

March 2024

Media Programme South East Europe

# Two years later: Why are Sputnik and RT still accessible within the EU?

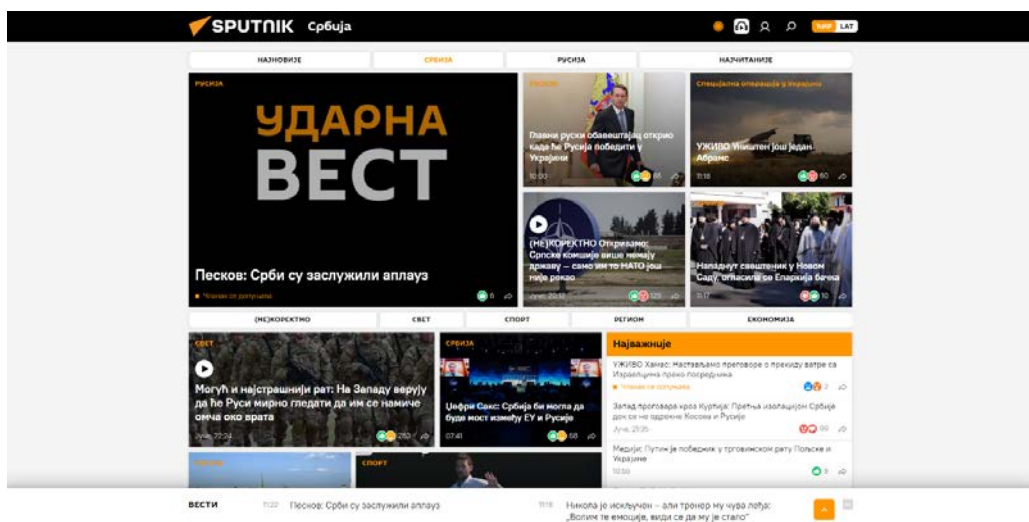
*Ralitsa Stoycheva*

Since the beginning of the Russian war of aggression against Ukraine in 2022, the European Union adopted 13 sanction packages against Russia. Five of them include restrictions on media outlets which are under the direct or indirect control of the Russian Federation carrying out pro-Kremlin propaganda – among them also RT and Sputnik. This applies to all means of transmission and distribution – cable, satellite, IPTV<sup>1</sup>, platforms, websites and apps. Moreover, they extend to all EU countries and have direct effect. Now, two full years after the start of the war, access to some sub-domains of both is still possible on EU territory – without any need to use VPN<sup>2</sup> or other similar services.

## What is accessible?

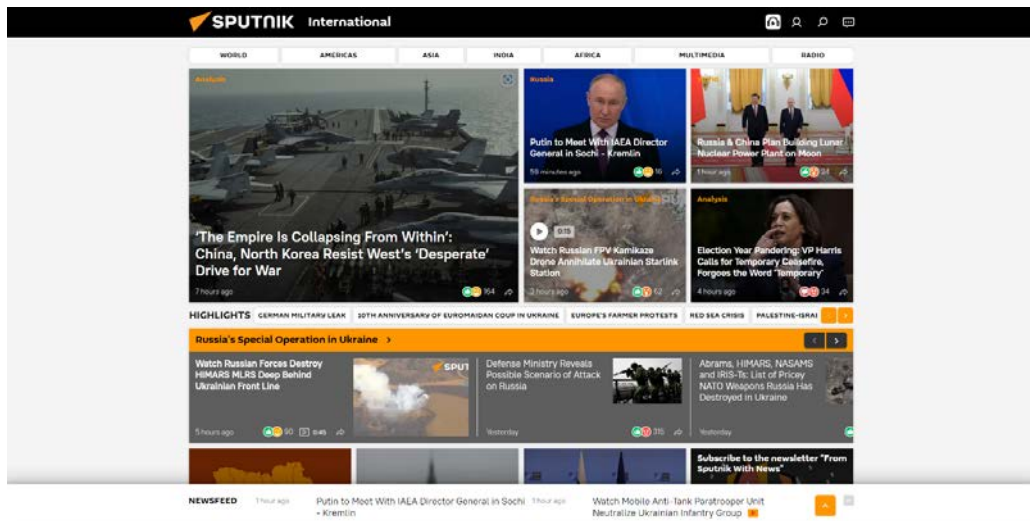
This concerns various sub-domains of both Sputnik and RT, which can be freely accessed on EU territory. Some operate on Serbian domains and produce content in Serbian (which is available in both Cyrillic and Latin). The Serbian domain of RT is called RT Balkans – thus, not limited to one country but rather meant to be a cross-border publication. And while Serbia, a non-EU country with a candidate status, is practically not obliged to ban these pages, it remains an open question why access is still possible from neighbouring EU member states? Seamless access is also possible to international versions in English. Moreover, RT has sub-pages in various European languages - German, French, Spanish, etc., which in turn implies that the population of the respective countries remain direct or in the least indirect target audiences.

Here are some screenshots of the home pages:

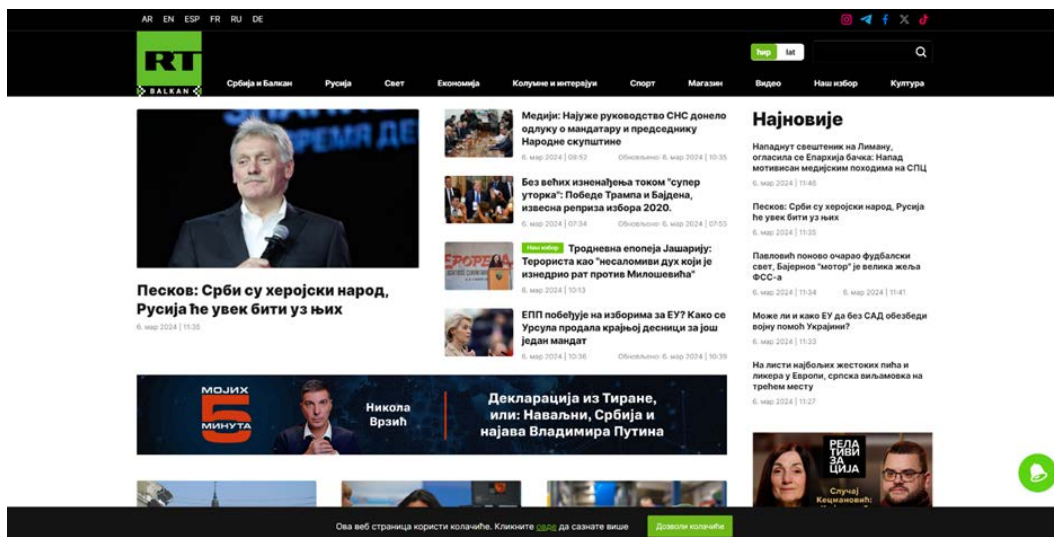


1 IPTV: Internet Protocol Television  
2 VPN: Virtual Private Network

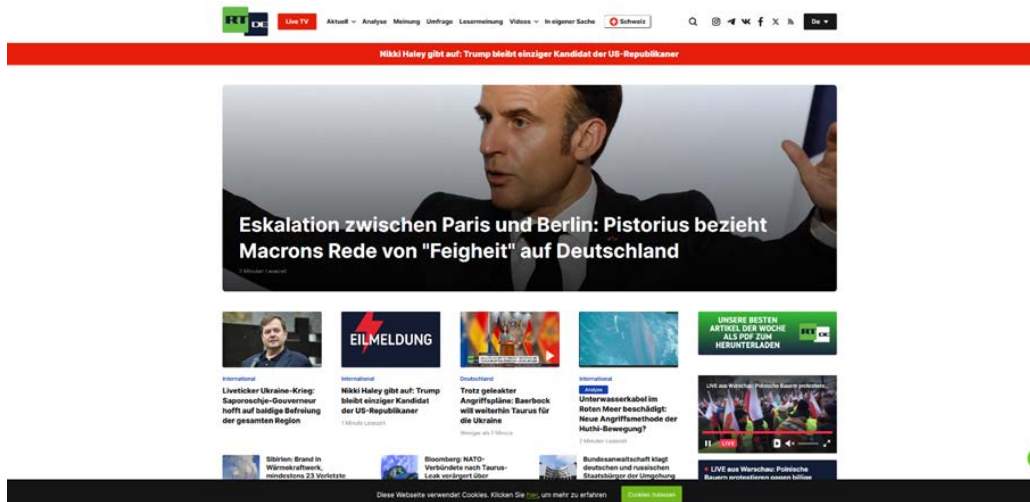
The homepage of Sputnik Serbia – accessed on 06.03.2024 on EU territory without usage of VPN. Some of the titles are: *Peskov: Serbs deserve applause; Russia's top intelligence officer reveals when Russia will win in Ukraine; The West speaks through Kurti: Threat of isolation of Serbia until it gives up Kosovo and Russia.*



The frontpage of Sputnik International – also accessed on 06.03.2024 on EU territory without the use of a VPN.



Screenshot of RT Balkans taken on 06.03.2024. Some of the main titles are quite close to those in Sputnik such as *“Peskov: Serbs are heroic people, Russia will always be with them”*.



*The front page of the German sub-domain of Russia Today, 06.03.2024, accessed without a VPN. Interestingly, although they do not comply with the EU restrictions, all visited versions of RT take into account the use of so-called “cookies” – as they are supposed to due to another EU directive.*

## Why is this dangerous?

Sputnik Serbia and RT Balkan are available entirely in Serbian, and the site has two versions – one in Cyrillic and one in Latin. In Southeast Europe, Serbian is completely understood not only in Serbia, but also in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia and Montenegro, and to a limited extent in Bulgaria and North Macedonia. Two countries, Bulgaria and Croatia, are member states of the European Union, and, at least in theory, access should not be possible. Our latest research showed that both RT and Sputnik sub-domains were accessible on 18.03.2024 from Bulgaria and on 12.03.2024 from Croatia.

And for countries that are not part of the same language group - the English version is also within reach, with RT also being available in German, French, Spanish and other languages. RT Deutsch, for example, was accessed from Germany by our team on 18.03.2024.

## What are the problems?

There are several multilayered problems with the access to RT and Sputnik on EU territory. While the sanctions came as a timely measure, it is still not entirely clear who is responsible for their full implementation. Upon an inquiry from the Media Programme South East Europe of the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung, the official position of the European Commission is that “it is the Member States that determine the rules for the correct enforcement of sanctions on their territory”. Moreover, the Commission “works closely with national competent authorities to address the risks of circumvention [...] by providing guidance and legal cooperation”.

However, while there are fewer discussions around who is responsible for restricting the live broadcast of TV and radio channels under the EU sanctions, when it comes to limiting the access to the websites, the enforcement gets rather complicated. The opinion of experts both in Bulgaria and in Croatia is not unambiguous about who should be ensuring the implementation of these sanctions. Both countries still need further legislation that clearly identifies the responsible institution. Such legislative gaps at this stage leave room for interpretation and transfer of responsibility between different actors.

To some extent this problem also arises because of the nature of the sanctions. “These sanctions are not based on media law but are formally economic measures as part of the common foreign and security policy of the EU” said Dr. Wolfgang Kreißig, President of the media authority in the German Federal State of Baden-Württemberg, in a conversation with our team. Essentially, this removes the focus from individual countries' media regulators and does not necessarily suggest they should be responsible for enforcing measures online. From a technical point of view, restricting access to these webpages is in the first place a task for the internet service providers and other media service providers operating within the EU as the sanctions are directly applicable law. Nevertheless, sanctions are made difficult as it is technically possible to bypass blocked websites by setting up so called mirror pages. So, we see a permanent race of blocking and creating new mirror pages. This means that effective implementation of sanctions requires not only a clear assignment of responsibility but also the establishment of robust monitoring and control mechanisms.

## The way forward

There is no simple solution. On the one hand, the adoption of stronger and more robust legislation is needed at the national level – especially in countries which tend to be more vulnerable towards Russian disinformation campaigns. In this sense, political will and recognizing political responsibility with key actors are central elements. The long-term goal should be, of course, to have a well-informed society, resilient to malign propaganda (e.g. Norway decided not to implement the sanctions against RT and Sputnik because, according to a government assessment, [among others] “Norwegian society and the public are able to resist manipulation attempts from Russian state-owned media”).

On the other hand, the European Commission must strengthen its support and efforts for proper implementation of sanctions recognizing the specificities and national realities of the different EU Member States. At present, there are still no penal consequences for non-compliance with sanction measures (or parts of them) regarding the access to restricted propaganda channels in any European country.

Sanctions are also bypassed through domains registered and operated in non-EU countries, which are de facto not obliged to apply the restrictive measures. Yet, the lack of harmonization with the EU, as well as deviation from its core values, could negatively impact the image of the respective countries.

Last but not least: citizens can become active as well - the European Commission has set up a whistleblowing tool to report breaches of sanctions anonymously: [EU sanctions whistleblower tool](#).

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