

February 25, 2022

Mr. Sundar Pichai
Chief Executive Officer
Alphabet Inc.
1600 Amphitheatre Parkway
Mountain View, CA 94043

Dear Mr. Pichai,

In the wake of the Russian Federation's illegal invasion of Ukraine, I write to encourage your company to assume a heightened posture towards exploitation of your platform by Russia and Russian-linked entities engaged in information operations. In addition to Russia's established use of influence operations as a tool of strategic influence, information warfare constitutes an integral part of Russian military doctrine. As this conflict continues, we can expect to see an escalation in Russia's use of both overt and covert means to sow confusion about the conflict and promote disinformation narratives that weaken the global response to these illegal acts.

While social media can provide valuable information to civilians in conflict zones and educate audiences far removed from those conflict zones, as well as a platform for some relatively independent media outlets – including in Russia – it can also serve as a vector for harmful misinformation and disinformation campaigns and a wide range of scams and frauds that opportunistically exploit confusion, desperation, and grief.

Unfortunately, your platforms continue to be key vectors for malign actors – including, notably, those affiliated with the Russian government – to not only spread disinformation, but to *profit* from it. YouTube, for instance, continues to monetize the content of prominent influence actors that have been publicly connected to Russian influence campaigns. Just yesterday, for instance, my staff was able to find RT, Sputnik and TASS channels' content *specifically* focused on the Ukraine conflict to be monetized with YouTube ads – including, somewhat perversely, an ad by a major U.S. government contractor. Meanwhile, Google's wider ad network continues to support influence outlets such as Sputnik and TASS¹, directing advertising dollars from unwitting U.S. brands like Best Buy, Allbirds, and Progressive to entities whose ties to Russian influence activity has been well-documented for over five years.² And according to the ad

¹ Patrick Coffee, "As the Kremlin Advances on Ukraine, Google and Big Brands Like Best Buy Continue to Fuel Russian Propaganda," Insider (February 23, 2022), available at <https://www.businessinsider.com/google-big-advertisers-fuel-websites-labeled-russian-propaganda-2022-2>

² Office of the Director of National Intelligence, "Background to 'Assessing Russian Activities and Intentions in Recent US Elections': The Analytic Process and Cyber Incident Attribution," (January 6, 2017), available at https://www.dni.gov/files/documents/ICA_2017_01.pdf

transparency organization Check My Ads, Google even continues to serve ads for *sanctioned* influence actors like Southfront – a matter that I have separately referred to the Department of Treasury and Department of Justice for their attention.³

Russia's efforts to shape global perceptions of the conflict in Syria, and its role in possible war crimes perpetrated by Russian and Russian-allied forces, offers a startling window into what's likely to be an even wider and more brazen set of information operation campaigns in the current conflict. Russia's information operations not only strove to sow false narratives on humanitarian efforts (including in ways that imperiled the safety of aid workers⁴), but sought to cover up evidence of war crimes by distorting online conversations with false claims, conspiracy theories, and doctored media.⁵ Pointing to the long-term value of online influence assets to Russia, much of the operating infrastructure focused on the Syrian Civil War was later found to pivot towards Russia's influence activities focused on the U.S. elections – underscoring the strong possibility that Russian influence actors may misuse current assets in future election contexts, such as the upcoming U.S. midterm elections.⁶

As one of the world's largest communications platforms, your company has a clear responsibility to ensure that your products are not used to facilitate human rights abuses, undermine humanitarian and emergency service responses, or advance harmful disinformation. Given the gravity of this situation, I would encourage you to, at a minimum, take immediate steps to:

- Desist from continued monetization of content and channels publicly attributed to have associations with Russian influence activity;
- Conduct an audit of Google and YouTube's advertising business, including its compliance with sanctions;
- Establish mechanisms by which Ukrainian public safety entities can disseminate emergency communications to your users in Ukraine;
- Furnish additional account monitoring and security resources to Ukrainian government, humanitarian, and public safety institutions to prevent account takeovers;

³ Nandini Jammi and Claire Atkin, "It's Wild How These AdTech Platforms Are Violating U.S. Sanctions Against Russia," CheckMyAds.org, (April 28, 2021), available at <https://checkmyads.org/branded/its-wild-how-these-adtech-platforms/>

⁴ Louisa Loveluck, "Russian Disinformation Campaign Targets Syria's Beleaguered Rescue Workers," The Washington Post (December 18, 2018), available at https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/russian-disinformation-campaign-targets-syrias-beleaguered-rescue-workers/2018/12/18/113b03c4-02a9-11e9-8186-4ec26a485713_story.html

⁵ Olivia Solon, "How Syria's White Helmets Became Victims of An Online Propaganda Machine," The Guardian (December 18, 2017), available at <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/dec/18/syria-white-helmets-conspiracy-theories>; "Chemical Weapons and Absurdity: the Disinformation Campaign Against the White Helmets," Bellingcat (December 18, 2018), available at <https://www.bellingcat.com/news/mena/2018/12/18/chemical-weapons-and-absurdity-the-disinformation-campaign-against-the-white-helmets/>

⁶ Scott Shane, "The Fake Americans Russia Created to Influence the Election" The New York Times (September 7, 2017), available at <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/09/07/us/politics/russia-facebook-twitter-election.html>; Shannon Bond, "Facebook, Twitter Remove More Russian-Backed Fake Accounts Ahead of Election," NPR (September 24, 2020), available at <https://www.npr.org/2020/09/24/916636508/facebook-twitter-remove-more-russian-backed-fake-accounts-ahead-of-election>

- Surge integrity teams, including those with language expertise in Ukrainian, Russian, Polish, Romanian, and German, to monitor your platform for malign influence activity related to the conflict;
- Devote additional resources towards the identification of inauthentic accounts, and the removal or labeling of inauthentic content, associated with Russian influence operations; and
- Establish dedicated reporting channels for qualified academic, public interest, and open source intelligence researchers to share credible information about inauthentic activity, disinformation, and other malign efforts utilizing your platforms.

At this uncertain and critical juncture, I request your prompt attention to this matter. An unprecedented conflict of this kind requires global communications providers to prioritize efforts such as these.

Sincerely,



Mark R. Warner
United States Senator