

14 September, 2021

#KeepItOn: Open letter to keep the internet open and secure during elections in Russia

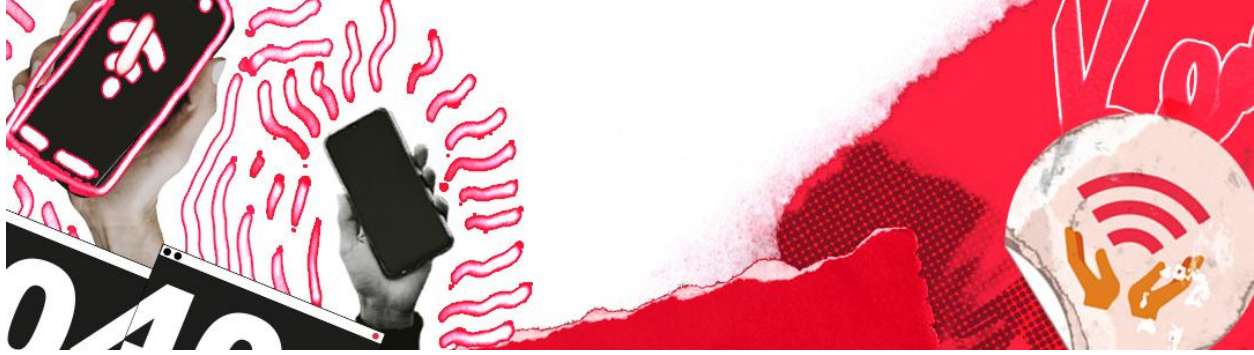
Subject: Threats of internet shutdowns and disruption of online communications and social media platforms in Russia

Tim Cook, CEO of Apple
Jack Dorsey, CEO of Twitter
Tigran Khudaverdyan, CEO of Yandex
Roman Kravtsov, CEO of TransTelekom
Andrey Kuzyaev, President of ER-Telecom
Vyacheslav Nikolaev, President and CEO of MTS
Mikhail Oseevskiy, President of Rostelecom
Sundar Pichai, CEO of Google
Khachatur Pombukhchan, CEO of MegaFon
Matthew Prince, CEO of Cloudflare
Kaan Terzioğlu, Group CEO of VEON
Alexander Torbakhov, CEO of Beeline
Mark Zuckerberg, CEO of Facebook

Dear Mr. Cook, Mr. Dorsey, Mr. Khudaverdyan, Mr. Kravtsov, Mr. Kuzyaev, Mr. Nikolaev, Mr. Oseevskiy, Mr. Pichai, Mr. Pombukhchan, Mr. Prince, Mr. Terzioğlu, Mr. Torbakhov, and Mr. Zuckerberg,

We the undersigned organizations and members of the #KeepItOn coalition — a global network that unites over 240 organizations from 99 countries working to end internet shutdowns globally — write to urgently request that you publicly pledge your support to maintain free, open, and secure internet access in Russia during September elections and beyond.

In preparation for legislative elections on September 17-19, 2021, the Russian government has accelerated its attacks on civil society, including prosecuting [journalists and independent media](#) and [human rights organizations](#), as well as [poisoning](#) and [jailing](#) an anti-corruption activist and opposition leader, Alexey Navalny. Russia has also been increasingly [putting pressure on social media companies](#) to take down content associated with elections and protests or risk being blocked or throttled. Thus, on March 10, 2021, the Russian agency responsible for ensuring compliance with media and telecommunications laws, Roskomnadzor, started [throttling Twitter](#) for failing to delete content that the Russian government deemed “unlawful.” Russia has also [threatened](#) Google with similar



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measures. In addition, Roskomnadzor has also [ordered](#) both Apple and Google to remove opposition and civil society content from their app stores and platforms and temporarily [blocked](#) Google and Cloudflare domain name system (DNS) services, resulting in internet disruptions on September 8, 2021.

These disruptions are not the only instance of the Russian government implementing internet shutdowns to suppress people's rights. In July and August 2019, Russian authorities [covertly blocked Moscow's mobile internet](#) during the Moscow City Duma elections protests. Authorities in Ingushetia also [shut down mobile internet on multiple occasions](#) in June, October, and November of 2018, and in March 2019, as people organized and headed out to the streets to protest the new border deal with Chechnya. Russia also unsuccessfully attempted to block Telegram in 2018, [obstructing](#) millions of IP addresses in the process.

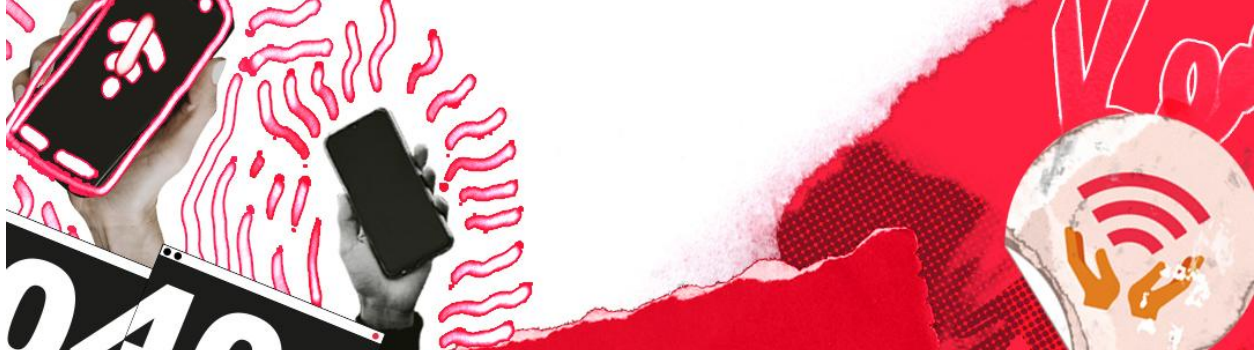
As Russian authorities are notorious for cracking down on protesters and critical voices, the risk of internet shutdowns during the national election period this year is significant.

Internet shutdowns and online censorship contribute to instability during elections

We call on your respective companies to prioritize the fundamental rights to freedom of expression and access to information of the Russian people by providing open and secure internet access and essential web services throughout the country, and to push back against the government's unjustified interference with these rights.

Without access to communication tools, journalists and media workers are unable to report on the election process. Research also shows that internet [shutdowns and violence go hand in hand](#), and last year's [eruption of election protests in the neighboring Belarus](#) confirmed this. Shutting down the internet and restricting access to essential platforms and websites during a global pandemic when access to information saves lives would add fuel to the fire. By disrupting the free flow of information, shutdowns and website blockings exacerbate any existing tensions in the society and increase the likelihood of protests, as well as potential for violence and human rights violations perpetrated by both state and non-state actors. Although governments attempt to justify network disruptions for various reasons, in reality, internet shutdowns cut off access to vital and life-saving information, and emergency services, plunging whole communities into fear and confusion.

Internet shutdowns and online censorship violate international law



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Internet shutdowns and online censorship violate fundamental human rights such as freedom of expression, access to information, and the right to peaceful assembly, among others guaranteed by national, regional, and international legally binding frameworks such as the Constitution of the Russian Federation, the European Convention on Human Rights, and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR).

The U.N. Human Rights Committee, the official interpreter of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), emphasizes in its [General Comment No. 34](#) that restrictions on speech online must be strictly necessary and proportionate to achieve a legitimate purpose. Shutdowns and website blockings, by contrast, are neither necessary nor effective at achieving a legitimate aim, as they block the spread of information, contribute to confusion and disorder, and obstruct public safety. According to the General Comment No. 34, ICCPR also prohibits blocking access to online sites or materials solely on the basis that they may be critical of the government.

Unlawfulness of shutdowns and online censorship has also been confirmed by regional and national courts. Thus, the [Economic Community of West African States \(ECOWAS\) Court](#), as well as national courts of [India](#), [Pakistan](#), [Sudan](#), [Zimbabwe](#), and [Indonesia](#) have invalidated government and telco actions to shut down the internet. The European Court of Human Rights has also ruled that website blockings, including [collateral blocking](#) and [wholesale blocking of opposition online media outlets](#) in Russia are in breach of the European Convention on Human Rights.

Companies must act to protect a functioning, secure internet for users

Businesses have a responsibility under the [UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights](#) and the [OECD Guidelines for Multinational Enterprises](#) to respect human rights, prevent or mitigate potential harms, and provide remedy for harms they cause or contribute to.

By resisting government shutdown and censorship orders, companies can and should take an important step to respecting human rights.

Recommendations addressed to companies:

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- 1. Publicly denounce internet shutdowns, censorship, and disruptions of essential online services in Russia and other countries, and highlight their devastating impact on your customers, your company, and the society at large;**
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2. **Resist and push back against shutdown and censorship orders by the government;**

3. **Preserve evidence and reveal any demands from the government urging you to disrupt internet access or block specific online content, and any pressure to conceal those demands;**

4. **Publicly disclose details such as when the internet and related services have been disrupted, their status throughout the shutdown, and when they come back online;**

5. **Contest the legality of internet shutdown or censorship orders in court; and**

6. **Consult civil society and rally peer companies to jointly push back against government censorship demands, and issue regular transparency reports to ensure open and secure internet access and deter future shutdown and content restriction orders.**

ORGANIZATIONS

Access Now
Advocacy Initiative for Development (AID)
Africa Open Data and Internet Research
Foundation (AODIRF)
AfroLeadership (Africa)
Azerbaijan Internet Watch
Bareedo Platform Somalia
Bloggers of Zambia
Body & Data
Common Cause Zambia
Electronic Frontier Foundation
Global Voices
Human Constanta
i freedom Uganda Network

Kijiji Yeetu (Kenya, Africa)
Media Institute for Southern Africa (MISA
Zimbabwe)
Mile4D
Net Freedoms Project
Общество Защиты Интернета (Internet
Protection Society, Russia)
Ranking Digital Rights
Right2Know Campaign
Роскомсвобода (Roskomsvoboda, Russia)
Ubunteam
Wikimédia France
Zaina Foundation

For More Information, please contact:

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