

The truth is coming out

By Wendy Sloane

*As the war in Ukraine drags on, cracks in Russia's disinformation strategy are deepening*

A recent investigation by the Kremlin's Global Fact-Checking Network (GFCN) has uncovered an earth-shattering falsehood. The report debunks news that Punch, a baby Japanese macaque who captured global attention after bonding with a bright orange plush orangutan following his mother's abandonment, would be deprived of his new best friend by zookeepers at Ichikawa City Zoo.

"Japanese Macaque Punch Will Not Be Separated From His Toy. It's a Fake News (sic)," declared the hard-hitting GFCN exposé. It noted that social media users around the world had rallied to defend the little monkey and concluded - after doubtless copious research - that there was no plan to take the toy away.

The GFCN's occasional fluffy article (geddit?) does little to mask its more concerning agenda, which is aligned with broader efforts by President Vladimir Putin to tighten his grip on public discourse at home and abroad. Promoted as an international platform to verify facts and combat "fakes" and other misinformation, the self-proclaimed "international alliance" of fact-checkers launched its bilingual English-Russian website last year, mimicking Western-style independent initiatives to "better spread its propaganda", according to Reporters Without Borders.

A recent GFCN article, without irony, called to support CIS nations' "digital sovereignty" - a term often linked to tighter state control over information - during the International Economic Forum of CIS Member States. Comprising nine former Soviet republics, the Forum was recently held in Moscow, with South African businessman Errol Graham Musk, Elon's father, among the speakers.

As the war in Ukraine enters its fifth year, Russia is introducing increasingly draconian legislation, hare-brained schemes, tighter censorship and punitive measures to suppress dissent and control information flows. Its latest restrictions - including rolling internet blackouts, blocking WhatsApp and threatening to close Telegram completely - have disrupted millions of Russians, damaged the economy, and exposed cracks in its censorship apparatus.

"I am surprised that Putin is willing to pay a sizable economic price to maintain his grip on power," a western journalist who currently covers Russia told me. "It is doing the opposite of what he has intended. It is contributing to the rise in discontent, particularly among young people who are unable to function without their digitised lives. The economic costs are huge, if they are unable to book a taxi or order food." The outage has also triggered widespread banking outages by disrupting domestic payment systems.

Previously compliant bloggers, celebrities and even pro-Putin politicians have spoken out against the crackdown, further damaging the Kremlin's image at home and abroad. Yet, as seen in Iran following its ban on Telegram, such restrictions often produce the opposite of their intended effect. Rather than limiting access to foreign information, they have driven an even sharper rise in VPN usage. At the same time, state surveillance capabilities, particularly those of the Federal Security Service, or FSB - have expanded, creating a growing tension between government control and public resistance.

The Kremlin has defended its decision to block Telegram primarily on national security grounds, claiming the move is necessary to prevent Ukrainian drone attacks. Officials allege the app has been used to facilitate terrorist activity, and earlier this year a criminal investigation was opened into Telegram founder Pavel Durov. The government-run *Rossiyskaya Gazeta* newspaper said that "the illusion of anonymity has drawn armies of radicals, drug addicts, killers, and terrorists to the messenger, which now poses a threat to [Russian] society", according to Russian independent media *Meduza*.

Although authorities have rejected applications for rallies supporting internet freedom, "dozens" gathered outside the Presidential Administration in Moscow to submit petitions asking that apps not be blocked, *Meduza* said. Some Russians were placed under "administrative detention" in March for filing to hold protests. "Welcome back to the Digital Resistance, my Russian brothers and sisters," Durov posted on Telegram. "The entire nation is now mobilised to bypass these absurd restrictions." Restrictions will be lifted only when the "necessity" for them disappears, a Kremlin spokesperson told Tass.

### *Reasserting control*

Does Putin's increasingly restrictive approach project strength, or does it reveal a growing anxiety about the Kremlin's ability to both control information and the technologies that shape it? The recent internet blockages are not happening in isolation, unfolding alongside a broader tightening of control reaching beyond the digital space.

A wave of new legislation aims to reassert authority over Russia's wider information environment, reshaping how information is produced, distributed and consumed across public life. Legislation framed as protecting the Russian language now requires all signage and public communication to be in Russian. At the same time, amendments to media and film regulations give authorities further powers to enforce what officials describe as "traditional Russian spiritual and moral values".

This is widely seen as an expanded version of the "gay propaganda" law, increasingly used not only to justify restrictions on LGBTQ+ identities, but also to target a broader range of content the state deems undesirable. Streaming services and social media platforms can be banned from hosting material considered to undermine these values,

while the Culture Ministry has been granted the power to deny or revoke distribution licences if the rules are violated. If a licence is withdrawn, Roskomnadzor, the state censorship agency, can order platforms to remove the content within 24 hours or face penalties.

Among banned films is the Oscar- and Bafta-winning documentary *Mr Nobody Against Putin*, which follows a school videographer documenting post-Ukraine state-sanctioned indoctrination of children in a small Russian town. The film “propagates extremism and terrorism” and promotes a “negative attitude towards the [war in Ukraine] and the current government”, according to Russian media. Putin later told a meeting of the culture council that Russian cinemas were showing “stupid and unnecessary” foreign films, adding that home-grown producers were not receiving enough support, the BBC reported.

Another measure, introduced in January, criminalises publicly challenging a new official narrative of the “genocide of the Soviet people”. The law makes it a crime - punishable by up to five years in prison - to deny the “genocide” or to insult the memory of its victims during the Great Patriotic War (World War II), either online or in the media. “Russia coined the term ‘genocide of the Soviet people.’ Now it wants to jail deniers - a move unprecedented even in the USSR,” said *Meduza*.

Censorship may prove effective in the short term but its long-term success is far less certain; what ultimately matters is who outlasts Putin’s regime, a former Moscow correspondent told me. “Russia has become a one-man state with people terrified to go near him, although some colleagues I knew have turned from liberals to toadies. That will not help Russia. What will help Russia is a solid independent state that will stand up to internal as well as external pressure.”

The state is facing escalating resistance in its efforts to control the internet. More than 65 million Russians use Telegram daily via Virtual Private Networks, or VPNs, according to Durov. He said his app would “continue adapting on its end, making traffic harder to detect and block”. As of this writing, however, Russia’s Digital Development Ministry has asked major platforms to block all users with active VPNs, after receiving a curated list from Roskomnadzor. Non-compliant companies risk losing tax benefits or being barred from operating in Russia, according to RBC, a Russian business organisation.

Russia initially drafted a “whitelist” of state-approved sites available during outages and encouraged citizens to use MAX, a home-grown messaging app intended to rival Telegram, monitored by the FSB. MAX comes pre-loaded on devices sold in Russia and is required to access many government portals, and all state employees will soon be required to use it, according to *Vlast*, a new newsletter written by Russian independent journalist Farida Rustamova. But MAX has proven less secure than hoped - so much so

that government officials often use separate SIM cards to install it, while the Kremlin has reportedly warned soldiers in Ukraine not to use it on the battlefield.

### *Kitty litter and cameras*

Everyday Russians are increasingly finding ingenious ways to circumvent the internet restrictions. When *Meduza* - now based in Latvia - asked readers to comment on the crackdown, many responded. Alina, a Russian now in Bali, said she communicates with her parents by repositioning an automatic pet feeder equipped with a camera “after other forms of communication failed”. *Meduza* noted that her cat, Snezhok, appeared “less than impressed”, prompting one reader to comment: “When they block the feeder, switch to a litter box with a camera.”

Other Russians are using chess apps to exchange messages abroad or creating improvised chat rooms on the Duolingo. Some people even use banking apps to stay connected with friends and relatives abroad, sending small payments with messages hidden in transaction details. “None of these methods, of course, come close to replacing a full-fledged messaging platform. They’re less a widespread solution than a mix of improvisation and dark humor - small ways for people to stay connected and perhaps keep their spirits up under tightening restrictions. In practice, the most reliable tool remains a VPN,” *Meduza* said.

Alongside these domestic controls, the Kremlin is also pushing its narrative internationally to shore up support. The Global Fact-Checking Network operates both inside and outside Russia as a vehicle for state-approved interpretations of global events. Contributors include “conspiracy theorists” such as Tim Anderson, director of the Sydney-based Centre for Counter Hegemonic Studies, who called the 2022 Bucha massacre - where roughly 500 people were killed by Russian forces - a “scam”, according to Deutsche Welle.

Since the GFCN’s launch, similar organisations have emerged in countries such as Hungary and Armenia, along with the African Initiative, a fact-checking group promoting pro-Kremlin narratives across Africa. The GFCN is not unique in Russia: it follows the Kremlin’s earlier “War on Fakes”, launched in 2022, which claimed to “debunk the notion that Ukrainians were not waging an information war against Russians”, according to the Global Investigative Journalism Network.

Maintaining political control and legitimacy at home is paramount. Over the past year, Putin has imprisoned several prominent dissenters and, in October, announced plans to restrict access to foreign AI chatbots while introducing a domestic alternative that would “rely on Russian culture, worldview, and values.” According to the Institute for the Study of War (ISW), embedding a “Soviet-style police state” could give the Kremlin a powerful tool to fully control the Russian internet ahead of any future confrontation with NATO.

What happens next remains uncertain. Upcoming State Duma elections in September may factor into Putin's calculations as he seeks to secure a decisive victory for the United Russia Party. However, any move to mobilise reserves further would likely prove deeply unpopular, which is why the regime is undertaking covert mobilisation efforts tied to individual businesses selecting recruits, rather than an involuntary national call-up, according to the ISW. International developments may also weigh on the Kremlin's thinking, particularly considering recent political shifts in allied countries such as Hungary.

Is a Russian attack on NATO a credible threat? It may not be inevitable, but it is no longer easy to dismiss.

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