



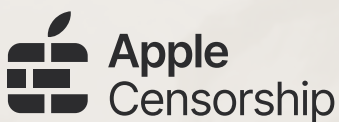
United Apple

APPLE'S CENSORSHIP AND
COMPROMISES IN RUSSIA

“This moment calls for unity, it calls for courage, and it reminds us that we must never lose sight of the humanity we all share. In these difficult times, I take comfort in knowing that we are united in our commitment to each other, to our users, and to being a force for good in the world,”

Tim, March 1st, 2022

(email sent to employees following Russia’s invasion of Ukraine.)



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INTRODUCTION

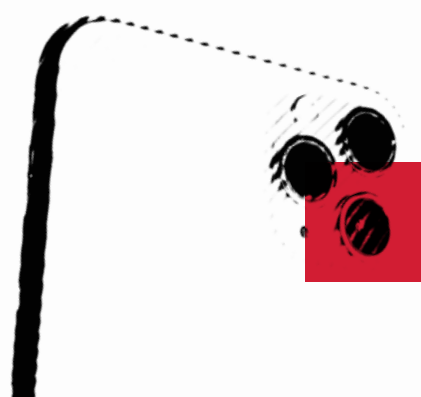
Apple began engaging with the USSR back in the 1980s, with Steve Jobs even making a personal trip to meet the Soviet government to discuss Apple's desired expansion into the region. Apple opened its first office in Russia in 2007 and launched its products and services to the country, despite Russia's rampant state censorship. Today, Tim Cook frequently justifies Apple's dealings with authoritarian governments, like Russia, with references to IBM's deeply-flawed slogan of "world peace through world trade." Apple's history and present-day dealings with Russia are an excellent case study in how corporations' reckless pursuit of profits can facilitate significant harm around the world.

The [U.S. state department](#) published a report in 2021 noting Russia experiences "significant human rights issues" ranging from extrajudicial killings, to enforced disappearances and pervasive torture, to political and religious persecution. Apple's strategic investments in Russia have assisted and facilitated the Russian government's commission of human rights violations, mass atrocities, and war crimes.

None of this should be a surprise to Apple. While the Russian Federation was only formed in 1993, it previously existed as part of the Soviet Union since 1922. Like modern day Russia, the Soviet Union was well known for systemic censorship and propaganda.

Today, Russia claims to be a federal semi-presidential republic, however, many argue the Russian government under Vladimir Putin is an authoritarian state, a kleptocracy, and that Putin is a dictator. Since 2004, Russia has been ranked as 'not free' in Freedom House's Freedom in the World report and recorded the sharpest decline in terms of digital freedom in its [2022 Freedom on the Net](#) report. The Economist Intelligence Unit recently ranked Russia as the 'authoritarian regime'.

Apple knew or should have known that the introduction of their services and products into Russia would result in demands by the Russian government to implement their century-old censorship, surveillance, and propaganda policies into Apple's technology. Apple's concurrent dealings with the Chinese government would have also informed Apple that authoritarian governments will often not accept "no" for an answer. Apple strategically invested in the Russian markets knowing that their presence there could, and likely would, further harmful and violent national policies. This report analyzes examples where Apple used its App Store, software, and physical products to implement the Russian government national censorship policies. It also takes a deeper look at Russia's App Store and the unavailable apps that were identified by AppleCensorship's App Store Monitor (ASM).





<https://www.cultofmac.com/436469/today-in-apple-history-steve-jobs-visits-the-soviet-union/>

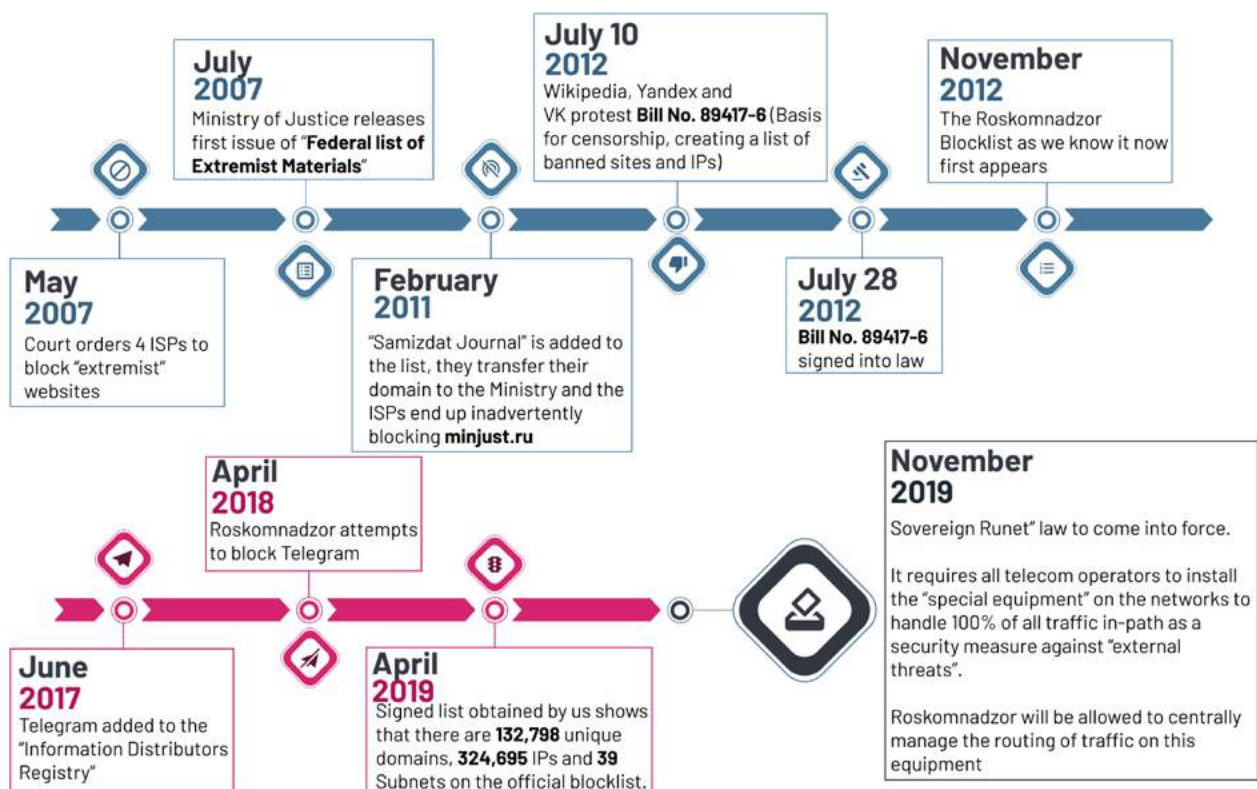
I. APPLE'S COMPROMISES WITH THE KREMLIN

The Russian government's digital authoritarianism is currently one of the most severe in the world, only matched by that of military regimes such as in Myanmar or repressive governments in Pakistan, Sudan, Saudi Arabia and one-party dictatorships such as Vietnam and China. The Kremlin's current censorship policies are the result of more than a decade-long accumulation of repressive legislation and sustained efforts to control information by suppressing any dissenting voices within the country's borders.

Recently, the Russian government has focused efforts on exerting control over foreign Big Tech companies. These efforts were translated into numerous legislative reforms including new laws: defining critical content as illegal, making tech companies responsible for the content they host, and new regulations requiring foreign companies set up 'representative offices'.

Russia Censorship Policies

Following Putin's return to this presidential status in 2012, the Kremlin began experimenting with new approaches to [information manipulation and control](#) that differed significantly from the often-compared Chinese 'Great Firewall' system. The Russian government pioneered a distinct model of censorship relying on less overt and more plausibly deniable, legalistic, and often non-technical mechanisms to manipulate online information flows, narratives, and framings, to affect and shape public opinion without resorting to systematic, technical censorship. The leveraging of third-party botnets, independent hackers, contracted video-producers, and pro-regime bloggers in coordinated actions provides a further degree of [deniability](#) of government involvement. Bots, trolls, leaks of compromising or manipulated content, DDoS attacks causing temporary 'technical failures,' and other difficult-to-attribute techniques are combined with occasional legal prosecutions or site-blockages for exemplary offenders under vague laws and mass digital surveillance, creating an overall online environment which can still appear relatively unrestricted.



Timeline of Russian Information Control

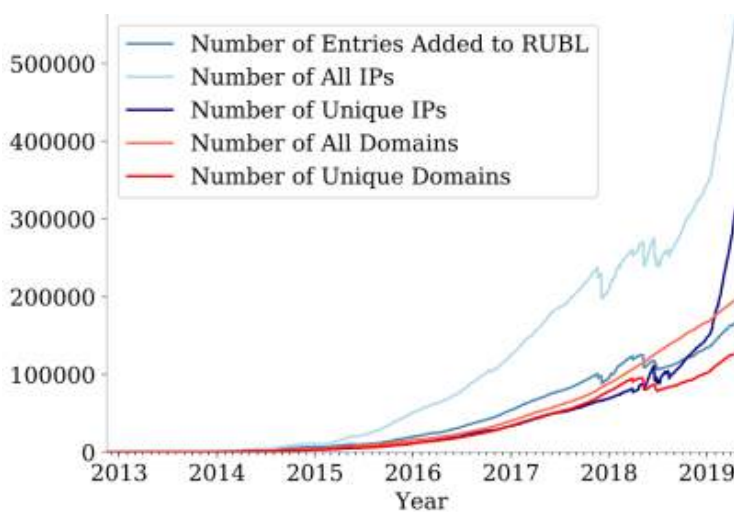
Censored Planet: <https://censoredplanet.org/russia>

The primary entity in charge of nationwide Russian digital censorship is a government agency named Roskomnadzor (RKN), that controls and supervises mass media (including electronic mass media), mass communications, information technology, and telecommunications. Other Russian government bodies may request that Roskomnadzor block sites that have content directly related to their scope of duty (a health agency may request to have health-related content blocked). However, Roskomnadzor itself is responsible for systematizing and maintaining a singular and centralized blocklist (known as the 'single register'). The blocklist, first published in November 2012 and enforced by all Internet Service Providers (ISPs), is used for the censorship of individual URLs, domain names, and IP addresses.

Russia then continued to develop nationwide censorship policies on top of its ISPs-enabled censorship strategies. For example, in 2014 the Information Security Law was passed which imposed restrictions on social media users in Russia, including prohibiting ‘anonymous’ accounts. Human Rights Watch [called](#) the law “draconian” and “another milestone in Russia’s relentless crackdown on free expression.”

In 2019, Russia adopted its Sovereign Internet Law (also known as ‘Sovereign RUnet’ law) which required telecom operators to install ‘special equipment’ on their networks to protect against ‘external threats’ allowing the Kremlin to track, filter, and reroute traffic.

Russian authorities now routinely [block](#) access to sensitive political and social content and citing a range of justifications, Russian censors also restrict or attempt to restrict access to many social media and communication platforms. According to unofficial [data](#), more than 4.74 million internet resources were blocked in Russia at the end of 2019.



The [Russian government](#) favors tools that make websites slow to load, instead of completely unreachable, a tactic which renders websites useless for distributing photos and video. It is more difficult for users to circumvent than old-fashioned methods of blocking sites, and it is more difficult for organizations that monitor and publicize cases of online censorship to detect.

Evolution of the blocklist

Censored Planet: <https://censoredplanet.org/russia>

“For the past decade, Russian authorities have used a web of vague laws and flimsy pretexts to intimidate and harass independent and dissenting voices,” [said Hugh Williamson](#), Europe and Central Asia director at Human Rights Watch. “Now they are bluntly imposing censorship combined with a false narrative that they demand everyone must parrot.” All of this makes it more challenging to detect and workaround censorship.

APPLE'S HISTORY WITH USSR & RUSSIA

Apple's History with Russia goes back to the Soviet Union. Steve Jobs [visited](#) the Soviet Union in 1985, allegedly in an effort to market Apple products in the USSR as well as to potentially [establish](#) a manufacturing facility to produce Apple computers in the Soviet Union. Jobs was accompanied by a commercial attaché from the U.S. Embassy in Moscow, who supervised the visit. Jobs and Apple's then General Counsel & VP of marketing, Al Eisenstat, told the attaché about their plans to talk to Soviet politicians about the manufacturing plant & introduction of Apple products to the USSR.

Per [RadioFreeEurope](#), the attaché "*warned [Apple] this would violate massive numbers of export regulations aimed at keeping sophisticated technology out of the hands of the United States' Cold War enemy.*"

Apple did introduce its products within Russia in 1996 and Apple [opened](#) its first office in Russia in 2007. Apple used Russian companies to sell and promote its products in Russia from 1996–2008, then in 2008 [transitioned](#) to using a subsidiary and official distributors.

In 2009, Apple [launched](#) the iTunes Store in Russia, following an initial 2008 [landing page](#) that redirected to authorized resellers.

Former Russian President Dmitry Medvedev [visited](#) Apple's headquarters in Cupertino and met with CEO Steve Jobs as part of a tour of Silicon Valley in 2010. Steve Jobs even [gave](#) the then-Russian President Dmitry Medvedev an iPhone 4 as a gift. Today, this visit is still memorialized on the Kremlin [website](#). Medvedev visited Apple in Silicon Valley again in 2011, [visiting](#) a San Jose Apple retail store and meeting with Jobs.

In 2012, a Russian university announced a design competition to honor Steve Jobs. As a result, in 2013, an enormous iPhone was [unveiled](#) in St. Petersburg, Russia, as a tribute to former Apple CEO Steve Jobs. They also launched a website dedicated solely to celebrating Steve Jobs.

Apple began [direct sales](#) of Apple products in Russia in 2013, first with an [online store](#), then later with brick & mortar retail stores. In 2016, Apple launched Apple Pay in Russia and has continued to expand its portfolio in the Russia market.



[Apple reportedly to start direct sales in Russia next year, Apple Stores to follow](#)



[Russland droht Apple, Nokia und Co.](#)



[Steve Jobs Memorial](#)

The Russian approach to information control attempts to undermine and marginalize the voices of opposition movements and leaders, while also shaping broader public opinion, through tactics like: surveillance, legal and extra-legal pressures, new forms of pro-regime content, mass-production and narrative manipulation, plausibly deniable cyberattacks, and hacking.

“The Russian government is using its growing technological capacity to engage in nontransparent, unlawful, and extrajudicial restriction of digital rights in Russia,” said Anastasiia Kruope, assistant Europe and Central Asia researcher at Human Rights Watch. “This past year’s [2021] dramatic crackdown on internet freedoms is the culmination of many years’ efforts by the authorities to restrict the rights and freedoms of Russians online.”

Year	Law	Impact
2014	<i>Information Security Law</i>	Allows pre-court blocking of websites instigating riots, extremist or terrorist actions, thus extending the outreach of the original law fighting child pornography. This law has been actively used ever since to ask Facebook, YouTube and Twitter to remove or restrict access to content.
2016	<i>Yarovaya Law</i>	Requires telecom operators to store recordings of phone conversations, text messages and users’ internet traffic for up to 6 months, as well as metadata for up to 3 years. This data as well as “all other information necessary” is available to authorities on request and without a court order.
2019	<i>Sovereign RuNet Law / Sovereign Internet Law</i>	Compulsory installation of technical equipment for counteracting threats; Centralized management of telecommunication networks in case of a threat and a control mechanism for connection lines crossing the border of Russia; Implementation of a Russian national Domain Name System (DNS).
2019	<i>Amendment to Article 4 of the Law of the Russian Federation “On the Protection of Consumer Rights”</i>	Smartphones, computers and other smart devices purchased in Russia must come pre-installed with Russian software. Applied to a number of technology companies but sometimes reported in the media as the “Law against Apple.”
2021	<i>Prohibited Content Law</i>	Compels social media companies to coordinate their content moderation efforts with Roskomnadzor, which will develop a special e-service for that purpose.
2021	<i>“Foreign Agent” Law</i>	Enables authorities to target online media sharing of politically threatening content.
2021	<i>The Landing Law</i>	Requires websites with more than 500,000 daily users in Russia to open in-country offices by January 2022.
2022	<i>Criminal Code, Article 207.3</i>	Criminalizes “public dissemination of knowingly false information disguised as truthful messages containing data about the use of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation to protect the interests of the Russian Federation and its citizens, and uphold international peace and security, as well as data about the execution by state bodies of the Russian Federation of their authority beyond Russian borders for the same aims”.

RUSSIA'S LANDING LAW

OFFLINE COERCION IN SUPPORT OF ONLINE CENSORSHIP & SURVEILLANCE

In June 2021, Russia adopted a law on foreign tech companies providing services to Russian users. The law requires websites with more than 500,000 daily users in Russia to open in-country offices by January 2022. Sanctions for noncompliance include banning the company from advertising or from using ads on their websites, restricting payments to the companies, and partial or full blocking of access to their websites.

According to Roskomnadzor, this law is applicable to 13 companies, including Google; Apple; Meta (including Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp, and other companies); Twitter; TikTok; and Telegram. Roskomnadzor [warned](#) that the tech companies that violate the legislation risk facing advertising bans, data collection, money transfer restrictions, or could be completely denied.

[The U.S. Department of State](#) wrote that this kind of local representation affords Russian authorities leverage to enforce fines and regulations through pressure on domestically located employees. If tech companies do not comply, Roskomnadzor is authorized to block their access to Russian users' personal data. The [Washington Post](#) called Putin's Landing Law a "hostage law" because it demanded the world's largest technology companies to keep employees in Russia and thus also exposed those employees to potential arrest or other punishment for their employers' actions.

[Barrons explained](#) that internet control is not just about blocking content and filtering access to websites. Russia's internet control model relies heavily on traditional, physical coercion, from intelligence service harassment to complex, confusing, and inconsistently enforced speech laws.

The Kremlin's use of physical coercion was on stark [display](#) in the fall of 2021. Ahead of nationwide Russian elections, Russia's internet censor demanded that Google and Apple delete an app made by opposition leader Alexey Navalny. Both companies—who had new, local offices per a recent law—initially refused. So, the Kremlin went after their employees.

The Russian parliament [summoned](#) Google company representatives to demand they delete the app and threaten punishment if they failed to comply—calling keeping the app up "election interference," according to Russian news sites Meduza and the Moscow Times. Bailiff officers visited company offices to demand compliance, the Financial Times reported, and the Kremlin sent masked, armed thugs to hang around Google's Moscow office. It was also recently revealed in the Washington Post that agents believed to be from the FSB, the successor security service to the Soviet-era KGB, showed up at the home of Google's top executive in Russia and told her she would be imprisoned in 24 hours if nothing was done. After her security team moved her to a hotel, the agents followed the person there to repeat the warning. Sure enough, both companies deleted the app. The U.S. government made no comment on the blatant pressure tactics. Apple and Google did not directly respond to the Washington Post or Financial Times about their findings.

"You can't talk about Moscow's shaping and suppression of information without discussing the 'economy of terror.'"

- Russian-American journalist [Masha Gessen](#)

iCensorship

In recent years, Apple has acquiesced to the Russian government in a number of censorship, surveillance, and information manipulation requests. From 2018 until 2022, Apple compliance with the Kremlin's requests seems to be increasing year over year. If Apple's compliance with requests for censorship is best illustrated by cases of app removals from the iOS App Store, Russia's innovative and extensive oppression has also led to censorship within software (LGBTQ+ watch faces), accessories (LGBTQ+ watch bands), software-based cartography (Crimea), protocols (Private Relay), and even the design of iOS (Russian iOS).

These instances where the censorship was identified and reported by users, developers, reporters, or organizations begin to show us how pervasive the extent of Apple's censorship for Russia may be. In addition to demands by the Russian government for apps to be removed from the iOS App Store (Russia's App Store only, or in cases of Platform Policy Takedown Requests), the Russian government may surveil, throttle, or otherwise interfere with access to and usage of those apps.

The Russian government's intimidation tactics may also chill those using an iPhone with a Russian profile, and those people may be the only ones to witness some of the Kremlin's more aggressive moves (like Apple's configuration of Apple Maps for Russia to show Crimea as part of Russia). There may be much censorship we do not yet know about, either because it is happening in the shadows or because those who see it are too afraid to report it. Thus, the instances we do know about should be taken with great weight as witnessing the 'smoke' for a larger fire.

Apple Pride Watch Face & Strap (2018)



Among all sensitive topics in Russia, topics related to the LGBTQ+ community best embodies Apple's hypocrisy and double standards practiced in Russia. Starting in at least 2016, Apple has made numerous controversial decisions related to the LGBTQ+ community. This exposed the insincerity of Apple's self-proclaimed support for LGBTQ+ rights and Apple's inclination to sacrifice its supposed principles in order to enhance its business and financial position.

Russia has [enacted](#) numerous draconian and discriminatory laws in recent years, resulting in a deterioration of human rights in the country. Russia implemented a "gay propaganda" law in 2013, which per the European Court of Human Rights, reinforces prejudice and encourages homophobia. The law enables threats of fines and jail time for 'offensive' speech. Online intimidation and physical violence against LGBTQ+ people also escalated following the adoption of the law.



[Read more on Twitter](#)

In January 2014, a coalition of over 15 Russian LGBTQ+ organizations encouraged Apple to stop business dealings with Euroset, a Russian mobile phone retailer, following news that Euroset's creative director said he wanted to shove all gay people "alive into an oven," compared homosexuality to fascism, and declared it an "overt sign of mental abnormality." The letter called on Tim Cook to "set Apple as an example of a corporate citizen who supports basic human rights." However, Apple was still partnering with Euroset to sell its products in Russia until at least 2016. The homophobic director did resign from Euroset following the backlash.

Dear Apple: Don't Work With Russian Company Whose Creative Director Advocates "Burning Gays in Ovens"



An open letter to CEO Tim Cook asks Apple to be a "corporate citizen who supports basic human rights."

KATIE ROSE QUANDT | JANUARY 7, 2014

After Tim Cook came out as gay in 2015, there was an anti-LGBTQ+ response in Russia. Previously, a coalition of companies (ZEFS) had erected a monument (which looked like a massive iPhone) to honor Steve Jobs in 2013. After Tim Cook came out, ZEFS then took down the monument and said because Tim Cook came out as gay, the monument "violated Russia's laws."



Tim Cook's coming out prompts backlash in Russia



5:40 PM · Nov 3, 2014 · Adobe® Social



12:04 PM · Nov 3, 2014 · Twitter Web Client

Russians hear Tim Cook is gay, pull dead Steve Jobs' memorial

[Vitaly Milonov](#), a member of the ruling United Russia party who sits on St. Petersburg's legislative assembly and the architect of what is known as Russia's "gay propaganda" law, has called for Apple's CEO to be barred entrance to Russia (persona non grata). "What can he bring us? The Ebola virus, AIDS, gonorrhoea? All of them over there have promiscuous relations. Ban him forever," Milonov said.

In 2015, it was exposed that the Russian language version of Siri, Apple's voice-controlled virtual assistant, provided homophobic answers to queries relating to LGBTQ+ topics. The allegations first came to light when a Russian man uploaded a video to YouTube appearing to show Siri either evading questions or expressing a negative response. When contacted by the Guardian, Apple refused to give further comment, replying with a single sentence saying only that Siri's responses had been "fixed".

In 2018, [The Verge reported](#) that Apple's special Pride (LGBTQ+) edition Apple Watch strap was not available in Russia. [Fast Company](#) called the censorship "shocking." [The Verge also reported](#) that Reddit users and Apple support forum users had also been questioning the lack of a Pride watch face in Russia for several months.

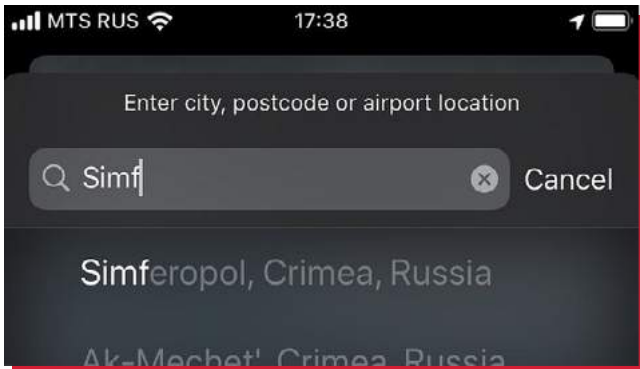
iOS developer Guilherme Rambo found [evidence](#) that the Pride Apple Watch face was "hardcoded to not show up if the paired iPhone is using the Russian locale." The Verge tested this on an iPhone and the pride watch face disappeared once the iPhone was switched to the Russian locale.

As Apple complied with the Kremlin's demands, Google made efforts to resist Russia's discriminatory laws. Google even promoted LGBTQ+ rights during the 2014 Winter Games in Russia. The Google homepage globally displayed a rainbow-inspired Google Doodle and the Olympic Charter, which called for the Olympic spirit of "no discrimination of any kind against every individual practicing sport."

Between mid-2016 and mid-2020, 32 different LGBTQ+ websites were [blocked](#) at least once on Russian internet providers. "News websites on LGBTQ+ related topics were most commonly blocked, followed by cultural and human rights sites," said the report published by OutRight Action International, the University of Toronto's Citizen Lab and the Open Observatory of Network Interference (OONI) in 2021. That year, Russia had the highest number of networks that block LGBTQ+ URLs with a Citizen Lab study [detecting](#) the blocking of LGBTQ+ websites on 172 distinct Autonomous System (AS) networks.

Apple's acquiescence to the Russian government has only strengthened Russia's anti-LGBTQ views and discriminatory process. Further, there is no record of Apple ever opposing or protesting the Russian government's derogatory comments towards Tim Cook.

Apple Maps & Crimea (2019)



[Read more on Twitter](#)



We guess Ukrainians not giving any thanks to @Apple this #Thanksgiving!

So let's all remind Apple that #CrimealsUkraine and it is under Russian occupation - not its sovereignty.



MFA of Ukraine and 6 others

7:09 PM - Nov 27, 2019 - Twitter Web App

[Read more on Twitter](#)



IPhones are great products. Seriously, though, @Apple, please, please, stick to high-tech and entertainment. Global politics is not your strong side. #CrimealsUkraine

5:24 PM - Nov 27, 2019 - Twitter for Android

[Read more on Twitter](#)

Apple also submitted to geopolitical requests from the Kremlin, including altering cartography related to disputed territories which quickly instigated international outcry.

Russian forces annexed Crimea from Ukraine in March 2014, drawing international condemnation. In January 2015, U.S. President Obama ordered [sanctions](#) that targeted Crimea, including banning US-based online services like Amazon, PayPal, and Apple's App Store from operating in the disputed peninsula. Apple also [banned](#) sales of its products in Crimea and [blocked](#) accounts of Crimean producers from distributing through the iTunes Store, removed published apps from all App Store if the developers were in Crimea, and blocked internal accounts from sending or receiving money if they were in Crimea.

After Russia's invasion, Apple [modified](#) its maps to show Crimea as "disputed territory" to all of its users. Then in November 2019, Apple [updated](#) Apple Maps within Russia to show Crimea as part of Russia. The [BBC reported](#) that Apple [complied](#) with Russian demands to show the annexed Crimean Peninsula as part of Russian territory on its apps. A member of the Russian government claimed Apple had complied with the Russian constitution. He [said](#) representatives of Apple were "reminded" that labeling Crimea as part of Ukrainian territory was a criminal offense under Russian law.

Ukraine [denounced](#) Apple for referring to the annexed Crimean Peninsula as a Russian territory on its apps. "Let me explain in your terms, Apple," Ukraine's Foreign Minister Vadym Prystaiko [said](#) via Twitter in November 2019. "Imagine you're crying out that your design and ideas, years of work and piece of your heart are stolen by your worst enemy but then smb ignorant doesn't give a damn about your pain. That's how it feels when you call Crimea a (Russian) land."

Former world chess champion Garry Kasparov [suggested](#) Apple's decision to change its maps inside Crimea to make it appear as part of Russia constituted "a huge scandal."

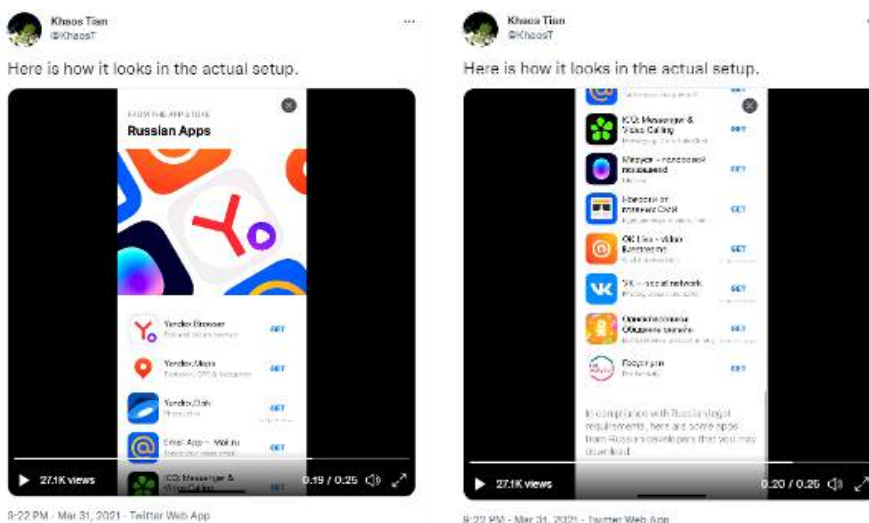
"American tech companies should stand up for the values of innovation that made their success possible, not bow down to dictators for a little extra cash they don't even need," Kasparov said.

Vadym Prystaiko, Ukraine's foreign minister, [wrote](#): "iPhones are great products. Seriously, though, @Apple, please, please, stick to high-tech and entertainment. Global politics is not your strong side. #CrimealsUkraine."

Soon after Putin's war on Ukraine began in 2022, Apple apparently [changed](#) its Apple Maps display for users not in Russia to show Crimea as part of Ukraine—rather than a disputed territory as previously depicted. Apple has repeatedly refused to comment on its current policy for users opening Apple Maps within Russia.

Apple's Russia iOS (2019)

Apple has also been very secretive about another software modification it made for Russia in recent years, on its Russian version of its iOS installed in all Apple devices sold in the country.



Here is how it looks in the actual setup.

- Khaos Tian (@KhaosT)

[Read more on Twitter](#)

In November 2019, Russian parliament [passed](#) a law requiring all mobile devices to preload a selection of applications from Russian developers as part of activation screens for new devices.

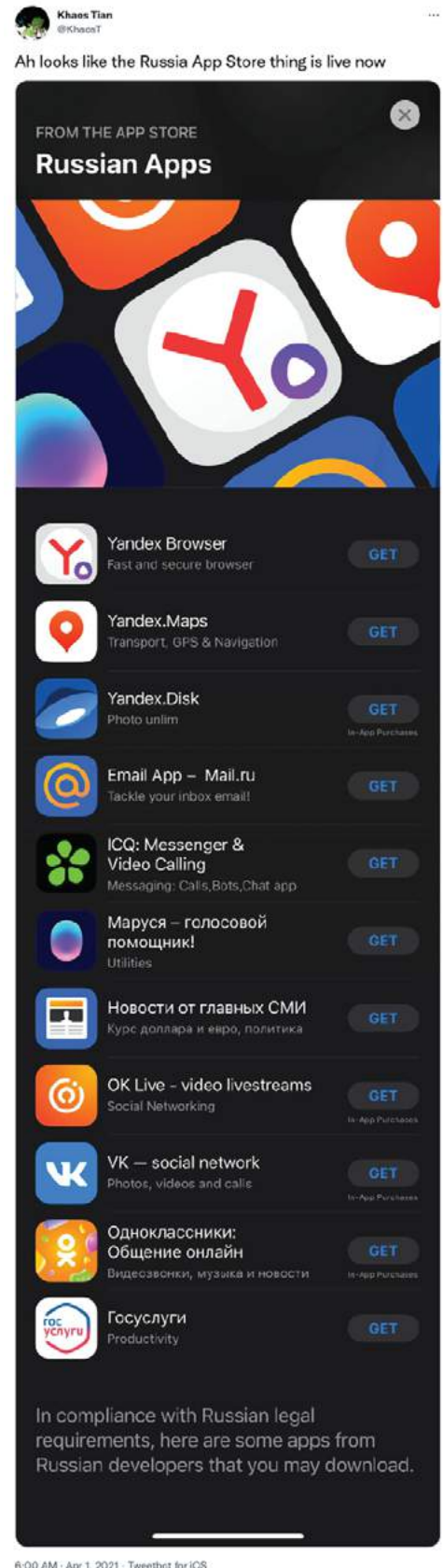
The pre-installed apps law became colloquially known as the “law against Apple” in Russia, as apparently Apple had threatened to [leave Russian market](#), when confronted with the request to change the rules of its walled-garden ecosystem in the country. Apple eventually conceded, stayed in Russia, and is now shipping a Russian-version of its iOS.

The [Washington Post reported](#) in March 2021, that Apple began configuring iPhones sold in Russia to promote Kremlin-backed social media companies, enabling users to activate them with a single click. It was a concession that advanced Putin’s goal of migrating Russian people to platforms controlled by the Russian government.

Apple’s decision baffled Russian analysts. “What is the reason at this point to accommodate the Russian government?” [asked](#) Sergey Sanovich, a postdoctoral scholar at Princeton University tracking the Kremlin crackdown. “I’m not sure what [Apple] has in Russia that they are trying to protect at this point.”

In April 2021, [The Verge reported](#) Apple’s Russia iPhones saying in the set-up screen, “In compliance with Russian legal requirements, continue to view available apps to download,” before showing a short list of just shy of a dozen apps. These include various Yandex apps, the email app from Mail.ru, a video live-streaming service called OK Live, and popular Russian social network VK.

Apple’s decision to bend its rules on pre-installed apps in Russia emboldened its government to continue making more demands, including blocking privacy features in the region, such as Private Relay. It may also inspire other repressive regimes to make similar demands in the future.



[Read more on Twitter](#)

[iPhone Setup Process in Russia Now Includes List of Suggested Russian Developed Apps](#)

Private Relay (2021)

In September 2021, Apple blocked Russian user's access to its new security tool, Private Relay, that could have helped Russians reach foreign news coverage and other content deemed 'illegal' by the government. The feature, designed to prevent websites and network providers from creating detailed user profiles and identifying users, comes pre-installed on new phones in the United States and some other markets. The service hides users' IP addresses and browsing activity and protects their unencrypted web traffic.

Apple initially offered the service in Russia, but those who tried to activate it in Russia later received a message saying that the program was 'not supported' in that country. The company had initially decided to not release Private Relay in ten countries, including China, Belarus, Colombia, Egypt, Kazakhstan, Saudi Arabia, South Africa, Turkmenistan, Uganda, and the Philippines.

Government Requests for User Data

Apple has also been increasingly compliant in handing over user data to the Kremlin per Apple's own 'Government Requests' reporting. Apple not only tells on itself by the data itself, but Apple also makes it clear they know their actions would invite public controversy with Apple's opaque and misleading presentation of the data.

When looking at Apple's data directly on its website, visualization of the data gives the misleading impression that the requests have decreased over the years when in fact the number of requests by the Russian government have significantly increased, for all types of data requests (i.e. device, account and financial data).



Sergey Sanovich
@SergeySanovich

Hey, @Apple! Turn on Private Relay for Russia (preferably, by default and for free). Don't help the Russian government conceal the atrocities of the war against Ukraine from the Russian people. Don't facilitate censorship, help people access unfiltered news.

Private Relay is not supported in this country or region.

Private Relay is not supported in Russia. You will be able to turn it on when you are online in a supported country or region.

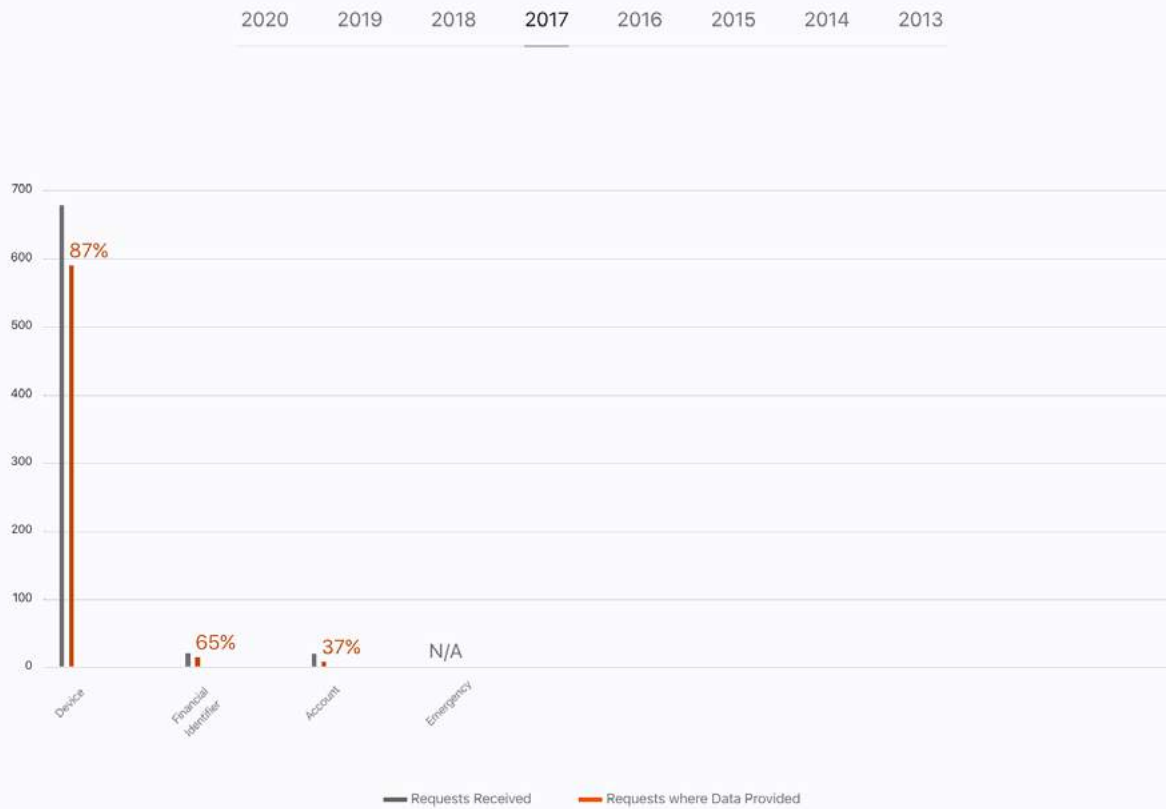
[Learn More...](#)

12:22 AM · Mar 9, 2022 · Twitter Web App

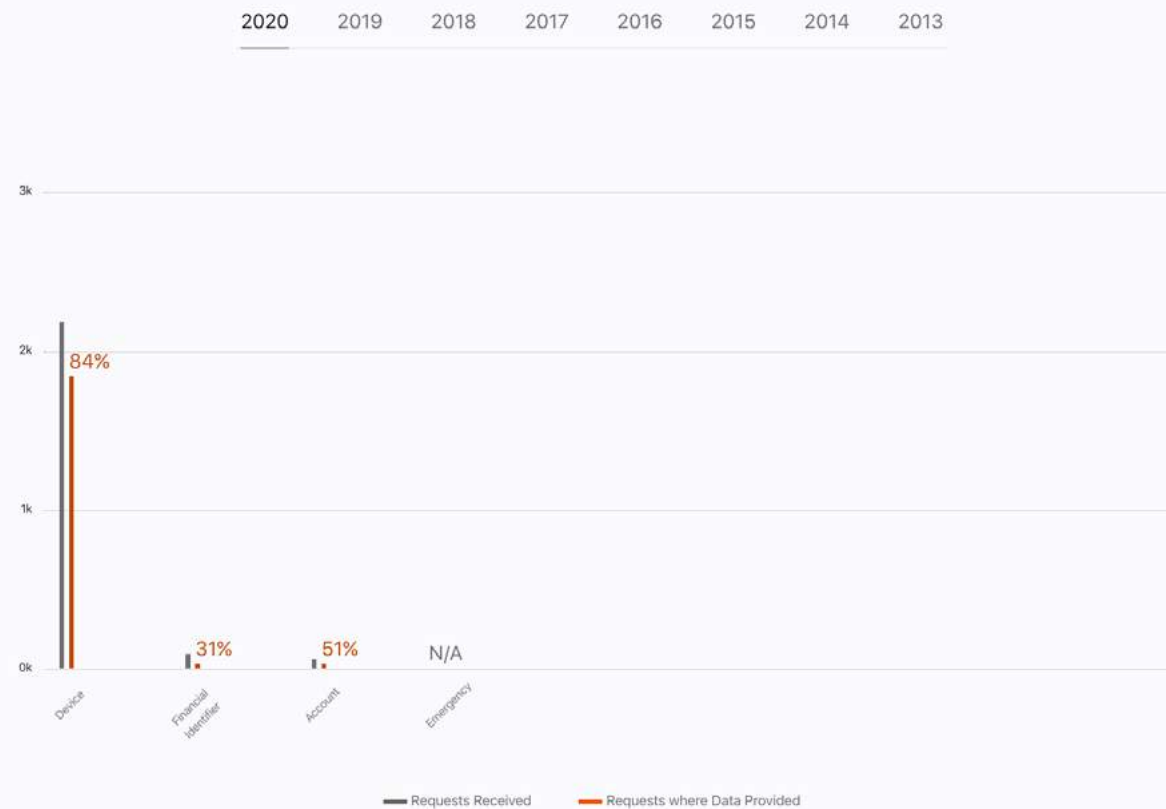
[Read more on Twitter](#)



Russia Government Requests for Customer Data by Year

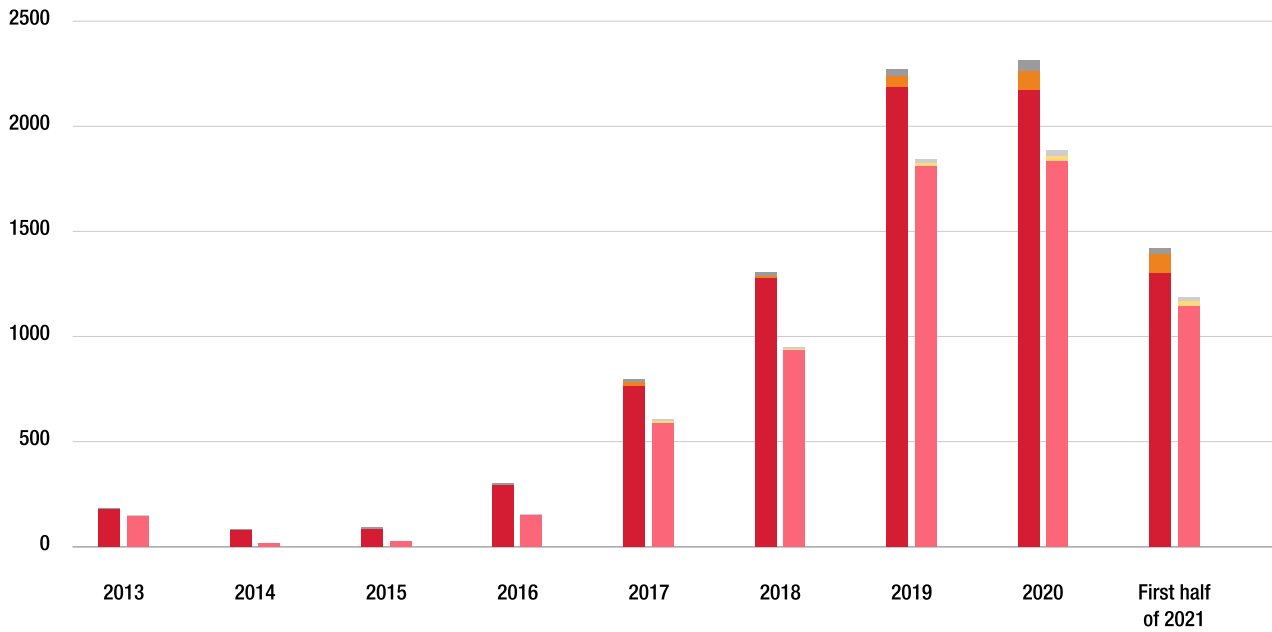


Russia Government Requests for Customer Data by Year



Apple's data is presented in a misleading way, giving the impression that government requests and Apple's compliance are decreasing over time. Source: <https://www.apple.com/legal/transparency/ru.html>

AppleCensorship analyzed Apple's data and prepared its own charts showing trends over time and as it can be seen, both the requests and Apple's compliance have increased exponentially over time.



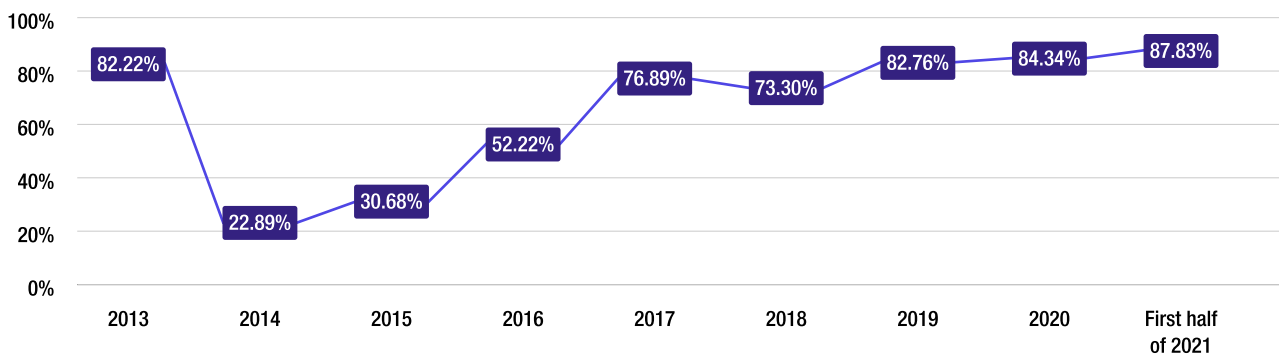
Left column: Received Requests

■ Device
 ■ Financial Identifier
 ■ Account
 ■ Emergency

Right column: Compiled Requests

■ Device
 ■ Financial Identifier
 ■ Account
 ■ Emergency

Apple's Compliance Rate



II. APPLE'S RUSSIA'S APP STORE

Overview

September 2021 Measurements

by AppleCensorship's App Store Monitor (ASM)

App Store Monitor (ASM)

Apps Unavailability Per Category - Russia's App Store - September 2021

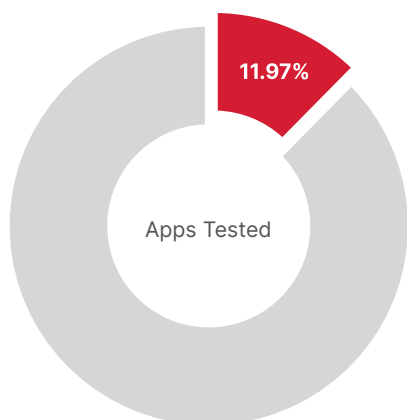
Number of apps tested	Book	Business	Developer Tools	Education	Entertainment	Finance	Food & Drink	Games	Graphics & Design	Health & Fitness	Lifestyle	Magazines and Newspapers	Medical
3,877	6	16	0	11	41	27	4	120	0	10	32	1	13
	Music	Navigation	News	Photo and Video	Productivity	Reference	Shopping	Social Networking	Sports	Stickers	Travel	Utilities	Weather
	13	7	17	12	18	2	16	30	25	0	6	34	3

Total Number of Unavailable Apps: **464**

Ratio of Unavailability: **11.97%**

Unavailable apps Russia's App Store (September 2021).

Source: ["Censored on the App Store" Report \(pages 14 – 15\)](#) / [Nov 1, 2022 Press release](#)



From **3,877 tested Apps**, **464 Apps** were detected as unavailable.

- 99 App Stores out of 155 had over 3000 apps tested.
- Russia was ranked 19th out of 155 App Stores in terms of unavailability of apps.
- Only 10 App Stores were found to have from 400 to over 500 unavailable apps (405 to 550).

In November 2021, AppleCensorship published its first overview report on the App Store. Studying the unavailability of apps in the 155 App Stores operated by Apple and based on the data collected by the App Store Monitor (ASM), we estimated no less than 29 million cases of app unavailability in Apple's App Stores.

Although there are discrepancies in availability of apps between App Stores - a fact which quashes the very idea of a unique App Store - we found that the average percentage of app unavailability (the ratio between the number of apps tested in a given App Store to the proportion of apps which were found to be unavailable in that App Store) among all 155 App Stores, was around 10% (10.46%).

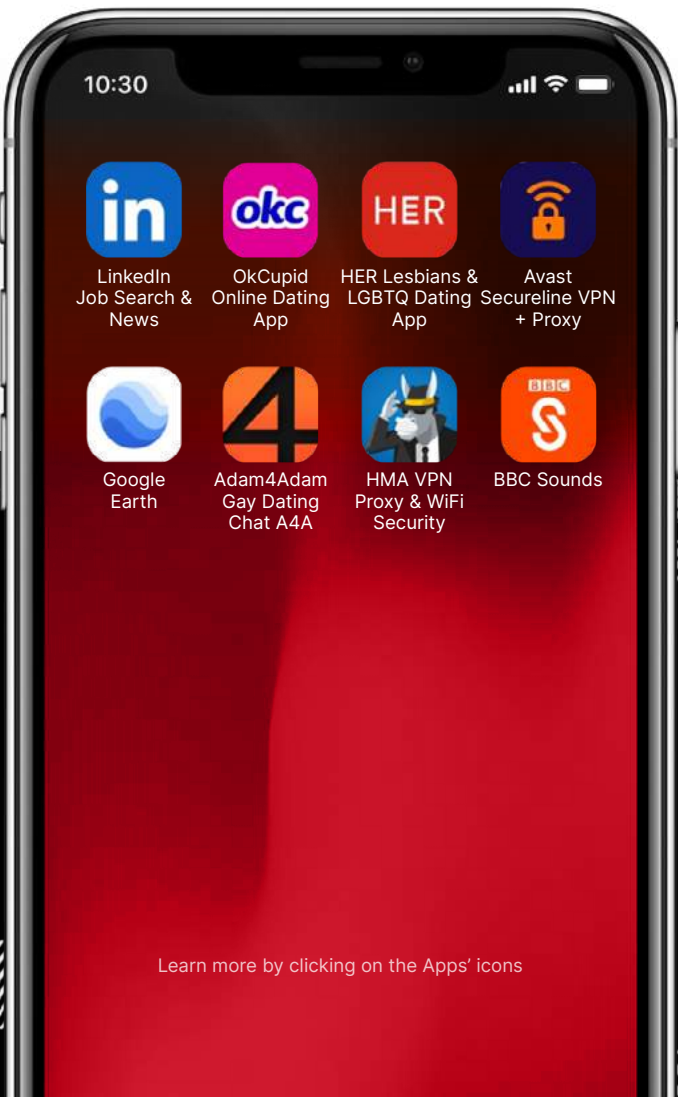
Russia's App Store already ranked high in terms of apps' unavailability. With 464 apps being found unavailable out of the 3877 apps that had been tested, and a ratio of apps' unavailability of almost 12% (11.97%), Russia's App Store ranked at the 19th position out of 155 App Stores.

When it came to specific categories, Russia's App Store was ranked 7th for unavailable "Health and Fitness" apps (10), 12th for "Social Networking" apps (30), and 10th for unavailable "Lifestyle" apps (32), three categories which include many LGBTQ+ related apps.

Russia's App Store ranked 3rd for Productivity (18), and 12th for Utilities (34), two categories which regroup the majority of VPN apps.

[All results are available here](#)

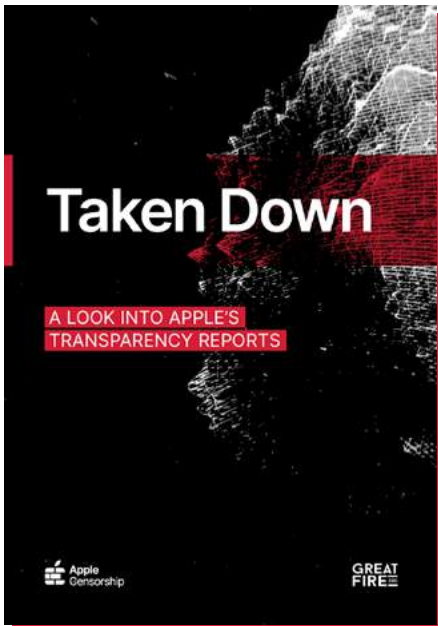
[List of unavailable apps in Russia's App Store detected by the ASM at the time](#)



Some of the most popular apps in the App Store, which were found to be unavailable in Russia

Learn more by clicking on the Apps' icons

App Takedown Requests



On April 21, 2022, AppleCensorship published a report, [“Taken Down: A Look into Apple’s Transparency Reports”](#), exposing how Apple carefully engineered its Transparency Reports to conceal as much information as possible on app removals from the 175 App Stores it operates worldwide.

The report, which examines the four Transparency Reports covering “Worldwide Government App Store Takedown Requests” from January 2019 until December 2020, established that Russia was, along with China and India, one of the few countries which continually requested that Apple remove apps over the 2 years period, appearing in every semiannual report compiled by Apple.

According to Apple, Russian authorities requested the removal of 42 apps over two years. Apple complied in 95.24% of the requests, removing 40 apps, 19 of which were removed from all 175 App Stores and not just Russia’s App Store.

APP STORE TAKEDOWN REQUESTS & REMOVALS – COUNTRY BREAKDOWN (2019 - 2020)						
Country	Total # mentions (out of 8 tables)	Total # requests made	Total # apps targeted	Total # apps removed	Apple’s Refusal (# apps)	Apple’s Compliance Rate
Russia	6	17	42	40	2	95,24%

Compliance with Russia’s requests for removal, although already high in 2019, increased to the maximum, despite the regime’s notoriety for censoring information and cracking down on digital freedoms.

By initiating 19 “Platform Policy Violations Takedown Requests (PPVTR), - i.e. removals - Russia triggered around 3,000 “collateral removals” across all App Stores. Such figures expose the real dynamics behind App Takedown Requests and reveal that authoritarian countries such as Russia impact the App Store’s ecosystem the most. The idea that Russia’s Internet policies only affect its own citizens is demonstrated to be false. While countries like India, (which triggered more removals than Russia in 2019 - 2020) Norway, or Austria also have their fair share of apps removed following takedown requests, their impact on the App Store globally cannot be compared to that of Russia (or China), as they only removed apps in their own country’s App Store. Over that two years period, 19 unknown apps were removed by Apple from 155/175 App Stores at the request of Russia, without any legal justification having been publicly disclosed, and while users worldwide are left with no option but to trust that Apple “knows [the line] when [it] sees it”.

September 2022 Measurements

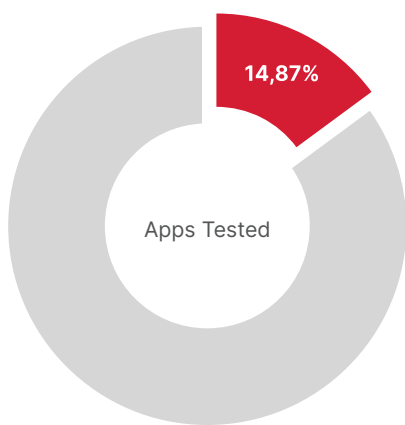
by AppleCensorship's App Store Monitor (ASM)

App Store Monitor (ASM)

Apps Unavailability Per Category - Russia's App Store - September 2022

Number of apps tested	Book	Business	Developer Tools	Education	Entertainment	Finance	Food & Drink	Games	Graphics & Design	Health & Fitness	Lifestyle	Magazines and Newspapers	Medical
15,784	26	82	1	64	204	140	55	659	2	62	142	4	67
	Music	Navigation	News	Photo and Video	Productivity	Reference	Shopping	Social Networking	Sports	Stickers	Travel	Utilities	Weather
	59	35	66	54	84	30	131	117	71	0	38	130	24

Total Number of Unavailable Apps: **2,347** Ratio of Unavailability: **14,87%**



From **15,784 tested Apps**,
2,347 Apps were detected as unavailable.

- 99 App Stores out of 155 had over 3000 apps tested.
- Russia now ranks 10th out of 160 App Stores in terms of unavailability of app.
- The App Store Monitor conducted a similar amount of tests in Ukraine's App Store (about 15 000 apps tested), and found 1859 unavailable apps, almost 500 less than in Russia's App Store.

Today, Russia's app store ranks 10* out of 160 App Stores in terms of apps' unavailability, with a ratio of unavailability at 14.87%. The App Store Monitor has found 2347 apps unavailable in Russia's App Store.

[Full list of these apps can be viewed here](#)

Comparison of the 2021 and 2022 Measurements

The percentage of unavailability consists in the ratio of unavailable apps in a given App Store over the total number of apps tested in that App Store.

At the time of AppleCensorship's September 2021 report, Russia was 19th/20 highest of app unavailability with 11.97%, now it ranks 10th. The App Store Monitor was only recently able to crawl certain App Stores: Marocco, Gabon, Tonga, Rwanda, and DR Congo, all of which currently rank in top positions in terms of unavailability percentage. Therefore, it is expected that Russia's App Store position in that ranking is in fact higher than it seems. This will be visible when more tests will have been run by the ASM and when the recently monitored Stores see their unavailability percentage decreasing.

Countries with highest percentage of unavailability (September 2021)

Nr	Country	Percentage of Unavailability	Number of Tested Apps
1	China (mainland)	22.02%	28,843
2	Liberia	14.17%	1136
3	South Korea	14.10%	3708
4	Nigeria	13.54%	1137
5	Tanzania	13.22%	1127
6	Saudi Arabia	13.20%	3781
7	Congo-Brazzaville	12.97%	1126
8	Burkina Faso	12.85%	1128
9	Ghana	12.78%	1135
10	Mauritania	12.70%	1126
11	Zimbabwe	12.70%	3243
12	United Arab Emirates	12.51%	3484
13	Mongolia	12.32%	1136
14	Tunisia	12.27%	3186
15	Estonia	12.19%	1132
16	Turks & Caicos Islands	12.15%	1128
17	Greece	12.06%	3268
18	Nepal	12.01%	1132
19	Russia	11.97%	3877
20	Madagascar	11.92%	1133

Source: [Censored on the App Store : First Overview of AppleCensorship Data](#) (September 2021)

Countries with highest percentage of unavailability (October 2022)

Nr	Country	Percentage of Unavailability	Number of Tested Apps	Number of Unavailable Apps
1	China (mainland)	28,44%	36289	10319
2	Morocco	20,73%	3410	707
3	Gabon	18,72%	3434	643
4	Tonga	16,57%	3410	565
5	Rwanda	16,52%	3414	564
6	Democratic Republic of the Congo	16,45%	3513	578
7	Hong Kong SAR China	16,09%	14465	2328
8	Turks & Caicos Islands	15,21%	3491	531
9	St.Lucia	14,95%	3466	518
10	Russia	14,68%	16995	2494
11	Malta	14,66%	3621	531
12	Sierra Leone	14,49%	3491	506
13	Latvia	14,41%	3497	504
14	Laos	14,40%	3563	513
15	Nigeria	14,31%	3585	513
16	Brunei	14,15%	3597	509
17	Papua New Guinea	14,11%	3508	495
18	Jordan	14,06%	3520	495
19	Cape Verde	14,04%	3484	489
20	Moldova	14,04%	3598	505

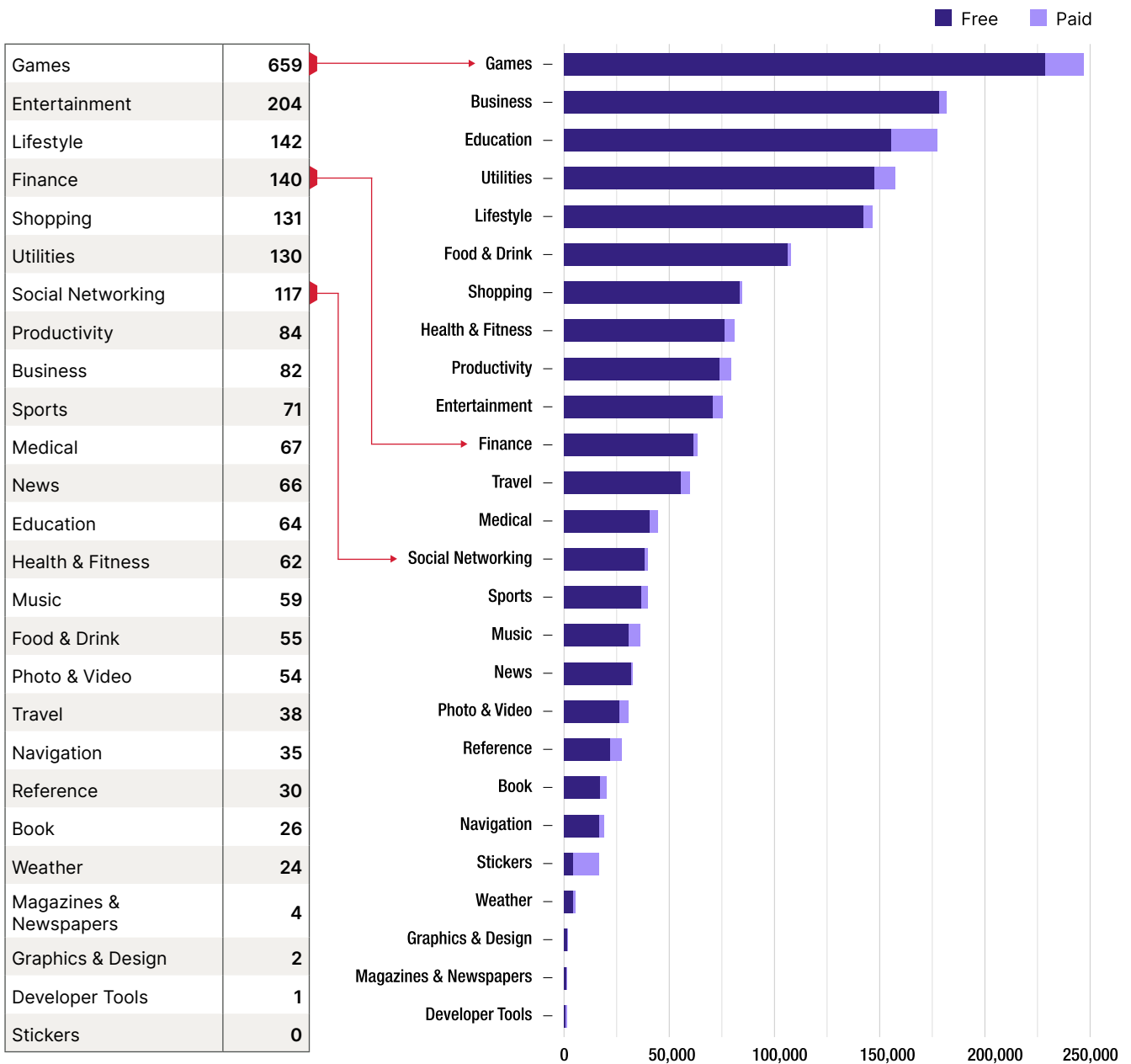
Source: [AppleCensorship.com](https://applecensorship.com) (Data exported on Oct 13, 2022)

In terms of categories, the main evolution between 2021 and 2022 is the increase of the number of unavailable apps from three categories: Shopping apps (from 10th to 5th position), Finance apps (from 6th to 4th position) and, to a lesser extent, Business apps (from 11th to 9th position). This is largely explained by the start of the war in Ukraine, and the decision of many companies to remove their own apps and services from Russia and Russia's App Store. Only 64 apps out the 353 apps that these three categories regroup, were tested unavailable by the App Store Monitor before February 24, 2022, the day on which Russian military troops entered Ukraine. The other 289 apps belonging to these three categories were removed between February 27, 2022 and September 15, 2022.

Rank	Category	Number of Unavailable Apps Sept 2022	Number of Unavailable Apps Sept 2021 (w. category's ranking)
1	Games	659	121 (1)
2	Entertainment	204	44 (2)
3	Lifestyle	142	31 (4)
4	Finance	140	27 (6)
5	Shopping	131	16 (10)
6	Utilities	130	35 (3)
7	Social Networking	117	30 (5)
8	Productivity	84	18 (8)
9	Business	82	15 (11)
10	Sports	71	25 (7)
11	Medical	67	13 (12)
12	News	66	17 (9)
13	Education	64	11 (14)
14	Health & Fitness	62	10 (16)
15	Music	59	11 (15)
16	Food & Drink	55	4 (20)
17	Photo & Video	54	12 (13)
18	Travel	38	6 (19)
19	Navigation	35	7 (17)
20	Reference	30	1 (22)
21	Book	26	6 (18)
22	Weather	24	3 (21t)
23	Magazines & Newspapers	4	1 (22)
24	Graphics & Design	2	0 (24)
25	Developer Tools	1	0 (24)
26	Stickers	0	0 (24)
Total		2347	464

As in 2021, the unavailability of apps per category in 2022 continues to reflect the distribution of categories in the App Store with a few noticeable differences: While the Entertainment category accounts for a small part of all the apps in the App Store, it ranks 2nd in terms of unavailable apps in Russia's App Store. On the contrary, while Education apps account for a significant part of all apps, it only ranks 13th in terms of unavailability. No immediate conclusion can be made out this observation and more data on these categories' unavailability in other App Stores would be required to allow further analysis.

Unavailability in Russia's App Store VS. Distribution of Categories in iOS App Store



Cases of unavailability by category

The representation of different categories of apps in the App Store (2021). Other sources offer different numbers but all rank the *Games* category first, and *Finance* and *Social Networking* in relatively low positions.

As shown before, the evolution of apps unavailability after the invasion of Ukraine, propelled Shopping and Finance categories in the top five unavailable apps categories. Setting aside these two categories - for which we can surmise the probable cause of unavailability (i.e. voluntary removals by the apps' owners) - we observe that both Social Networking and Productivity categories stand out as including a significant number of unavailable apps (117 Social Networking apps and 84 Productivity apps) while these categories do not account for many apps within the App Store.

Local & Regional Apps

In Apple's app distribution, an undetermined number of apps are released only in one or very few specific App Stores. The unavailability of these "local" or "regional" apps in almost all App Stores but one (or a few), is notably explained by the relevance of an app in a specific context (e.g. a city map only released in the country of that city), its language (e.g. an app in Arabic language only released in countries where Arabic is the main language), by copyright issues or by the desire of the app's developer or owner to target a specific market for any other reason. It is worth noting that self-censorship can be hidden behind such geo-blocking decision, as developers choose not to release their app in certain App Stores due to specific regulations and requirements as well as to avoid any dispute with Apple's App Review Board.

Therefore, the availability of an app worldwide (the number of App Stores an app is present in) constitutes a useful indication on the possibility for a given app's unavailability to be a case of censorship. Most of the apps which are only released in a single App Store, are deliberately made unavailable by their developer/owner. However, even those cases can hide cases of censorship or self-censorship, as some developers may have tried to release their app in other regions in vain or may have been too apprehensive to even try. In a different case scenario, some locally released apps are paired with a sister app, which is offered in all App Stores but the one where the local app is released. Such is the Case for the for the BBC News which has a [local app](#) and a [global one](#).

Out of the 2347 apps tested unavailable in Russia on September 15, 1239 apps are found to be present in only one App Store worldwide. Another 569 apps are present in between two and ten App Stores, 301 apps are present in between 11 and 30 App Stores, 94 apps are in between 31 to 50 App Stores, and 144 apps are present in 51 or more App Stores.

Although the vast majority of apps is not tested in all existing App Stores (as this would require the ASM to run millions of tests), partial information on the availability of an app in the App Store globally already gives an indication on the targeted nature of the unavailability of that app in Russia's App Store: the more available the app is, the more probable it is for it to have been deliberately blocked in Russia's App Store. Further investigation (i.e. information collected and provided by human sources), is required to obtain conclusive evidence on censorship and its causes.

Detected Changes

From its launch in January 2019, until September 15, 2022, the App Store Monitor has detected 586 "Detected Changes" (i.e. both apps which are deleted or restored in Russia's App Store). Out of these 586 changes, 237 are app removals :

[View the list of all app removals from Russia's App Store detected by the App Store Monitor between January 2019 and September 2022](#)

Only 22 of these removals occurred in 2021 ; 180 removals were detected in 2022. Such increase in the number of detected deletions is partly due to the ASM augmenting its monitoring of Russia's App Store after the war in Ukraine started, a decision taken in the last days of February 2022. However, this increase of removals also results from a wave of voluntary removals from Russia's App Store initiated by app developers and owners, either to show their support of Ukraine or to comply with sanctions imposed by the European Union or specific governments (see the section "[The dangerous opacity behind app removals in wartime](#)").

Targeted Censorship: Categorical Bans

One of the main obstacles to producing a complete picture of Apple's policing of the App Store is the absence of information and figures for apps removed regionally due to governments targeting of certain categories of apps or blanket restrictions requested by said governments.

While Apple communicates (poorly) on government requests relating to one or more specific apps, they do not disclose the number of apps removed due to governments requesting that Apple reject or take down all apps of a particular kind or category. In fact, this type of removal is barely acknowledged by Apple. Blanket restrictions allow governments to ensure the removal or rejection of apps by Apple without having to issue a request for every app it wants to ban. Those restrictions lead to "proactive removals": app removals or rejections initiated by Apple itself, in accordance to concealed blanket restrictions or for other politically motivated reason, such as Apple trying to avoid the ire of a government. As it has been confirmed by the New York Times in the case of China, Apple does elaborate blacklists of content that should not be uploaded in specific App Stores.

Like in China's App Store, patterns of app removals from Russia's App Store detected by the ASM suggest that specific groups of apps could be targeted by the Russian authorities and/or that such system of Apple-enforced bans and proactive removals are in place in Russia's App Store.

Apple's public relations teams have communicated on a number of occasions on proactive removals. In fact, Apple is proud of the global takedowns effected under its App Store guidelines, stating that the review process will always reject or remove 'content or behavior that we believe is over the line'. However, the review process itself is scarcely spoken about by Apple or its employees. Apple's opacity extends to discussions of its internal content curation process, where lines between removals of existing apps and pre-publication rejections (i.e. apps prevented from being offered on the App Store) are blurred and the company commingled its own guidelines with government interests.

Sensitive Categories of Apps in Russia

Such tactics by Apple have led AppleCensorship to elaborate and monitor specific ad hoc "categories" of sensitive apps. The following categorical lists of apps currently unavailable in Russia's App Store are composed of apps which have a higher probability of having been censored by Apple.

A selection of unavailable apps in Russia's App Store was made and the selected apps were regrouped in five categories of potentially "sensitive" apps : "dating, relationship and LGBTQ+ related apps", VPN and private browsing apps", "information, media, news, TV & radio apps", "Digital Security & Privacy apps", and "Social media & communication tools". A sixth category, "other, tools", has been created to regroup apps which are not by nature sensitive, but for which information on availability worldwide seems to indicate geo-blocking in Russia's App Store.

Dating, Relationship and LGBTQ+ Related Apps

LGBTQ+ related apps constitute the most prominent type of apps being unavailable in Russia's App Store, with at least 25 apps currently unavailable, including some of the most popular LGBTQ+ apps worldwide. LGBTQ+ related apps have continually disappeared over the last few years, leading to a widespread restriction of access to such apps worldwide, as detailed by AppleCensorship's report on censorship of LGBTQ+ apps published in June 2021.

Rank	App's ID	App's Name	Developer / Owner	Genre	App Tested in (# territories)	Available in (# territories)
1	1462068523	Gay dating	DigitalMarketer Limited	Social Networking	155	154
2	930441707	Bumble: Dating, Friends & Bizz	Bumble Holding Limited	Lifestyle	155	153
3	351331194	Badoo " Dating. Chat. Friends	Badoo Software Ltd	Lifestyle	155	153
4	1481809362	BC: LGBT & Bisexual Dating App	Sathish Devasani	Lifestyle	155	153
5	1152403579	Lesly: Lesbian Dating & Meetup	Chengdu Xijiu Trading Co., Ltd	Social Networking	155	149
6	338701294	OkCupid: Online Dating App	OkCupid	Lifestyle	155	129
7	1282966364	Taimi: LGBTQ+ Dating, Chat	Social Impact Inc.	Social Networking	155	125
8	573328837	HER: Lesbians&LGBTQ Dating App	Bloomer Inc	Lifestyle	155	114
9	887914690	Feeld: Meet Couples & Singles	Feeld Ltd	Lifestyle	155	102
10	1042814349	HUD, Dating & Hookup App	HUD STUDIO LIMITED	Lifestyle	106	100
11	1215154593	Threesome Chat, Couples Finder	3rder Limited	Social Networking	155	81
12	389638243	Plenty of Fish Dating	Plentyoffish Media Inc.	Social Networking	155	78
13	440185993	Adam4Adam Gay Dating Chat A4A	A4A Network Inc	Social Networking	155	71
14	1195844907	Dating for Gays & Bi Sex	TEKHNOSOFT, OOO	Entertainment	60	59
15	1344508411	#open Polyamory & ENM	Open App, LLC	Lifestyle	155	30
16	595287172	Hinge: Dating & Relationships	Hinge, Inc.	Lifestyle	155	20
17	1049979758	BRO: Friends, Dates, and FWBs	BROTECH, LLC	Social Networking	33	18
18	1178656034	Peanut: Find Friends & Support	Peanut App Limited	Lifestyle	97	15
19	305939712	Match, - #1 Dating App.	Match Group, LLC	Social Networking	112	11
20	403684733	Badoo Premium	Badoo Software Ltd	Social Networking	13	9
21	1506820334	Wave - Make New Friends & Chat	Appverse LLC	Reference	10	9
22	1463320976	LMK: Make New Friends	LightSpace Inc.	Social Networking	8	6
23	1109339083	Adult Sexy Emoji - Naughty Romantic Texting & Flirty Emoticons For Whatsapp, Bitmoji Chatting	kishan chapani	Reference	6	5
24	1241622005	Bored Chat-chat with strangers	Researchified Applications Pty Ltd	Social Networking	8	3
25	1483029919	Dating Women Ukraine - DWU	Ronald Jutte	Social Networking	5	2

VPN and Private Browsing Apps

In March and June this year, the Russian authorities confirmed that crackdowns to prevent citizens from accessing VPN services was underway. In March, 200 VPN websites were blocked by Roskomnadzor, and in June the authority said that “measures” were being taken to limit access to VPN services that violate Russian law. The majority of removals of VPN apps detected by the ASM, occurred after the start of the war.

Rank	App's ID	App's Name	Developer / Owner	Genre	App Tested in (# territories)	Available in (# territories)
1	1526930592	VPN Proxy Master super connect	Kovtun Roman Mikhailovich	Productivity	155	153
2	1223470521	AVG Secure VPN & Proxy server	AVG eCommerce CY Limited	Productivity	155	153
3	675102189	HMA VPN Proxy & WiFi Security	Privax LTD	Productivity	155	153
4	694633015	VPN Unlimited - IP changer app	KeepSolid Inc.	Productivity	155	153
5	1554819217	Fox VPN	Chap ApS	Utilities	155	152
6	1516805757	Nolog VPN - Fast Stable Proxy	Bitmorpher Limited	Productivity	155	150
7	1359212059	VPN Vault -Super Proxy App	Appsverse Inc.	Productivity	155	150
8	1441297895	VPN Ai + Private Browser	AI APPS PTE LTD	Productivity	155	149
9	633495655	SurfEasy VPN - WiFi Proxy	SurfEasy Inc	Productivity	155	148
10	1493703272	Wachee VPN	Routeme Limited Liability Company	Productivity	155	148
11	1526622816	VPN.lat - VPN ilimitado	Galaviz Montes, Johnatan Alfredo	Productivity	155	147
12	1504101226	Malwarebytes Privacy VPN	Malwarebytes Corporation	Utilities	155	147
13	771791010	F-Secure FREEDOME VPN	F-Secure Corporation	Productivity	155	146
14	1546446242	VPN +	Fin Yazilim Gelistirme Anonim Sirketi	Utilities	155	146
15	1193122683	IVPN - Secure VPN for Privacy	Privatus Limited	Productivity	155	145
16	955626407	VPN by Private Internet Access	Private Internet Access, Inc.	Productivity	155	145
17	1609177809	VPN - VPN Master & Fast VPN	ECO MOBILE COMPANY LIMITED	Productivity	155	145
18	1440130022	OSARi Simple Secure VPN	Bogdan Novikov	Productivity	146	143
19	1107224386	VPN - SPEED - 最快最稳定网络免费加速器	yang yinli	Reference	145	134
20	793096595	Avast Secureline VPN + Proxy	AVAST Software a.s.	Utilities	129	127

Rank	App's ID	App's Name	Developer / Owner	Genre	App Tested in (# territories)	Available in (# territories)
21	1095519285	Norton Secure VPN - Proxy VPN	NortonLifeLock, Inc.	Productivity	155	113
22	1494021151	Yahoo OneSearch	Yahoo! Inc.	Reference	155	25
23	1362645427	VPN - GAIA ExpressVPN Master	Bobbi Lee	Lifestyle	140	90
24	1467375203	VPN Hotspot Best VPN Proxy	YUNOAPP LLC	Productivity	89	87
25	1063151782	Tob Browser + Private Browser	Privacy Browser Inc.	Utilities	96	80
26	1456731716	VPNä,œ	Dream Downloader Infotech Ltd.	Productivity	69	59
27	1116666629	Atom - secure browser	Irina Nazaruk	Utilities	32	30
28	1112484006	Avira Phantom VPN & Wifi Proxy	Avira Holding GmbH & Co. KG	Productivity	19	17
29	1491947119	Polar VPN	High Star Eood	Productivity	14	13
30	1488316565	VPN Sense	DIGITAL HERO TOV	Productivity	10	8

Information, Media, News, TV & Radio Apps

The crackdown on independent media in Russia, which has accelerated during the pandemic in 2020 and worsened this year after the start of the war, is one of the most serious signal of deterioration of the political situation and human rights inside Russia. The government has labeled many independent media as foreign agents and has targeted individual journalists with harassment and prosecution. The regime hit a new high in March, with a media law that criminalizes objective reporting about the war in Ukraine and which threatens those who violate it with 15 years in prison. Many independent media outlets have been forced to shut down and more than 150 local journalists are reported to have gone into exile. Access to outside media sources have been blocked, with Russian citizens unable to directly access the BBC, Radio Free Europe, Radio Liberty, and other U.S. and European news sources.

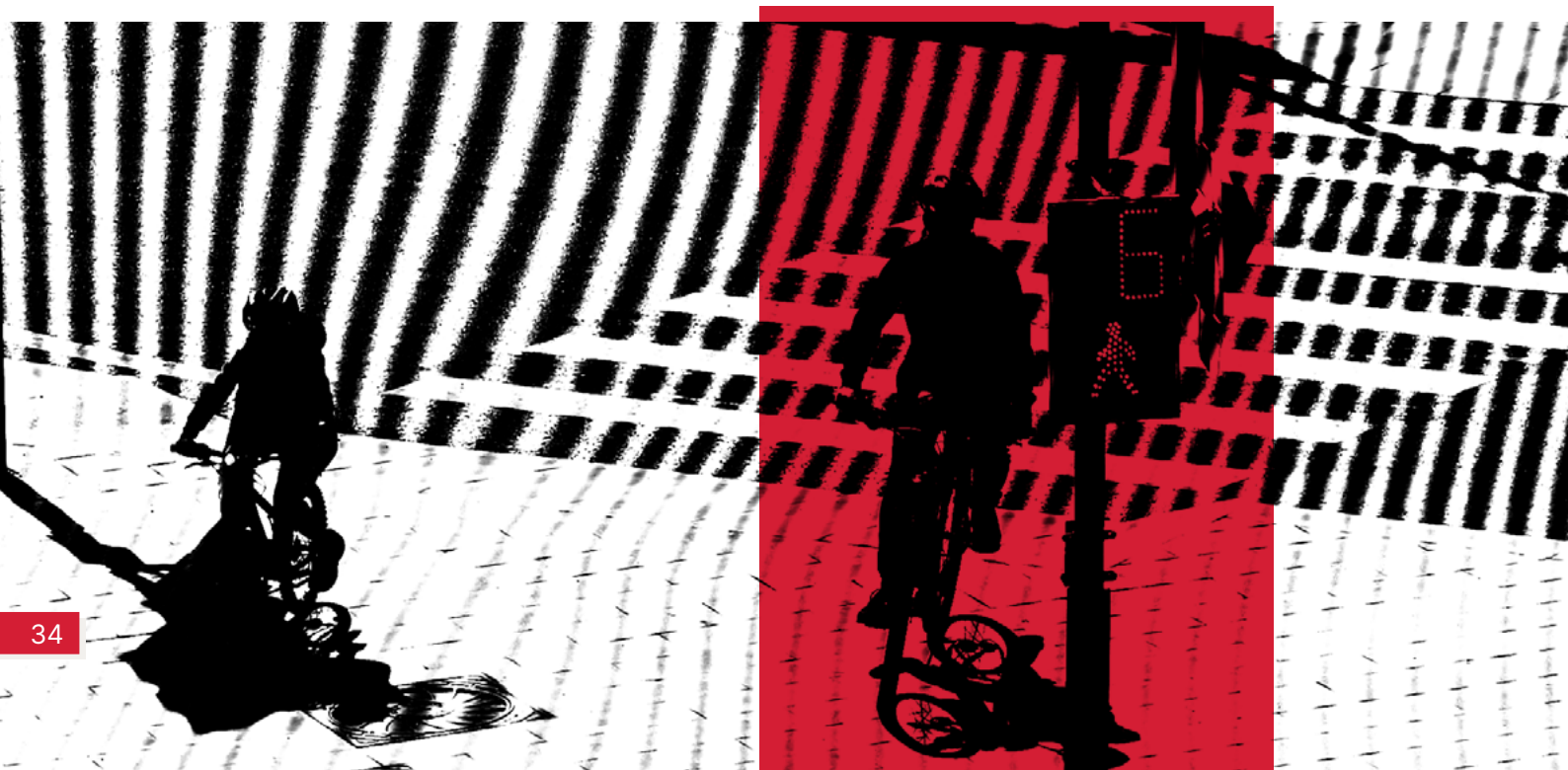
Although Russia's App Store does not reflect the present government-controlled media landscape, the list of unavailable news apps continues to grow as the App Store Monitor unveils new foreign media blocked or removed from Russia's App Store. While most of the apps providing news can be found in the eponymous category, some apps, such as [Spotify New Music and Podcasts](#) and [TuneIn Radio: News & Music App](#), which gives access to VOA networks radios, belong to the Music category or even to the Business category. Apple's [Apple TV](#) app remained available in Russia's App Store as of September 15, 2022.

Rank	App's ID	App's Name	Developer / Owner	Genre	App Tested in (# territories)	Available in (# territories)
1	418987775	Tuneln Radio: News & Music App	Tuneln	Music	160	159
2	288429040	LinkedIn: Job Search & News	LinkedIn Corporation	Business	155	153
3	324684580	Spotify New Music and Podcasts	Spotify	Music	155	145
4	545519333	Amazon Prime Video	AMZN Mobile LLC	Entertainment	87	85
5	319295332	Tuneln Radio Pro	Tuneln	Music	71	70
6	1462759162	TV Marti +	United States Agency for Global Media	News	155	50
7	712437486	LinkedIn Recruiter	LinkedIn Corporation	Business	44	43
8	1113752736	RadioPublic - The Podcast App	RADIOPUBLIC PBC	News	42	41
9	565967395	MEGOGO - TV, Movies, Audiobook	Megogo OOO	Entertainment	40	39
10	610437234	VOA News 标准英语新闻广播 2021 年合集	Yiyi Shen	News	69	38
11	496681035	The Baltimore Sun	Tribune Company	News	48	34
12	1099118521	哔哩哔哩直播姬	Shanghai Kuanyu Digital Technology Co., Ltd	Utilities	124	31
13	576468704	MY FOX8	Local TV LLC	News	40	29
14	947984433	Amazon Fire TV	AMZN Mobile LLC	Utilities	30	28
15	971265422	HBO Max: Stream TV & Movies	WarnerMedia Global Digital Services, LLC	Entertainment	95	25
16	751712884	Pluto TV - Peliculas y Series	Pluto, Inc.	Entertainment	71	24
17	342792525	IMDb	IMDb	Entertainment	20	19
18	858527021	HN: Hacker News Reader	Sokichi Fujita	News	18	17
19	1446075923	Disney+	Disney Electronic Content, Inc.	Entertainment	39	17
20	334256223	CBS News: Live Breaking News	CBS Mobile	News	36	13
21	425655609	Yahoo新聞 - 香港即時焦點	Yahoo! Inc.	News	155	13
22	373238146	LA Times	Los Angeles Times Communications LLC (US)	News	17	12
23	354730788	New York Daily News	New York Daily News, LP	News	15	11
24	1132762804	NewsBreak: Local News	Particle Media Inc.	News	63	10
25	950527505	NewsDigest (ニュースダイジェスト)	JX PRESS Corporation	News	10	6

Digital Security & Privacy Apps

Along with many VPN apps, a number of digital security, privacy oriented and network related tools became unavailable after the start of the war. However, many of apps tested by the ASM were only tested in Russia's App Store for the first time after the start of the war, making it very difficult to ascertain if those apps were already unavailable before the war. Such is the case for [Avira](#), [McAfee](#), [Norton](#) and Avast security apps.

Rank	App's ID	App's Name	Developer / Owner	Genre	App Tested in (# territories)	Available in (# territories)
1	562315041	Network Analyzer	Jiri Techet	Utilities	65	64
2	1278474169	Norton 360: Mobile Security	NortonLifeLock, Inc.	Utilities	47	45
3	474990205	DocuSign - Upload & Sign Docs	DocuSign	Productivity	27	25
4	692893556	Avira Mobile Security	Avira Holding GmbH & Co. KG	Utilities	36	34
5	504750161	Norton Password Manager	NortonLifeLock, Inc.	Utilities	8	6
6	1276551855	Avast Security & Privacy	AVAST Software a.s.	Utilities	134	131
7	1099085132	WiFi Master - by WiFi.com	LinkSure Network Holding Pte. Limited	Utilities	120	105
8	1538761576	Authenticator	UNSTABLE, SL	Productivity	8	7



Social Media & Communication Tools

After blocking Twitter on March 4, and banning Meta (Facebook) and Instagram on March 21 for hosting ‘extremist’ content, the Russian authorities intimidated other platforms using new laws criminalizing “fake” news and anti-war stances. [YouTube](#) (and its affiliated apps) remains available in the country’s App Store along with other popular platforms such as [TikTok](#) and [Snapchat](#) without any temporary removal having been detected by the ASM.

Communication tools owned by Russian tech company [Yandex](#) (now partly owned by government-controlled company VK), remained available as of September 15, 2022 this report. However, less than two weeks after the period covered by the present lists, Apple removed all apps owned by Russian company VKontakte (aka VK) including “[VK: social network, messenger](#)”, a Russian equivalent of Facebook, and the email application “[Почта Mail.ru](#)” from all App Stores where the apps were previously available. The implications and impact caused by these removals, as well as Apple’s content curation policies related to compliance with sanctions is discussed later in this report.

Rank	App's ID	App's Name	Developer / Owner	Genre	App Tested in (# territories)	Available in (# territories)
1	443904275	LINE	LINE Corporation	Social Networking	155	153
2	990903485	Emoji Keyboard by LINE	LINE Corporation	Entertainment	90	85
3	341249709	Hootsuite - Social Media Tools	Hootsuite Media Inc.	Social Networking	155	154
4	712437486	LinkedIn Recruiter	LinkedIn Corporation	Business	44	43
5	309735670	Indeed Job Search	Indeed Inc.	Business	51	25
6	953614327	Ello	Ello PBC	Social Networking	149	3
7	922793622	Email - Edison Mail	Edison Software Inc.	Productivity	62	61
8	473225145	QQ Mail	Tencent Mobile International Limited	Utilities	60	50
9	1285713171	Messenger Kids	Facebook, Inc.	Social Networking	47	34
10	997102246	Spark “ Email App by Raddle	Raddle Inc.	Productivity	35	34
11	1312825768	Hello Yo – Group Chat Rooms	HELLO YO PTE. LTD.	Social Networking	36	17
12	395563123	dscout	dscout, Inc.	Lifestyle	22	15
13	1061724021	Fiesta by Tango	TangoMe, Inc.	Social Networking	13	12
14	765359021	Collect by WeTransfer	WeTransfer BV	Productivity	10	9
15	835399970	FreedomPop: Calling & Texting	STS Media, Inc.	Utilities	155	9
16	1107107453	Utternik - Opinion Rewards App	Rohitesh Gupta	Lifestyle	14	8
17	314716233	TextNow: Call + Text Unlimited	TextNow, Inc.	Social Networking	39	8
18	397648381	Talkatone: WiFi Text & Calls	TALKATONE, INC.	Social Networking	50	8
19	1517524960	Spotify Greenroom: Talk live	Betty Labs Incorporated	Social Networking	8	5

Other Tools

The following table does not consist of particularly sensitive apps. However, the availability of these apps worldwide seems to indicate a deliberate removal from Russia's App Store (or an intended unavailability from the day the app was released).

Rank	App's ID	App's Name	Developer / Owner	Genre	App Tested in (# territories)	Available in (# territories)
1	299117180	Airports	Applicate Ltd	Reference	155	153
2	364901807	â€ŽDocuments: Media File Manager	Readdle Technologies Limited	Productivity	113	112
3	1040093707	iScanner: PDF Docs Scanner App	BP Mobile LLC	Business	49	46
4	466693925	ScheduledDay	tadashi atoji	Utilities	44	36
5	979401801	Browser and Documents Manager	Eilvera UAB	Utilities	34	32
6	896694807	Working Copy - Git client	Anders Borum	Developer Tools	22	21
7	340268949	Commander Compass Go	Pavel Ahafonau	Navigation	18	17
8	1126658370	CLM Timer â€œ Meeting Stopwatch	Evan Stone	Productivity	18	17
9	970353453	Usage: System Activity Widgets	Oleh Stasula	Utilities	15	14
10	744920098	Boating Marine & Lakes	NAVIONICS S.R.L.	Navigation	15	13
11	955837609	HERE WeGo Maps & Navigation	HERE Apps LLC	Navigation	16	7
12	1138348055	BIM 360 Team	Autodesk	Productivity	9	7
13	1473929657	Aweray Remote (AweSun)	AWERAY PTE. LTD.	Productivity	9	7

App Store Case Studies

A number of high profile cases illustrate the disproportionate power that Apple holds on apps and apps developers as well as the company's readiness to curb free speech and freedom of information when it means securing its profit generated by a presence in the Russian market.

In January 2017, shortly after having removed the New York Times app from its China's App Store, Apple removed the LinkedIn app from Russia's store. Apple's decision followed a demand from Roskomnadzor, which had blocked the professional network several weeks prior its request sent to Apple and Google. The app remains unavailable in Russia (along China) as of today.

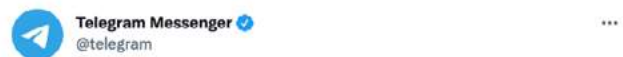
More recent cases, such as the request to remove Telegram Messenger in 2018 and the removal of Alexey Navalny's Smart Voting app (Навальный) reveal even more on the mechanics governing Apple's relationship with the Russian government and on the extent of Apple's ability to censor content.

Telegram.app (2018)

In April 2018, a Russian court had announced that the secure messaging app Telegram was **banned** in Russia because the app had refused to provide a backdoor for the Russian government to decrypt and surveil messages sent on the platform. However, the app remained available in the Russian version of Apple's App Store for almost two months.

At the end of May 2018, Roskomnadzor asked Apple to remove the app from the App Store and block it from sending push notifications to local users. Creating the appearance of Apple weighing in favor of the Russian government, Apple **prevented** Telegram from updating the App Store in February 2018 until the app was resubmitted with requested changes. Pavel Durov, the founder of Telegram, denounced Apple's refusal to allow the messaging service's software to be updated globally.

"Apple has been preventing Telegram from updating its iOS apps globally ever since the Russian authorities ordered Apple to remove Telegram from the App Store," explains Durov in a Telegram message. "While Russia makes up only 7 percent of Telegram's user base, Apple is restricting updates for all Telegram users around the world since mid-April."



Russia asked both @Apple and @Google to remove Telegram from their stores on April, 17. Our global iOS updates stopped coming through that same day. In the meantime, Telegram for Android got 4 updates.



nytimes.com
Telegram App Says Apple Is Blocking Updates Over Dispute With Russia (Publi...
The allegation undercuts the importance Apple has placed on privacy and encrypted communication, and highlights the gatekeeper role the company pla...

12:38 PM · May 31, 2018 · Twitter Web Client



We call on @Amazon, @Google, @Microsoft, and @Apple to resist Russia's internet censorship campaign.

Stand for human rights by ensuring @Telegram's access to their platforms and allowing them to change IP addresses without limit. abcnews.go.com/Technology/wir

10:26 PM · Apr 18, 2018 · TweetDeck

[Read more on Twitter](#)

The revelation made by Durov was significant because it undercut the supposed importance that Apple's chief executive, Tim Cook, had publicly placed on privacy and encrypted communication, and added to criticism that Apple too easily acquiesces to the demands of foreign governments.

"Russia banned Telegram on its territory in April because we refused to provide decryption keys for all our users' communications to Russia's security agencies," Durov [said](#) in a statement posted to his official Telegram channel. "We believe we did the only possible thing, preserving the right of our users to privacy in a troubled country. Unfortunately, Apple didn't side with us," he continued.

Apple finally [approved](#) Telegram's app updates in June 2018 following public outcry.

Navalny's SmartVoting.app : Навальный (Navalny) (2021)



[Read more on Twitter](#)

On September 17, 2021, Apple [removed](#) an app developed by Russian activists working with jailed Kremlin critic and opposition leader Alexei Navalny from Russia's App Store after Russia accused the American technology companies (Apple, Google) of election interference, and threatened fines and criminal prosecutions, while also calling Navalny supporters "extremists."

The tactical voting app, named "Navalny" (Навальный) allowed voters who did not want President Vladimir Putin's ruling political party, 'United Russia', to win the election, to organize around a single opposition candidate in each of the 225 legislative constituencies used in Russia to elect half of the seats in the State Duma Parliament, in an effort to boost the number of non-Kremlin-approved politicians in power.

"Removing the Navalny app from stores is a shameful act of political censorship," said Ivan Zhdanov, former Anti-Corruption Foundation head and a Navalny ally, in a statement on Twitter. "Russia's authoritarian government and propaganda will be thrilled."

On the same day, on Twitter, [Ivan Zhdanov shared](#) a [message](#) received from Apple where the company explained that the Navalny app had been blocked for users inside Russia because it *"includes content that is illegal in Russia, which is not in compliance with the App Store Review Guidelines."*

[On September 23](#), Alexey Navalny published a thread on Twitter to share his views on the removal of his app by Apple and Google: *"If something surprised me in the latest elections, it was not how Putin forged the results, but how obediently the almighty Big Tech turned into his accomplices,"* Navalny [said](#) on Twitter.

He also called on employees inside the companies to raise the issue, writing: *"I know that most of those who work at Google, Apple, etc. are honest and good people. I urge them not to put up with the cowardice of their bosses."*

"We know this stuff is complicated, but it is your responsibility to understand and make sure your app conforms with all local laws,"

- Apple

Apple went on to say that Russian officials had also determined that the app violated the legislation of the Russian Federation by enabling interference in elections. On Twitter, some users in Russia reported after the app's removal that the App Store displayed a misleading message when trying to search for the Navalny app, claiming falsely that *"the developer deleted this app from the App Store."*

A week after the removal, [Al Jazeera reported](#) that Google and Apple had caved in to pressure when the Russian government turned to threats of criminal prosecution of their Russia-based staff. Court marshals had visited Google's Moscow headquarters to demand that the company's search engine stop returning results referring to the 'Smart Voting' app.

Ahead of the 2021 parliamentary elections, the Russian government started [blocking](#) Russian Internet users' access to the 'Smart Voting' app on various platforms. Roskomnadzor also ordered Apple, Google, Cloudflare, and Cisco to withhold services to the project that allowed it to circumvent Russia's censorship efforts.

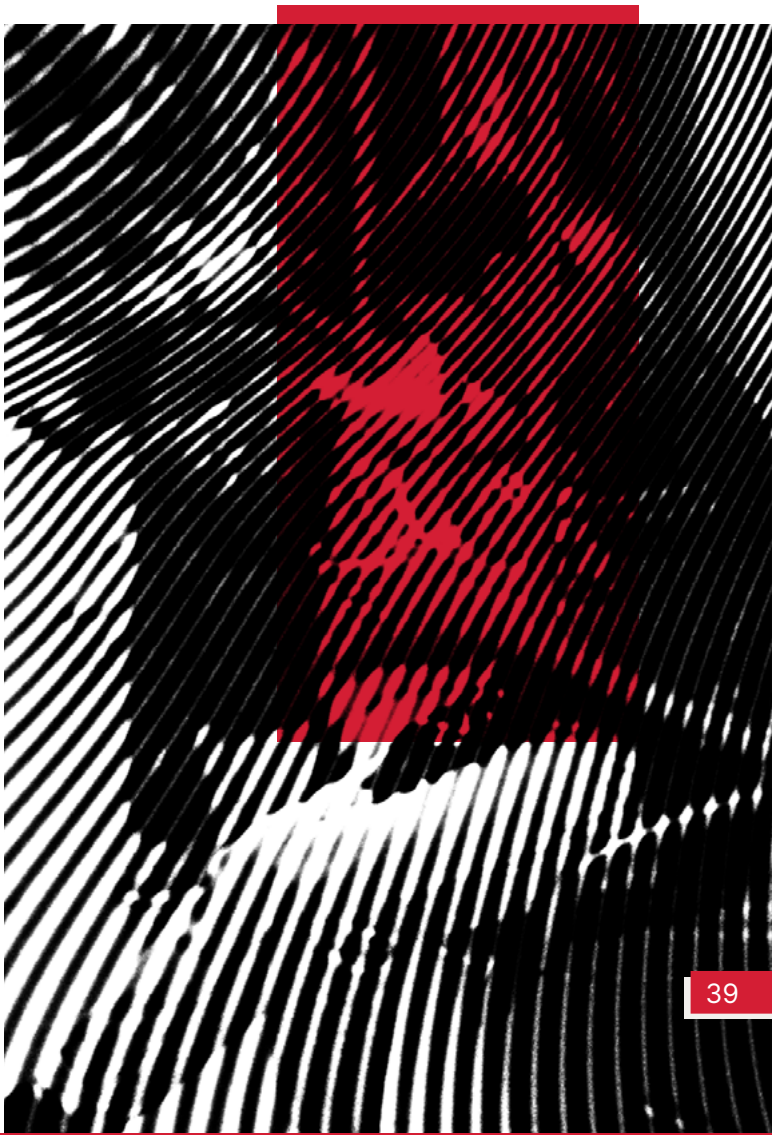
If many tech companies were targeted by Russian authorities' pressuring demands, none played a more important role in enforcing Roskomndazor's censorship than Apple.



[Read more on Twitter](#)



[Read more on Twitter](#)



On the day following the app's removal, the attention turned to Telegram, which also announced the removal of Navalny's 'Smart Voting' services from Telegram. In a statement published on its personal channel, Telegram's founder Pavel Durov said he was compelled to remove Navalny's 'Smart Voting' bots from its platform:

“Telegram, like all other mobile apps, depends on the Apple and Google ecosystems to keep going. In particular, without the support of these companies, Telegram could not have remained accessible to the majority of Russian users during the 2018-2020 blocking period. Apple and Google have already approached us this year to remove publicly available information in accordance with the laws of individual countries, under the threat of removing Telegram from the Google Play and App Store app catalogs. Now, judging by their blocking of the Smart Voting app, this practice has spread to Russia. Changes in policy from Apple and Google will inevitably affect Telegram, as they are at the top of the information food chain as creators of the two major mobile operating systems and can dictate the rules of the game for developers like us. This is sad, but expected: I have written more than once that the oligopoly of Apple and Google is a threat to free speech.”

[\(full statement in Russian\)](#)

Both Google and Apple threatened to remove Telegram from their store if it did not comply with their demands. However, only Apple's threat meant that Telegram could disappear for all iOS users worldwide, as, in case of Google's removal from the Play Store, Android users would have still been able to download the app from Telegram's or other third parties' website.

Apple's direct interference in a third party's app hosted in its App Store, was not the first case of this type. However, it confirmed the firm's far-reaching ability to control content made by users of other services not related to Apple. This case also illustrates how companies such as Apple, manipulate their 'middle-man' status to enforce decisions in their interest while denying legal responsibility for hosting or enabling third-party content.

“Google, Apple and other Big Tech companies are no longer simply tech start-ups disrupting the Internet, they're now infrastructure companies that impact people everywhere,” [said](#) Tanya Lokot, an Internet freedom researcher and professor at Dublin City University in Ireland. “They haven't really caught up to this. They still don't want to accept how much responsibility they bear for what happens to millions, if not billions, of people around the world.”

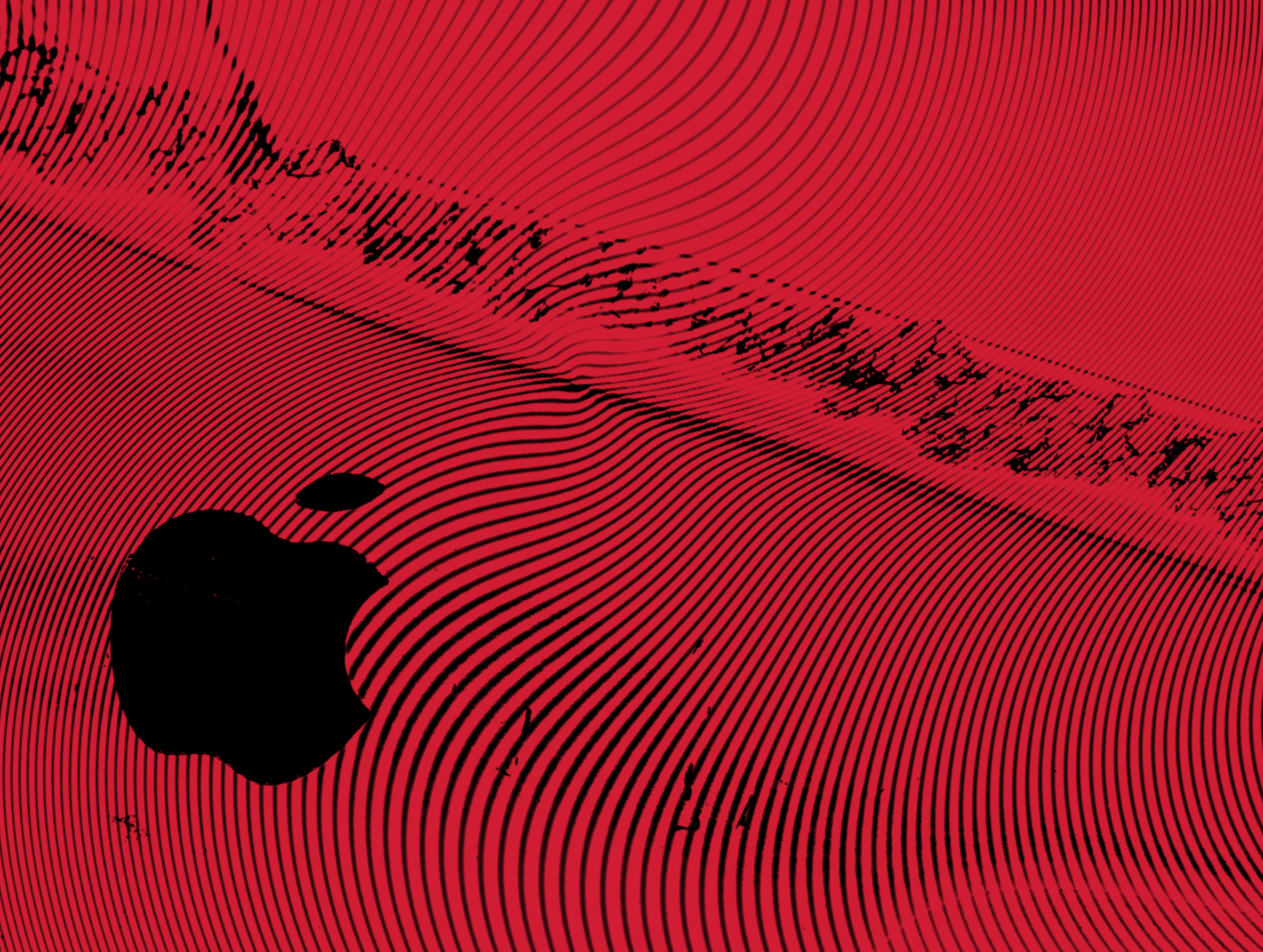
However, no public statement was given by the United States government, where both of these companies are based. The US State Department declined to comment directly on the matter, instead issuing broad statements about freedom of expression.

A few days after the app's removal was revealed, Sascha Meinrath, a Penn State University professor who studies online censorship issues [said](#): *“Now this is the poster child for political oppression.” Google and Apple “have bolstered the probability of this happening again.”*

Apple quietly [restored the app](#) in April 2022 and in August 2022 Navalny's staff [announced](#) they planned to release new Smart Voting recommendations for the September gubernatorial elections. *"We believe that this is the election that will give us the greatest chance of doing damage to Putin and his party of warmongers. That's why we're calling for all Muscovites to come together to vote in protest,"* read the initiative's [site](#). No censorship was reported and the elections resulted in a landslide victory for Putin's party "United Russia".

Apple's knee-bending to Putin with Navalny in 2021 following the [Landing Law](#) did not just hurt the Russian opposition's ability to communicate to the Russian people - it also marked the dangerous effectiveness of a new Kremlin policy: force foreign tech firms to put employees on the ground, so they can then be coerced and threatened into doing the Kremlin's bidding.

Even after the Landing Law and related intimidation, as of August 2022, a significant number of senior Apple employees still list their Apple office location as "Moscow, Russia" or "Russia" We reached out to some of these Apple employees to see if they were willing to comment but none of them responded.



III.

APPLE'S OPAQUE AND ARBITRARY CURATION POLICIES DURING THE WAR

A full-scale invasion and a war. That's what it took for Big Tech companies to finally take some distance from Vladimir Putin's authoritarian regime. Following Russia's invasion of Ukraine, Apple, Google, Meta and other tech companies took unprecedented steps to ensure they were not facilitating the Russian government's unlawful actions and authoritarian narratives.

After the war began, Apple's ambivalence in content curation decisions raises questions. Apple's post-war conduct also contributes to the general opacity surrounding the company's app removal policies.

Complying with Sanctions?

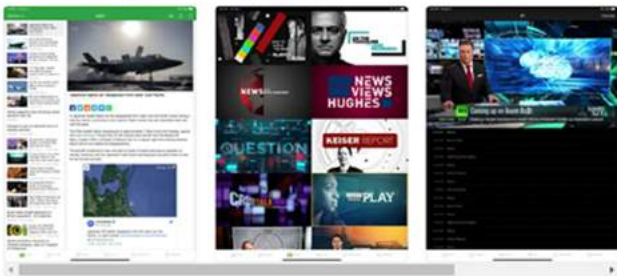
RT News and Sputnik News



RT News 12+
RT
Designed for iPad
#39 in News
★★★★☆ 4.7 - 3.5k Ratings
Free

Screenshots

[iPad](#) [iPhone](#) [Apple TV](#) [Apple Watch](#)



This is the official RT News application.

RT news - find out what the mainstream media is keeping silent about.

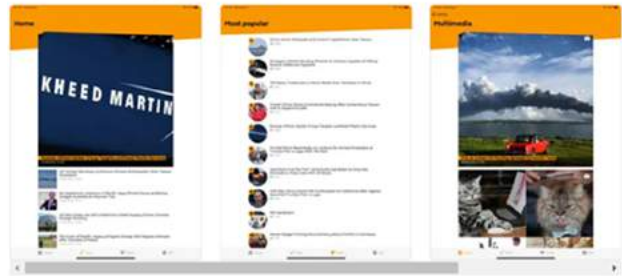
RT is a 24/7 English-language news channel. We are set to show you how any [more](#)



Sputnik News 12+
Sputnik tells the untold. News
MIA ROSSIYA SEGODNYA FGUP
Designed for iPad
#66 in News
★★★★☆ 4.6 - 237 Ratings
Free

Screenshots

[iPad](#) [iPhone](#)



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With the Sputnik app, you'll be the first to receive breaking news, find out about major global events, read in-depth commentary from leading experts and tune into the live radio broadcasts and exclusive interviews. [more](#)

Apple has always claimed it was following local laws to the letter. Following European Council's sanctions on March 1, 2022, Apple removed the apps of two state-controlled media, **RT News** and **Sputnik**, from all App Stores except Russia's.

In a statement published on appcensorship.com on March 4, GreatFire condemned the restrictions imposed by the European Union (EU) on the two Russian state-owned media, saying that, not only was this ban "inefficient and counterproductive" but that it set a "dangerous precedent for freedom of access to information in the EU and in the rest of the world".

Under EU sanction rules, Apple was legally obliged to remove the apps and did so between February 28th and March 1st. However, as the sanction only provided that RT and Sputnik could not operate in any of the EU territories, Apple could have decided to leave the apps in non-EU App Stores.

At first, the company kept the two apps available in Russia's App Store. But RT News was eventually removed by Apple from Russia's App Store between the 23rd and the 27th of June, as [shown by the App Store Monitor](#), while Sputnik News [remains available in Russia's App Store](#) and has never been affected by any temporary removal since the start of the war. This discrepancy in Apple's response went unnoticed. In the end, the censorship of these apps in non-EU App Stores can be attributed to the company's own arbitrary decision, and only the removals from the 27 EU-based App Stores were a result of Apple's legal obligations.

These global removals were part of an all-out effort by Apple to advertise on its stance regarding Russia. The company had simultaneously imposed limitations on its Apple Pay service and, on March 1, it issued a statement saying it had “paused all product sales in Russia” after having stopped all exports into its sales channels in the country. Apple also mentioned it had disabled traffic and live incidents in Apple Maps in Ukraine. A couple of days later, media reported that Apple [reverted its decision to show Crimea as Russian territory](#).

On March 2, Tim Cook sent out an email to all employees saying Apple was “donating to humanitarian relief efforts and providing aid for the unfolding refugee crisis.” (...) “I take comfort in knowing that we are united in our commitment to each other, to our users, and to being a force for good in the world.”, the email concluded.

But such measures stand in contrast to Apple’s collaboration with Moscow just days prior to the invasion, and to its engagement with authoritarian regimes (including China and Saudi Arabia). Indeed, until February 24, 2022, Apple had been eager to comply with all Russian laws and demands from the Russian censorship bureau, despite the known consequences of these demands on human rights.

Less than three weeks prior to the invasion, [Apple had opened a ‘representative office’](#) in Russia, becoming the first company to comply with the Kremlin’s ‘Landing Law’, a set of new rules requiring foreign technology firms to localize their operations in the country according to the newly imposed regulations. Less than five months prior to this decision, Apple had removed the app affiliated to opposition leader Alexey Navalny from its App Store.

VKontakte and Mail.ru

Apple’s recent actions regarding several other apps owned by Russian oligarch’s companies affected by the United Kingdom’s sanctions, point towards further contradictory behavior from Apple, and raise questions whether Apple is really complying with government’s international sanctions regimes.

On September 26, Apple removed all apps owned by Russian company VKontakte (aka VK) including “[VK: social network, messenger](#)”, a Russian equivalent of Facebook, and the email application “[Почта Mail.ru](#)” from all App Stores where the apps were previously available. VKontakte’s parent company is now owned by two companies, [Gazprom and Sogaz](#), the latter being controlled by the family of Yuri Kovalchuk, a powerful billionaire with close ties to Russian President Vladimir Putin. According to VKontakte, which said it had asked for clarification, Apple did so without informing the social network company. However, the explanation for these removals came the next day in a brief [statement](#) given by one of Apple’s spokesperson to the press:

“These apps are being distributed by developers majority-owned or majority-controlled by one or more parties sanctioned by the UK government. In order to comply with these sanctions, Apple terminated the developer accounts associated with these apps, and the apps cannot be downloaded from any App Store, regardless of location. Users who have already downloaded these apps may continue to use them.”

On the same day the UK's government announced its new sanctions, Apple removed the dozen apps that "V Kontakte OOO" (VKontakte's name on Apple's website) was offering at the time on the App Store.

iPad & iPhone



VK Mail
Productivity



Юла: объявления
рядом
Shopping



My photo storage,
drive: Cloud
Productivity



VK: social network,
messenger
Social Networking



Новости России и
мира. Погода
News



Email App – Mail.ru
Productivity

iPhone



VK Calls: Online Video
Calls
Business



VK Messenger: Live
chat, calls
Social Networking



VK Clips: Short Videos
Social Networking



Маруся – голосовой
помощник!
Utilities



VK Admin
Productivity

<https://web.archive.org/web/20220610193448/https://apps.apple.com/us/developer/v-kontakte-ooo/id427948433>

On October 14, 2022, Apple quietly reinstated VK's social network and Mail.ru apps in all its App Stores (although Mail.ru remained unavailable in China and Ukraine where it was already blocked before Apple had complied with the sanctions). Following the observations of the App Store Monitor, the Guardian inquired Apple on these discreet restorations, but the company chose to ignore the request. The ownership of VKontakte and Mail.Ru had not changed in the past month, and the leadership of these groups remained [sanctioned by the British government](#).

On October 18, tests made by the App Store Monitor confirmed that Apple had quietly restored some of VK group's apps in its App Stores. Again, no information was immediately provided by Apple to explain its decision. The company eventually issued a short [statement](#) in response to the many articles commenting the return of the apps:

"The apps from this developer were removed from the App Store, as required by law, after multiple requests were made to the developer to provide documentation to verify that they were not in violation of UK sanctions. Subsequent to the removal, the developer has provided the requisite information verifying that they are not majority owned or controlled by a sanctioned entity. Thus, the apps have been reinstated to the App Store."

However, Apple's explanations do not lift concerns on the company's arbitrary management of its App Store, as Apple's decision to comply with the sanctions seems to have been made immediately after the UK's government issued the sanctions, making highly improbable the "explanation" given by Apple.

How could Apple have repeatedly asked, to no avail, for documents from VK, when the sanctions and Apple's decision were almost simultaneous? Why would VK itself and the Russian Ministry of Digital Affairs need to [send Apple requests for clarification](#) on the disappearance of its apps and to investigate "[the reasons for deleting VK applications and developer accounts](#)" if that possibility had been discussed with VK for weeks prior to the removals? Unfortunately, Apple was not asked these questions.



The Need for Greater Transparency in Times of Crisis

Apple's ability to impact the ongoing crisis in Ukraine fits into a wider trend of how large tech companies' choices have increasingly [geopolitical implications](#) and should warrant for increased transparency on major decisions relating to or affecting the conflict and the populations living in it.

The example of other companies such as Mailchimp, Slack, Sectigo, which provide essential communications and website security tools, is telling. They all blocked Russian accounts indiscriminately, affecting members of the civil society at the same time. This directly [helped](#) Putin's regime to silence activists and journalists.

On July 13, 2022, a group of U.N. human rights experts [expressed](#) urgent concerns over technology companies carelessly withdrawing from the Russian market. They warned companies not to take action in response to the war "without necessarily taking into account the negative impacts on human rights of people left behind." They also argued against "leaving human rights defenders and civil society organizations with little access to the information and communication infrastructure vital for their work," and urged businesses to "be mindful of human rights throughout their operations and try to help Russian human rights defenders and civil society organizations avoid complete isolation."

Apple's signature behavior of trying to conceal every single decision it takes regarding its App Store puts users at risk of being deprived of crucial tools overnight and without alternatives to access those tools.

The Dangerous Opacity Behind App Removals in Wartime

Many of the removals from Russia's App Store detected by the App Store Monitor occurred after the start of the war. Out of 174 app removals from Russia's App Store recorded from January 1 until September 22, 2022, 168 occurred after the start of the war.

[See the list of app removals from Russia's App Store](#)

Due to Apple's lack of statements about Apple-ordered removals, either for legal or internal reasons, it is virtually impossible to know the reasons behind every single removal without inquiring to the apps owners themselves.

An undefined number of apps, which are used by members of civil society to work, communicate or protect their privacy and circumvent censorship, were removed in the first weeks and months of the war. Below are just a few examples:

App	App Rating	App Store	Date/time of removal	Change	Category/Tag
VPN Hotspot Best VPN Proxy	14	Russia	5/15/22 15:45	Deleted	VPN
Taimi: LGBTQ+ Dating, Chat	1779	Russia	5/10/22 4:16	Deleted	LGBTQI+
VPN Unlimited - IP changer app	238	Russia	4/6/22 19:22	Deleted	VPN
Badoo — Dating, Chat, Friends	20834	Russia	3/15/22 1:49	Deleted	Dating
BC: LGBT & Bisexual Dating App	36	Russia	3/15/22 1:44	Deleted	LGBTQI+
Bumble: Dating, Friends & Bizz	74802	Russia	3/15/22 1:44	Deleted	Dating
Documents: Media File Manager	53618	Russia	4/21/22 22:06	Deleted	
LaoWangBooster-No Log	5546	Russia	5/10/22 7:35	Deleted	VPN
HUD™ Dating & Hookup App	2430	Russia	5/12/22 17:49	Deleted	Dating

In some cases, notably when the apps' owners have communicated on their website or social media account, it is fairly easy to determine who initiated the removal. But in many cases, it cannot be determined without contacting the apps' owners. In some cases, apps were removed voluntarily from the app's owners/ developers without any communication, while in other cases, companies announced their [decision to pull-out from Russia](#) (e.g. [Mailchimp](#)), or to forbid use of their app by Russian nationals [without removing their app](#) (e.g. [Airbnb](#)) from Russia's App Store.



Number of user ratings: 494

Mailchimp Marketing & CRM is unavailable in 1 App Stores

App Store	Last Tested	Test Details	Test Now	Verify in App Store
Russia (previously available)	2022-10-05	Details	Test Now	Verify



Number of user ratings: 88594

Airbnb is unavailable in 0 App Stores

The 168 removals recorded by the App Store monitor since March 1st, 2022, represent a fraction of all the apps that have effectively disappeared from Russia's App Store in 2022. According to data from a mobile market intelligence firm cited by [TechCrunch](#) on March 15, 2022, the Russian App Store lost 6,982 mobile apps in the first two weeks following the Ukraine invasion, as numerous companies pulled their apps and games from Apple's App Stores in the country.

The categories of apps that have seen the largest number of removals from the Russian App Store included those in Games, Productivity, Utilities, Music, Business, Education and Health. This is confirmed by the data of the App Store Monitor on app removals from February to September 2022.

Some technology companies have not exited Russia's market - including Microsoft, Google, Adobe, & TikTok - which have kept many of their products available. Many VPN apps have also stayed in Russian app stores & have risen to the top of the App Store charts.

Without projects such as AppleCensorship, it would be impossible to have even the slightest idea of what has happened in Russia's App Store since the beginning of the war. Even with constant monitoring of app removals from the App Store, questions remain on the reasons behind those removals, as companies which exited Russia's market or decided to restrict their product in Russia have not systematically communicated on their actions.



After the sudden removal of its apps Meta Trader 4 and Meta Trader 5 from the App Store, MetaQuotes, a trading platform company and owner of the apps, dismissed the assumption that the delisting has to do with the West's response to Russia's war on Ukraine. "We do not believe that Apple's actions are linked in any way with the Western sanctions on Russia," the MetaQuotes representative said.

While it can be assumed that a majority of these targeted removals were the result of apps' owners decisions, however, Apple's complete opacity over its management of the App Store prevents us from identifying all apps that have been quietly deleted by Apple in Russia's App Store and, like VKontakte's recent case has shown, in other App Stores too. Such opacity gives Apple the ability to take arbitrary decisions for which even the [apps' owners struggle to receive any justification](#).

CONCLUSION

Apple's promises to fight for democracy and human rights were clearly contradicted with Apple's involvement in subverting the efforts of Nalavany's opposition party and censoring anti-corruption content. However, this has gone on for a long time. Apple partnered with Russian authorities and has watched passively its oppression, violation of human rights, and violation of international law. Apple not only did not pull support for Russia until it was legally required to do so due to sanctions, but Apple progressively invested and expanded in Russia whenever it was able to.

We can see that in the extent of censorship. At the time of AppleCensorship's 2021 report, Russia was 19th/20 highest of app unavailability with 11.97%, now it is 14.87%, and continues to go up as more tests are being conducted by the App Store Monitor.

[CensoredPlanet](#) warned that Russia's effort over the past decade to control content on its decentralized networks and the lessons and experiences it has gathered in tightening control are applicable to networks in countries all over the world. Russia's censorship architecture is a blueprint, and perhaps a forewarning of what national censorship regimes could look like in many other countries. Understanding decentralized control will be key to continuing to preserve Internet freedom for years to come.

"Every meaningful, practical avenue for dissent is being systematically shut down," Pavel Khodorkovsky [said](#) in March 2022, who is founder of the New York-based Institute for Modern Russia, and whose father was one of Russia's original oligarchs before spending a decade in prison after confronting Putin over corruption. *"I don't think it's an over-dramatization to say that Putin is longing for a return to Soviet Union times,"* Khodorkovsky said, *"not only in geopolitical power but in terms of total control inside the state."*

Apple's relationship with the Russian authorities in general and its censorship apparatus, embodied by the Roskomnadzor, in particular, could also be used as a blueprint for other repressive regimes willing to keep a leash on foreign tech companies operating in their country.

Russia is a party to multiple international human rights instruments, including the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), the Commonwealth of Independent States Convention on Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms (CIS Convention) and the Helsinki Final Act. All of these international instruments, as well as Russia's own Constitution and customary international law, require the Russian authorities to respect human rights, including the right to freedom of expression.

International law [allows](#) for certain restrictions on freedom of expression online for protection of national security or of public order, health, or morals. Those restrictions, however, should be in line with the criteria of necessity, proportionality, and legality. The United Nations special rapporteur on freedom of expression has emphasized that international law requires these limits to be "provided by law, which is clear and accessible to everyone," and to be predictable and transparent. The Russian authorities should stop imposing inappropriately extreme measures, such as throttling and blocking, on freedom of expression and access to information in a manner disproportionate to the conduct they sanction, HRW said.

Apple purports to augment the freedoms of those living under autocratic rule, however Apple's mix of cowardice and active cooperation with the censors in Russia has made Russians less free. Opposition leaders, journalists, NGOs, activists and other members of the civil society, and ultimately Russian citizens, could not rely on Apple's platforms and services to access, organize, and disseminate information, as these have always been dependent on the government's willingness to tolerate.

Nothing indicates that Apple's policies and relationship with Russian authorities would change if the company were to fully resume its operations in the country. The exceptional nature of the ongoing conflict could well be a simple pause for the company. Today, visitors of the [Russian Apple.com](https://russian.apple.com) page will find a notice that says "Магазин Apple Store в данный момент закрыт" or "The Apple Store is currently closed" with the outline of an Apple logo with an embellishment circling the logo mimicking the "loading" sign. The logo seems to imply Apple plans to return to Russia as soon as it will be legally allowed to do so.



RECOMMENDATIONS

Apple has to recognize that silence is complicity. It emboldens censors and makes online platforms that have become the basis for civic engagement even less safe for activists, NGOs, journalists, and all those who dare criticize their governments.

To curb the growing [threat](#) of internet and mobile apps' censorship, we need transparency from Big Tech companies on how such political demands are being dealt with and how they will ensure they will not cave in to them each time, to the detriment of their users. Commitments to human rights and freedom of expression need to be translated from PR rhetoric to actual corporate policies. Otherwise, it would mean that users are left on their own to fend for their internet rights against the growing power of censors. There also needs to be action taken by democratic governments. They need to make a clear and unequivocal stand against international companies being forced to become tools of oppression and come up with solid policies to help prevent that. The upcoming democracy summit, hosted by Biden in December, can be a great venue to start this conversation and take concrete steps to protect internet freedom from autocratic encroachment. If we do not act now, it may soon be too late. Precedents set today may turn into the order of the day tomorrow, undermining digital freedoms for us all.

Putin's regime has long relied on thuggery to oppress, from beating protesters and a botched attempt to assassinate Navalny to jailing him as he was still recovering from being poisoned. So it's no surprise that after Navalny's imprisonment prompted mass nationwide protests, the Kremlin would try to control every possible election risk, including by strong-arming US tech companies.

Apple and other Big Tech companies need to think much harder about the costs and risks of having employees on the ground who the Kremlin can threaten. Closing their Russian offices might prompt the Russian government to use technical measures against the companies' web-based services, such as throttling access from within Russia (as it did with Twitter back in April). Yet these companies are no strangers to facing technical blocking attempts in autocracies, and censorship demands over email or the phone are much easier to ignore when the state cannot haul employees into detention centers or interrogation rooms and threaten their physical safety. Theoretically, using the internet to resist dictatorship from afar is one thing; risking physical safety while doing so is another entirely.

1 Apple should take measures to prevent any return to a normalization of its relationship with Russian government in the identical terms that were observed prior to February 24, 2022.

2 Apple should provide full transparency regarding its apps distribution platform in Russia:

Apple should allow the public to understand how the Russian government has been attempting to remove (or censor) content, by providing information on:

- the reasons it provided for each of its requests, including the specific laws and/or guidelines the apps allegedly broke;
- the rules and procedures that Apple follows when dealing with these requests and if specific rules are enforced in its Russia's App Store;
- a copy of Apple's internal procedures;
- a timeline of the requests being filed, the length of time it took to consider each request, and the point at which the apps specified were removed from Russia's App Store.

3 Apple should also provide:

- Data on app rejections or removals it made according to any categorical requests from the Russian government, which do not specify apps but do function as blanket legal violation requests;
- Data on the rejection and removal decisions it made after requests from Russian third parties (other than government agencies or official bodies with legal powers).
- Details of the apps it rejected or removed of its own accord from Russia's App Store, whether these removals are due to guideline violations, proactive takedowns of apps which break local laws, or government-requested category bans.
- A list of all apps which remain on Russia's App Store but are blocked by the government. Apple should further inform users of such blocks directly on the app description page within the App Store.

4 Regarding transparency and accountability:

- Apple should adopt all [recommendations](#) previously made by AppleCensorship and included in its report ["Taken Down" A Look into Apple's Transparency Reports](#), published on April 21, 2022;
- Apple should model its Transparency Reports on the efforts of other companies, such as Twitter and Google, to provide as much - rather than as little - useful information as possible. This would include the addition of many of the details listed above, as well as a broader effort to use the Transparency Reports to resist - rather than enable and conceal - censorship and repressive governance.

5 Regarding transparency and accountability:

- Apple should take measures to make itself less vulnerable to the Russian government's pressure and censorship demands, and in particular:
- Allow "sideloading" of apps on iOS devices in order to make censorship requests a less efficient tool for the authorities;
- Take measures to ensure safety for its staff to limit Russian government's intimidation and censorship pressure, including relocation of staff abroad (like Microsoft, [Google](#) and [Adobe](#) in 2014);
- Work with other tech companies targeted by censorship demands in order to better resist abusive requests;
- Engage with Russian civil society organizations to understand the impact of its decisions regarding Russia's App Store, to learn how to become more resilient to censorship and to discuss ways to protect members of civil society organizations using iOS devices;

6 * Apple should adhere to the [UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights](#) in order to address adverse human rights impacts with which it is involved, and in particular:

- To avoid causing or contributing to adverse human rights impacts through its App Store's Platform Policy in Russia;
- To seek to prevent or mitigate adverse human rights impacts that are directly linked to its App Store, iOS devices or other services by its business relationships with Russian government and relevant bodies and agencies.

APPENDIX

Abbreviations

ASM	App Store Monitor
EU	European Union
ICCPR	International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights
LVTR	Legal Violation Takedown Request
NGO	Non-governmental organization
PPVTR	Platform Policy Violation Takedown Request
UK	United Kingdom
UN	United Nations
US/USA	United States of America

References

Report: *“Taken Down” A Look into Apple’s Transparency Reports : Key Highlights*

- Highlights: <https://applecensorship.com/taken-down-a-look-into-apples-transparency-reports-key-highlights/>
- Summary: <https://applecensorship.com/taken-down-a-look-into-apples-transparency-reports/>
- Full Report: <https://applecensorship.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/AppleCensorships-Taken-Down-Report-Print.pdf>

Report: *“Censored on the App Store”: new report shows the staggering scale of app censorship by Apple*

- Press Release: <https://applecensorship.com/censored-on-the-app-store-new-report-shows-the-staggering-scale-of-app-censorship-by-apple/>
- Full Report: <https://applecensorship.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/AppleCensorships-Censored-on-the-App-Store-Digital-Spreads.pdf>

Tool: *AppleCensorship’s App Store Monitor*

- Overview: <https://applecensorship.com/rightscon-2022-what-apps-have-disappeared-from-apples-app-store/>
- Tool: <https://applecensorship.com/app-store-monitor/>

Human Rights Data Sheet



FreedomHouse - Russia



Learn More: <https://freedomhouse.org/country/russia/freedom-world/2022>



Learn More: <https://freedomhouse.org/country/russia/freedom-net/2021>



Reporters without Borders - Russia



Ranking: 155/180

Learn More: <https://rsf.org/en/country/russia>



Amnesty International - Russia

Freedom of Expression

Russian authorities used laws on regulating “foreign agents” and “undesirable organizations” to curb the right to freedom of expression and silence independent media, journalists and activists. Fines were introduced for non-inclusion of the mandatory headline-style “foreign agents” disclaimer in relevant publications.

Learn More: <https://www.amnesty.org/en/location/europe-and-central-asia/russian-federation/>



Article 19 - Russia

2020 Expression Category

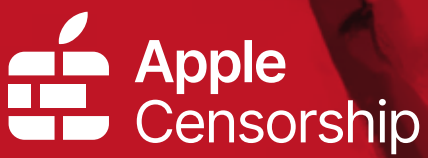
Highly Restricted

2021 Expression Category

In Crisis

Learn More:

<https://www.article19.org/gxr-22/>



GreatFire's AppleCensorship project

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December 2022

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