

Russia accelerates internet shutdowns

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Since early March 2026, the Russian government has intensified efforts to cut citizens off from independent sources of information. This marks another stage in the 'sovereignisation' of the Russian segment of the internet (see '[The Great Russian Firewall. The Kremlin's ultimate crackdown on internet freedom](#)'), a process that has intensified since the outset of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Current measures include the large-scale disruption of Telegram, the most popular messaging platform, with over 95 million users, as well as partial shutdowns of mobile internet in Moscow and St Petersburg, with similar measures announced for the Moscow Oblast. Mobile internet accounts for 50-70% of total data transmission in Russia. In addition, the government has throttled fibre-optic broadband in cities such as St Petersburg. Officials have justified these restrictions primarily on security grounds, citing the need to prevent Ukrainian drone attacks and to thwart efforts to recruit saboteurs via social media networks. Telegram's self-exiled owner Pavel Durov has been accused of supporting terrorism after refusing to censor content on a mass scale at the government's request.

These measures are intended to test and roll out a nationwide system of internet 'whitelists'. The aim is to ensure that the public can access only selected websites, services, and online platforms, while preventing the use of sources not authorised by the Kremlin. The government's flagship project is Max, a messaging app launched in mid-2025, which uses spyware to keep users under constant surveillance and lacks essential security safeguards.

The decision to complete the 'sovereignisation' of Russia's internet has sparked significant controversy within the ruling elite and fuelled tensions across the country. The government's economic bloc and business circles have expressed concern about the impact of these restrictions on the economy and public finances. Meanwhile, officials responsible for propaganda are concerned that they could lose effective channels for disinformation operations targeting foreign audiences, as well as tools for influencing Russian society ahead of the so-called parliamentary elections in September 2026.

Commentary

- **The priority for Putin and the security services, particularly the FSB, is to protect the regime from potential domestic political threats.** The backdrop to the 'sovereignisation' of Runet includes a lack of success on the battlefield in Ukraine, a deteriorating macroeconomic situation, and a growing budget deficit (see '[Russia's stagnating economy](#)'), resulting in increased fiscal burdens and cuts in spending on social policy and infrastructure facilities. As society becomes increasingly burdened by the costs of the

war, independent sociologists have reported that support for continuing the invasion has fallen to record-low levels – just 25% in February 2026, according to the Levada Center. Social frustration and anxiety about the future are also on the rise. Citing the hostile intentions of foreign intelligence services (in the context of escalated Ukrainian attacks on Russian military facilities and critical infrastructure) largely serves as a pretext to justify the isolation of Russian society from independent sources of information and channels of horizontal communication. This serves to prevent the exchange of information about abuses of power and the course of the war, as well as the potential organisation of anti-regime protests. The forced redirection of users to domestic Russian platforms is intended to facilitate mass infiltration, indoctrination, censorship, and intimidation. This has provoked resistance and criticism both within society and among the establishment.

- **The new internet restrictions have exacerbated Russia's already challenging economic situation.** Preliminary estimates suggest that losses incurred by Moscow-based businesses as a result of connectivity problems have reached around 1 billion roubles (approximately \$12.5 million) per day. The actual costs may be several times higher, as companies are forced to invest in adapting to the new conditions. The restrictions are affecting a key source of revenue for Moscow, the country's wealthiest region, which is home to around 10% of the country's population and serves as a hub of Russia's digital economy. According to the city authorities, the IT and digital services sector accounted for as much as 36% of its gross regional product in 2024. Small and medium-sized enterprises have been the hardest hit, as they rely heavily on online services and digital communication with customers. Unlike large corporations, they are unable to adapt quickly to the new conditions, particularly as they contend with increased fiscal burdens this year. The SME sector, which accounted for around 30% of Moscow's tax revenues in 2025, now faces a wave of bankruptcies.
- **It remains unclear whether the calculations of the Kremlin and the security apparatus are limited solely to domestic policy** – tightening control over Russian society and intensifying repression – or whether they also have an external dimension. Should Russia choose to escalate its actions targeting the EU and NATO, Moscow may seek to minimise its digital links with the international environment in order to limit the impact of potential retaliatory measures. This interpretation is supported by the chaotic manner in which the restrictions were implemented in central Moscow, without prior notice to businesses or clearly defined timeframes for disconnections, thereby generating significant costs for the economy.