paid ads, there is a problem of getting organic traffic for every new video. Even the most popular videos don't grow organically well after a certain point, and they don't rank. About 40-60% of normal traffic is lost.

YouTube support office cannot explain what it is. They said the problem probably is because of suspicious traffic type. If it is the case, then perhaps it is the result of Kremlin institutions' activity that directs / redirects to pro-democracy YouTube channels such suspicious "trash" traffic in order the YouTube algorithm punishes these channels.

Channel: Za nami uzhe viefiali (За нами уже выехали)

 <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCIILaUQtcaabbw9-uQysRjw>

The channel suddenly stopped getting into the recommendations section. Many of its subscribers wrote to the host that they didn't see the notifications and that they found new videos only if they went to the channel.

The demand for political content, judging by the trends for news sites, remains high, so the channel author doesn't think that his videos have simply become uninteresting. But, if the algorithms and rules change, then he would be happy to at least receive the information from YouTube about how these rules changed and how his own approach should change so as not to lose the audience.

Channel: Realnaya zhurnalistika (Реальная журналистика)

 <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCgbZ5Zi0slbwvUwiGC1om1g>

Videos disappeared from the list of recommended videos, people stopped receiving notifications from them about new videos. Traffic for such videos collapsed by 70 or 80 percent.

What is important, this story touched only those who criticize the regime of Vladimir Putin, while Putin's propagandists with thousands and even hundreds of thousands of fake subscribers feel great.

Channel: Mari Govori (Мари Говори)

 <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCL4Ttqmg5Y0yz7A0ldl6Guw>

In 2020, the channel was not monetized, which means that YouTube did not promote the relevant videos well, and channel's audience just didn't see some of the videos in the recommended video list. The videos of the channel are seen by no more than 10% of its subscribers, views are being frozen, comments are turned off and massive unsubscriptions take place on the day the video is released. At the same time, the user is not notified that she/he has been unsubscribed from my channel. Technical support does not work. The platform rules are vague.

Channel: Zueva

 <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCv7UltPPo8KVIPD6hl09xHg>

In the fall 2021, the channel encountered strange behavior of YouTube algorithms in relation to the channel. With a good starting reaction and decent commenting, videos stopped being recommended to people who were not subscribed to the channel. In addition, from the messages of subscribers, it turned out that even among users subscribed to the channel, the videos did not pop up in notifications (even when all the bells were pressed / enabled).

Correspondences with technical support staff did not result in anything (the channel host sent them all the screenshots confirming the cases). However, there was only one answer: "everything is OK".

The attitude to "sensitive", but socially important content also deserves special attention. The video about the "Kazan shooter" and the analysis of the problem of "suicides" in Kazakhstan is automatically sent by algorithms to the "yellow" monetization. This returns to normal after a couple of days (sometimes it reaches a week), but, of course, the video is already losing its starting reaction and relevance, so it no longer falls into any recommendations.

Summary

All channels faced the following trends since September 2020:

- Videos are disappearing from recommended videos;
- Subscribers stop receiving notifications;
- Number of views decrease; traffic collapses;
- YouTube unsubscribes subscribers;
- YouTube does not explain things nor answer bloggers' questions.

This report is created by team of Friida BELL, NGO (Estonia) in cooperation with ARU Television (Estonia) and TIIM YouTube Incubator (Estonia) and in the framework of expert platform RUBYCON: security dialog.

AUTHORS:

Andrejs Berdnikovs (Latvia)

Pavel Marozau (Belarus-Estonia)

CONTRIBUTORS:

Leonid Muravjev (Kazakhstan)

Olga-Anastasiya Marozava (Estonia)

Maxim Berezinsky (Belarus)

Pavluk Bykovski (Belarus)

Maria Chistiakova (Russia)

Artemy Troitsky (Estonia-Russia)

Maksim Maltsev (Russia)

Dmitri Dubovitski (Kazakhstan)

Alexandr Romanenkov (Russia) and others

