

Slipping through the cracks

Understanding Efforts by Russian State Media to
Circumvent EU Sanctions

12 October 2023

Contents

1

EU Sanctions

2

Circumventing Strategies: A
Case Study On Alternative
RT Domains

3

Other Circumventing
Strategies

3

Successes, Challenges &
Recommendations

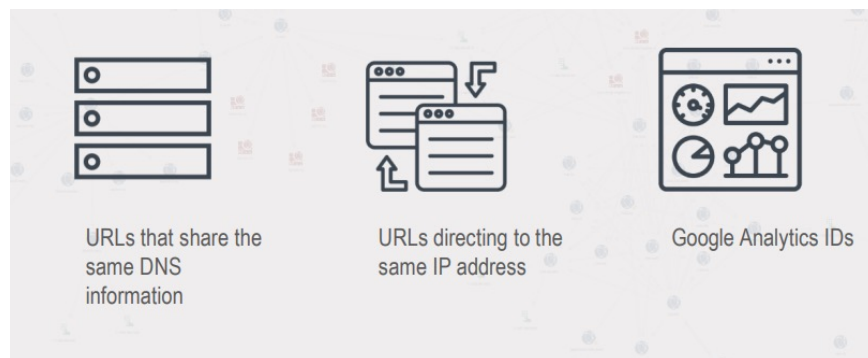
EU Sanctions

- On 2 March 2022, the European Council introduced **sanctions that prohibit the broadcasting activities of Russian state outlets Sputnik and RT** within the EU or directed at the EU.
- Consequently, **major social media platforms suspended the accounts of Russian state media in Europe.**
- While studies concur on the **overall effectiveness of the introduced sanctions** in limiting EU access to Russian state outlets, these outlets have employed a wide range of **circumventing strategies.**
- Understanding these strategies and how to detect them can help improving the design and implementation of both existing and new sanctions.

Circumventing Strategies: A Case Study On Alternative RT Domains (1/5)

Methodology

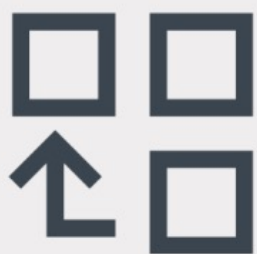
- Discovery (Google searches)
- Attribution (Maltego)



- Spread on social media (Brandwatch/CrowdTangle)
- Web traffic analysis* (SimilarWeb) (*Big caveat: VPNs)



Circumventing Strategies: A Case Study On Alternative RT Domains (2/5)



14
alternative
domains and
subdomains for
RT

resolving to RT IP
addresses
(12 domains, 2 subdomains)



5
mirror websites
for RT

similar, but could not
be attributed to RT



112
copy-paste
websites

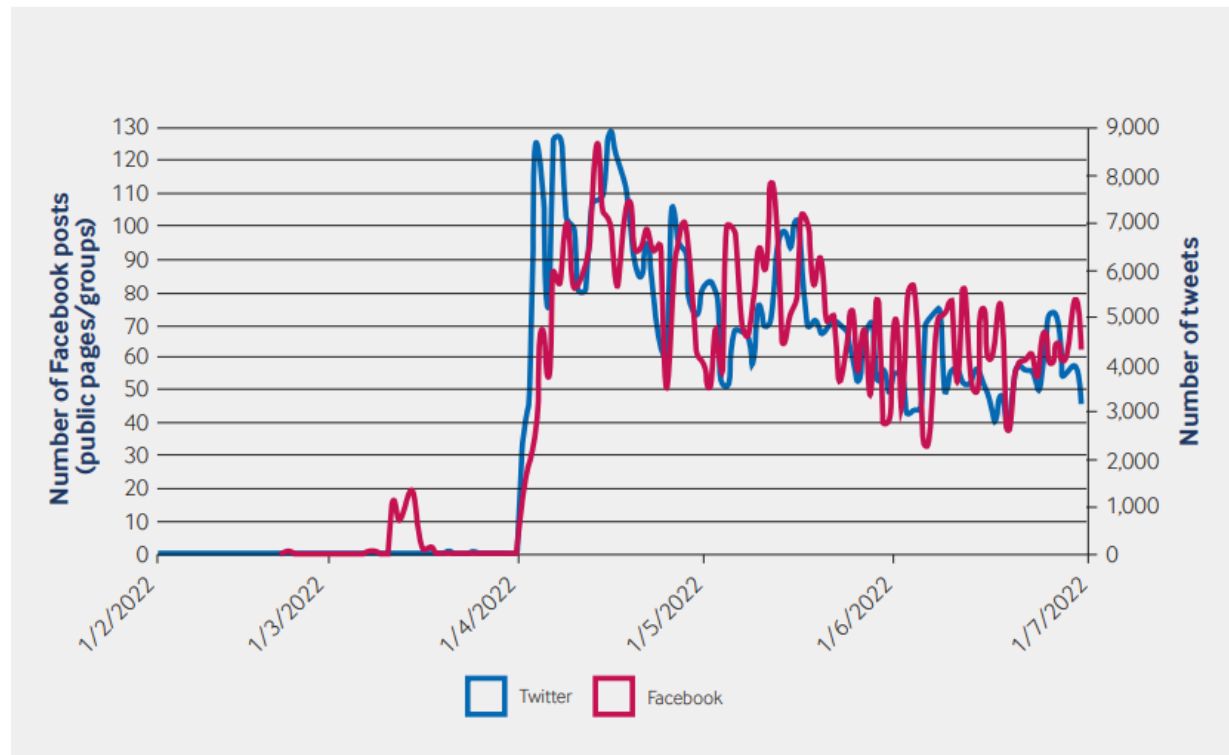
websites with articles
found in their entirety



46
aggregator
websites

websites containing
parts of articles and
directing traffic to RT

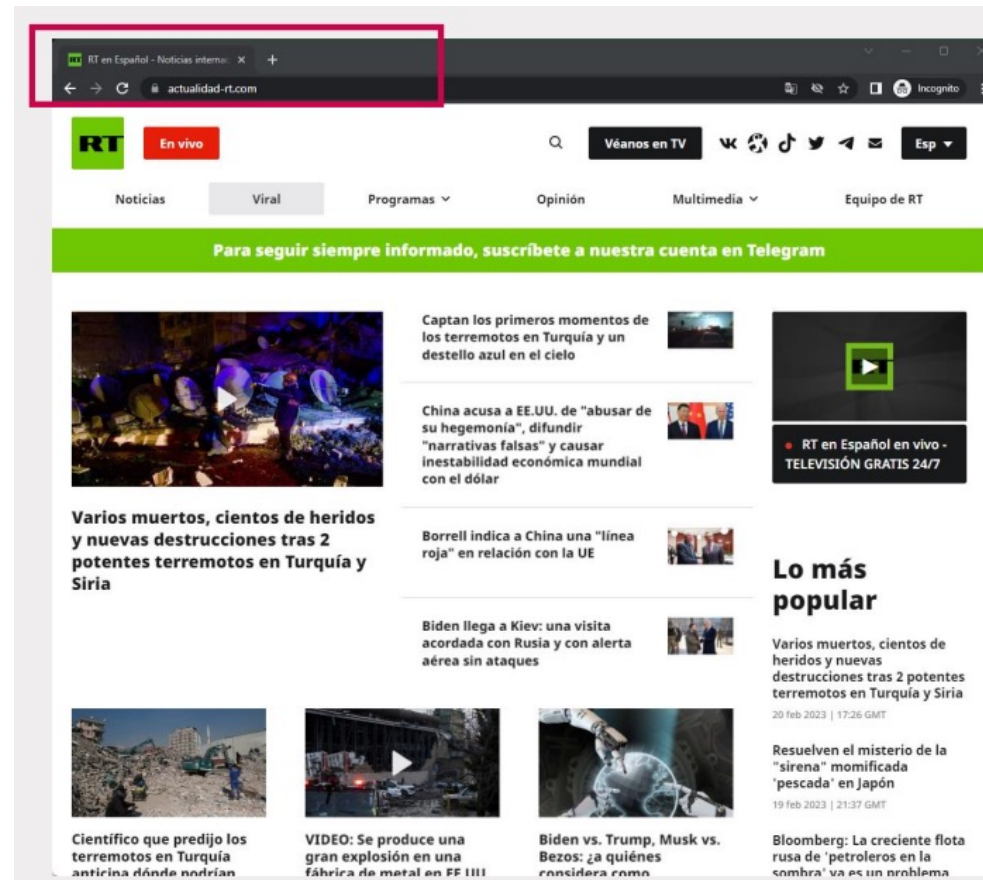
Circumventing Strategies: A Case Study On Alternative RT Domains (3/5)



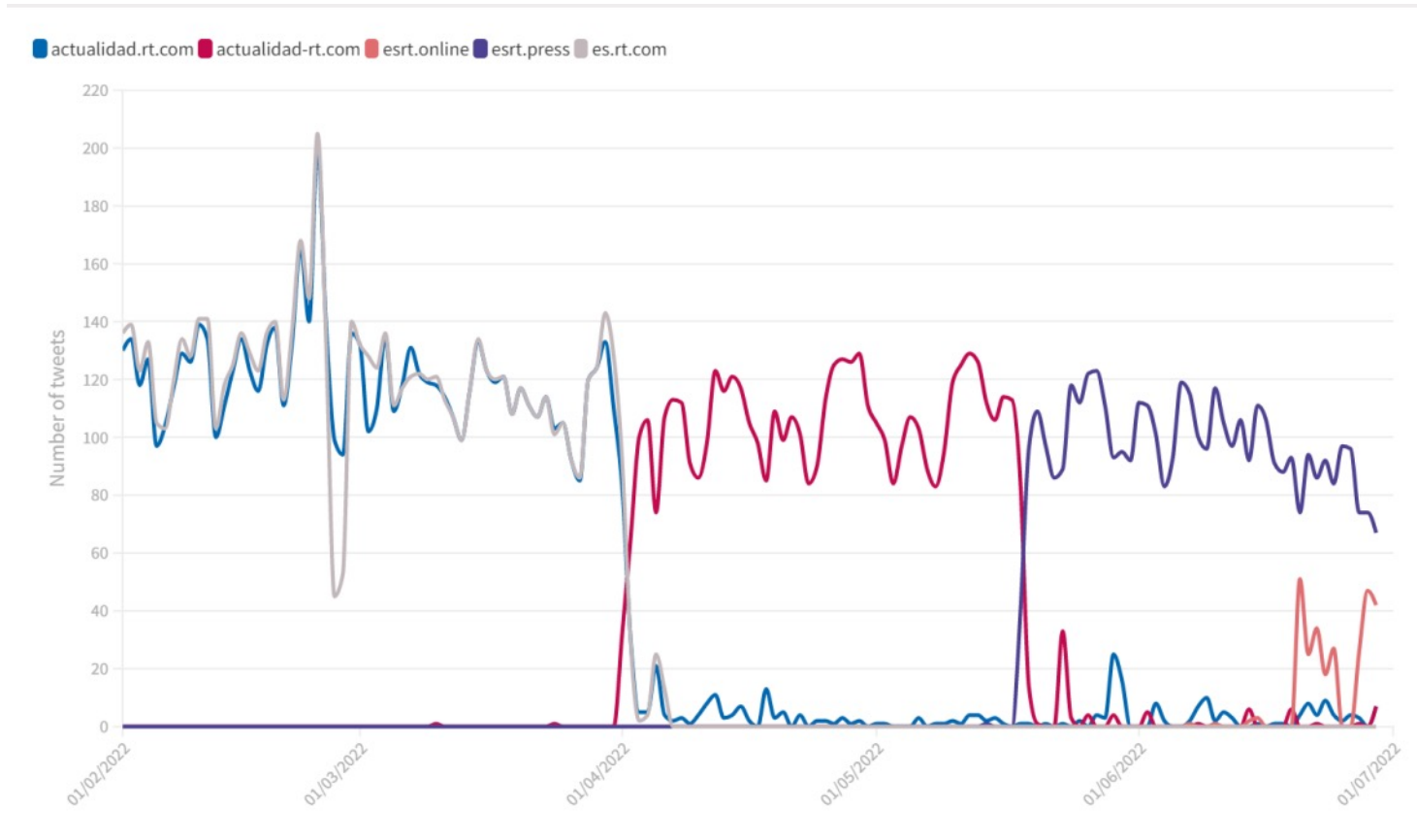
Spread of alternative RT domains on Facebook (red) and Twitter (blue) from 1 February 2022 to 30 June 2022.

- Posts containing links to these websites were shared over **450,000** times on Twitter by almost **50,000** unique users.
- On Facebook, there were over **6,000** shares from around **1,200** public Facebook pages and groups, with a combined followership of over **46.7M** users.
- In the period under analysis, these sites totalled about **2.5M** views/month.
- This said, **overall drop in EU traffic to RT was significant**, moving from 52M visits/month in early 2021 to 14M in June 2022 (**-74%**).

Circumventing Strategies: A Case Study On Alternative RT Domains (4/5)



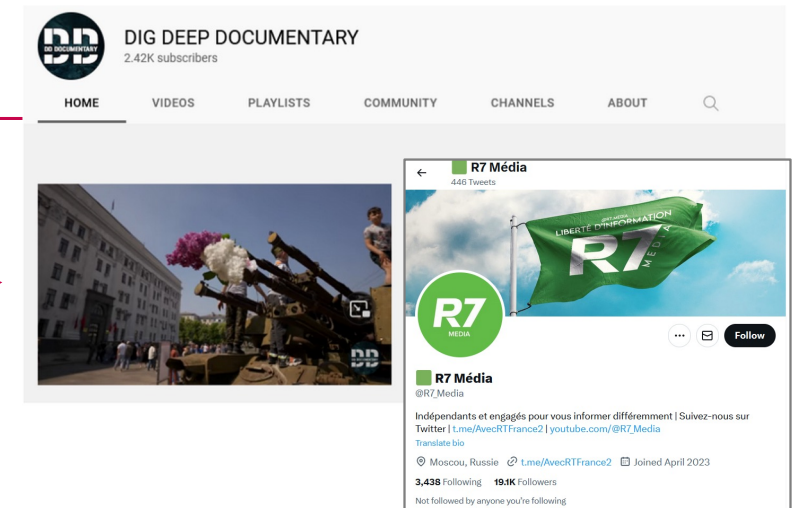
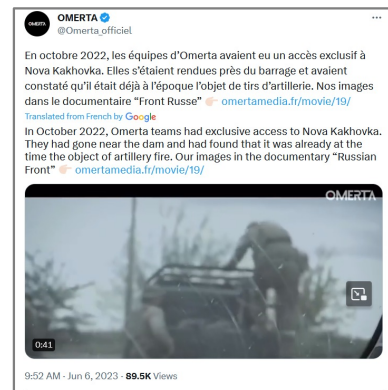
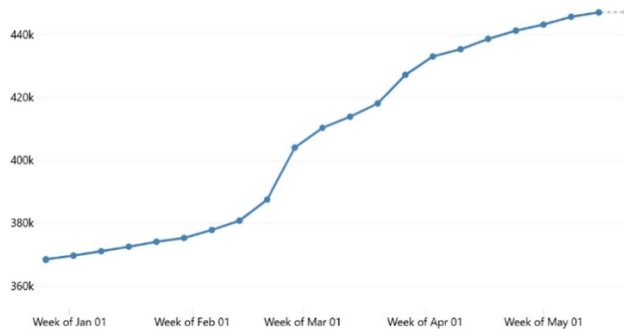
Circumventing Strategies: A Case Study On Alternative RT Domains (5/5)



Spread of different alternative RT domains by the Twitter account ActualidadRT, from 1 February 2022 to 30 June 2022.

Other Circumventing Strategies

- 1) Mirror domains, alternative domains, copy-paste websites
- 2) Rebranding of content
- 3) Expansion of online presence on alternative platforms
- 4) New media set up by former RT employees
- 5) Use of diplomatic accounts
- 6) Promoting usage of VPNs



Impact of Sanctions: Successes, Challenges and Recommendations

Successes

- Restrictions placed on accessing Russian state media were overall effective in reducing traffic from the countries that applied the sanctions;
- Engagement with sanctioned social media accounts also decreased in the aftermath of the bans.

Challenges and Recommendations

- Sanctioning a fixed set of assets has its limits;
- Sanctioned content can easily be recreated and spread through other media;
- Sanctions were only applied to the most well-known state media outlets;
- State-affiliated actors are not the only actors spreading pro-Kremlin disinformation.

Thank you.

Contact us:
fa@isdglobal.org