

The Kremlin's grip tightens on Russia's answer to Facebook

Russian social network VK launched six years ago and has since attracted 122 million users. But as Olga Shvarova explains, political and copyright crackdowns are limiting the free flow of information and ideas its users once enjoyed.

[VK](#), formerly VKontakte or “In Touch” in Russian, is a popular social networking site among Russian speakers and the world’s most visited Russian language website. VK is similar to Facebook in design and functionality but is not a clone, as some have [claimed](#). According to VK’s founder Pavel Durov, the site’s design was based on the [open source concept](#) and looks quite different to its more famous rival.

Facebook, although present in Russia, has hardly been able to compete with VK for Runet – the Russian-speaking internet. Some suggest that the secret to VK’s success is its appeal as an entertainment resource and that, unlike Facebook, VK is primarily used for its file-sharing functionality, which allows users to easily find pirated movies, music and [porn](#). But it is hard to imagine that porn and pirated content alone has attracted 122 million people to register on the site and 38 million to log on daily. VK’s site usage [statistics](#) show the majority of site activity is messaging and photo uploads. The real reason for VK’s success over Facebook in Russia may be Facebook’s late arrival in Russia and VK’s clever [marketing campaigns](#).

The site’s community standards were once loosely phrased, allowing users considerable freedom of expression. Over the last few years, however, these [terms](#) were extended and clarified to match Facebook’s in terms of prohibited content.

VK’s biggest problem has been pirated music and videos. VK has [expressed](#) a readiness to delete litigious copyrighted content from its servers upon demand from copyright owners and has allowed many companies, including [ivi.ru](#), to moderate video content on the site and replace it with licensed material. Nevertheless, in March 2011 VK was [blacklisted](#) by the US Trade Representative’s office

as one of the companies “that are reportedly engaged in piracy and counterfeiting” and was accused of “permitting users to provide access to allegedly infringing materials”.

VK also faced a number of complaints and lawsuits from Russian companies between 2008 and 2012. For example RTR, the leading Russian TV channel, filed a case against VK for copyright infringement. A court [ruled](#) in favour of VK, but on appeal VK was found guilty and forced to pay damages equivalent to £20,000 to RTR. In February 2012 in the dispute between Gala Records and VK, the St. Petersburg arbitration court [found](#) VK guilty of “passive behaviour”, ruling the social network had not reacted adequately to address complaints of copyright infringement.

The other problem VK faces is porn uploaded by users. According to data collected by Russia’s ministry of internal affairs, the majority of child porn flagged in 2009 in Runet [was found](#) on VK. Ukraine [threatened](#) to block VK locally in 2009 for the site’s high proportion of pornographic material and in 2011, Dr. Web, a Russian company that provides software for parental control, [blacklisted](#) VK. In 2012 Turkey also [announced](#) plans to block VK on its territory. Lev Leviev, VK’s managing director, [claimed](#) the company is collaborating with the police in child porn cases, but despite many customer [complaints](#), adult pornographic materials have not been removed and offending users have not been blocked.

Durov recently commented on the porn issue in an [interview](#) with Afisha.ru: “We are living in an upside down world, which is distorted by church dogmas from the middle ages”. The views of VK’s founder suggest that the freedom of self-expression its users enjoyed before new terms were implemented was intentional, not accidental. This claim is supported by VK’s [refusal](#) to step in when the site was [used](#) to organise post-election protests in 2011.

VK was one of many websites in Runet to allow its users freedom of expression. Unfortunately, this situation did not last long. Regulations are becoming tighter, forcing VK to control and moderate user content. Changes to VK’s terms of use could be a result of internal company policy or symptomatic of greater state censorship in Russia. On 1 October 2012 Russia’s ministry of communications [proposed](#) a bill that would force ISPs to block or slow down service to sites blacklisted by Russia’s information policy committee. Russia is moving further from the principle of net neutrality and companies like VK will have to adjust to stay afloat or face sanctions. VK has already demonstrated a willingness to comply by pre-emptively removing the controversial Innocence of Muslims video a week before its distribution was [banned](#) by a local court decision. This happened despite a [statement](#) from the company originally saying the video would remain on VK until the court order was issued.

A poll conducted in September 2012 [suggested](#) that 63% of Russians support the idea of state-mandated internet censorship. Such censorship, if introduced, would violate Russia’s constitution. There are no evident threats to state security to explain such drastic measures, but there clearly is a demand. The question is whether such demand originated from society or the state. Is it driven by people used to the state taking responsibility for their way of life and fearful of freedom, or is it

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the state, striving to control Runet? As Facebook [aims](#) to encroach on VK's market share in Russia, what concessions will the social network make to gather its next billion members?

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