



CYCLICAL CONSUMER GOODS

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Banned and blocked: LGBT+ websites censored from Russia to Indonesia

By Hugo Greenhalgh, Thomson Reuters Foundation



- * Online censorship in six nations documented in new report
- * Iran and UAE top list for blocking of LGBT+ websites
- * Authorities use anti-LGBT+ laws, URL blocks to gag sites

LONDON, Aug 31 (Thomson Reuters Foundation) - When Russian cities started banning Pride marches, LGBT+ rights activist Mikhail Tumasov took to the internet to make sure his organisation kept its voice. But state authorities were quick to catch up.

Tumasov said the country's internet regulator had tried repeatedly to shut down his group's website under the terms of Russia's 2013 "anti-gay propaganda" law, which bans the dissemination of LGBT+ information to children.

So far, his organisation - the Russian LGBT Network - has been able to challenge the shutdowns in the courts.

“Somehow we succeeded,” Tumasov said.

“So our website is still up and our social profiles are still up. But not everyone is so successful,” he told the Thomson Reuters Foundation by phone.

According to a major global report published this week by three rights organisations, 32 different LGBT+ websites were blocked at least once on Russian internet providers between mid-2016 and mid-2020.

“News websites on LGBTIQ-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).

Same-sex relations in Russia are legal, but attitudes about sexuality and gender identity remain conservative for the most part.

In a 2020 referendum, voters backed an amendment to the constitution to allow marriage only between a man and a woman – effectively closing the door on potential future legislation in favour of same-sex weddings.

“Governments filter LGBTIQ websites using a variety of methods, but typically consisting of legal and technical methods,” said Irene Poetranto, senior researcher at the Citizen Lab tech human rights group and one of the report’s co-authors.

These can include passing laws that restrict “pornography” as well as specifically targeted anti-LGBT+ legislation, Poetranto said in emailed comments.

“For example, in Russia, the anti-gay propaganda law was enacted supposedly to protect children/minors and thus, LGBTIQ website censorship is conducted for the same reason.”

Russia’s internet regulator Roskomnadzor did not immediately respond to an emailed request for comment.

‘DANGERS TO NATIONAL SECURITY’

Besides Russia, the report focused on Indonesia, Malaysia, Iran, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), using software developed by OONI that measures different forms of internet censorship.

The six countries were chosen because they were known to monitor LGBT+ content, Poetranto said.

According to the report, website bans violate Article 19 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), of which Indonesia, Iran and Russia are signatories.

The multilateral treaty says “everyone shall have the right to freedom of expression ... (including) freedom to seek, receive and impart information and ideas of all kinds, regardless of frontiers”.

Of the countries analysed, Iran blocked the highest number of website addresses linked to LGBT+ content.

“In total, 75 unique LGBTIQ URLs were detected as blocked in (Iran), followed by the UAE, where 51 unique LGBTIQ URLs were found to be blocked,” the report said.

Five years ago, Indonesia’s government said it would move to ban LGBT+ sites, and at least 38 LGBT+ websites are currently blocked in the country of 270 million people, the study found.

Lini Zurlia, advocacy officer of regional LGBT+ organisation ASEAN SOGIE Caucus, was working at Arus Pelangi, an Indonesian LGBT+ advocacy group, when the government announced the crackdown.

She said the organisation had received a letter from the government saying it was “on the list” of sites to be shut down, though it eventually escaped a ban.

“The LGBTIQ community is characterised by governments as dangers to national security and threats to the moral fabric of society,” Zurlia said in emailed comments.

Indonesia’s Communication and Information Technology Ministry did not immediately respond to a request for comment.

Local activist groups are not alone in having their websites targeted.

Grindr, one of the world’s most popular gay dating apps, has been banned in countries including Indonesia, Lebanon, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Turkey and the UAE.

“Grindr is not directly involved in challenging any bans by foreign governments,” a spokesman said in emailed comments.

“But we are aware of community-based efforts in several places to have bans overturned and strike back against attempts to limit LGBTQ life locally.”

In Russia, Tumasov said the internet provided a vital social lifeline to LGBT+ people, with the website clampdown reflecting broader discrimination and disregard for their rights.

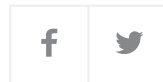
“The LGBTI community’s freedom of speech is suffering from a lot of threats from homophobic people,” he said. (Reporting by Hugo Greenhalgh @hugo_greenhalgh, with additional reporting by Matt Lavietes in New York and Maya Gebeily in Beirut; Editing by Helen Popper. Please credit the Thomson Reuters Foundation, the charitable arm of Thomson

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