

United States Senate
WASHINGTON, DC 20510-0908

COMMITTEES:
APPROPRIATIONS
FOREIGN RELATIONS
SELECT COMMITTEE ON INTELLIGENCE
SMALL BUSINESS AND ENTREPRENEURSHIP
SPECIAL COMMITTEE ON AGING

October 1, 2021

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

Mr. Tim Cook
Chief Executive Officer
Apple Inc.
One Apple Park Way
Cupertino, CA 95014

Dear Mr. Pichai and Mr. Cook:

I write to express serious concern with the recent decisions by Google and Apple to accede to illegitimate and outrageous censorship requests by the Russian government. This month, both of your companies removed from your respective app stores an app designed to coordinate protest voting in the September 17-19, 2021 Russian parliamentary election, which was supported by allies of opposition leader Alexei Navalny. The decision to remove the app was widely reported to have followed threats from Moscow to arrest employees of both of your companies.

The “Smart Voting” app in question was designed by a Navalny-led campaign to consolidate protest votes and recommend the political candidates that were best positioned to defeat United Russia, the dominant, pro-Putin party in the State Duma. Your companies removed the app from the Google Play Store and App Store at a critical moment, just as millions of Russians were going to the polls to vote. By intervening as you did, your companies denied a legitimate political opposition the opportunity to organize and get out the vote – and potentially even its rightful seats in the Russian Duma – and enabled Vladimir Putin’s continued suppression of Russians’ fundamental right to elect their leaders.

By bowing to Moscow’s demand, Google and Apple have made themselves complicit in the censorship of an oppressive, authoritarian regime. You have set a disturbing precedent for both of your companies, and their peers, one with ramifications for billions of users of your technologies worldwide. Why your companies would choose to assist a regime that, just days beforehand, began fining Facebook and Twitter for refusing to remove content per its beck and call, as well as reportedly blocked users’ access to Smart Voting material hosted on Google Docs, is beyond comprehension.

In the same vein, I am also concerned by YouTube’s decision to block RadioFreeEurope and RadioLiberty from airing a clip from an August 30, 2021 Russian election debate broadcast on state television. In the clip, journalist and candidate Maksim Shevchenko called for the release of Alexei Navalny, and other political prisoners. According to RadioFreeEurope, the state-owned All-Russia State Television and Radio Company requested that YouTube block use of the video on the basis of copyright infringement. As Shevchenko noted, however, the Russian

government lacks the right to claim such infringement on so central "a part of the political process."

In response to your companies' decision to remove the app, Navalny wrote from prison that "[i]f something surprised me in the latest elections, it was not how Putin forged the results, but how obediently the almighty Big Tech turned into his accomplices... I know that most of those who work at Google, Apple, etc. are honest and good people. I urge them not to put up with the cowardice of their bosses."

When presented with an opportunity to support your own goals of transparency, openness, advancement of human rights, and internet freedom, you instead bowed to the demands of an authoritarian regime. I strongly urge you to reconsider your decision to do so and request greater background and transparency from both Google and Apple about the decision-making process that led to these censorious actions on behalf of Putin's Russia.

Thank you for your attention to this matter. I look forward to your prompt response.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "M. Rubio", written in a cursive style.

Marco Rubio
U.S. Senator