

Russia blocks Telegram and cracks down on VPNs

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In the first half of April, the Russian government intensified its previously announced censorship measures in the digital sphere. It almost completely blocked access to the Telegram messaging platform for Russian citizens and cracked down on efforts to circumvent the restrictions through VPN connections. A third line of action, which is currently in the planning stage, involves a far-reaching tightening of licensing criteria for telecommunications operators, including a significant increase in the financial threshold for entry into the fixed broadband internet market.

Although access to Telegram has been increasingly restricted since August 2025, the number of its users fell only slightly in the first quarter of 2026 (by around 1.5% compared with the fourth quarter of 2025) and still stood at over 94 million, according to Mediascope data. However, in the first ten days of April, the availability of the messaging platform to users without VPNs in Russia dropped to a record low of 5%. At the same time, the popularity of VPN services enabling access to blocked online resources has been increasing, with the share of VPN users in Russia now estimated at no less than 40%.

Efforts to block Telegram have primarily benefited Turkey's BiP messaging platform, South Korea's KakaoTalk, and China's WeChat. According to data from the telecommunications operator MTS, their combined number of users in Russia surged by 60% in March 2026, reaching 1.68 million, 436,000, and around 1.15 million, respectively. The 'sovereign' messaging app Max, which the Kremlin seeks to impose on both the public and officials, has failed to gain popularity. Although official data indicate that more than 107 million users have registered on the platform, they tend to limit their use of Max owing to its surveillance features.

In mid-April, at the instruction of the Ministry of Digital Development, more than 20 Russian websites and e-commerce platforms began restricting access to their services for users relying on VPNs. These include Gosuslugi, Ozon, Wildberries, Yandex, Sberbank, and VK. Difficulties have also been reported in accessing online medical services, supermarkets, and the Russian Railways website. Entities that fail to comply with the government's guidelines have been threatened with the revocation of their licences. The ministry has also demanded that operators significantly increase service fees for users who frequently rely on VPNs.

Restricting internet access has negatively affected the government's public image and has drawn criticism from administrative and business circles, but there is little prospect of easing censorship and blocking measures. Both Vladimir Putin and the repressive apparatus regard the isolation of Russians from independent sources of information as a guarantee of the regime's security.

Commentary

- **Efforts to restrict internet access have adverse consequences for domestic political stability and Putin's image.** Although the potential for active protest remains extremely low, the situation is antagonising a segment of apolitical Russians who have so far remained loyal to the regime. The intensification of online censorship – actively promoted by the repressive apparatus, primarily the FSB – is generating discontent among the public, within various levels of the state administration and in business circles. This is reflected in public statements by some officials and pro-Kremlin bloggers, as well as in public opinion surveys. Since the beginning of 2026, the state-run VCIOM pollster has recorded a steady downward trend in declared support for and trust in Putin. Compared with January, support for his policies fell in early April from 75.1% to 67.8%, the lowest level since February 2022, while trust expressed in response to an open-ended question dropped from 33.3% to 29.5%; by comparison, the figure stood at 38.3% in May 2025. In Russian conditions, a decline in the leader's popularity poses a serious problem for officials. Ensuring an adequate approval rating is a key criterion for the Kremlin's evaluation of their performance, particularly in the run-up to the September parliamentary 'elections'. According to VCIOM, support for the ruling party, United Russia, has also fallen – from 33.5% in January to 29.7% in the first days of April.
- **The government's censorship measures are generating a range of problems for domestic propaganda, business, and the military.** The restrictions have produced side effects in the form of disruptions to the functioning of fully loyal services and companies. As a result of the drastic restriction of access to Telegram, pro-regime channels on the platform lost approximately 40% of their views in the second half of March (according to data from Novaya Gazeta), while opposition channels lost only 17%, owing to the relatively widespread use of VPNs among their audiences. The crackdown on Telegram has deprived Russia's frontline forces of an effective communication tool, while businesses have incurred substantial financial losses. According to the Russian Union of Industrialists and Entrepreneurs, 85% of surveyed companies described the effects of the internet restrictions as 'critical' or 'significant' for their operations.
- **Plans to tighten the conditions for granting licences to telecommunications operators will create multiple problems in the Russian telecoms market, if implemented in the coming years.** Above all, a further reduction in competition will drive up prices, erode service quality, and increase the financial burden on operators owing to new obligations to censor users, thereby limiting their investment capacity. Eliminating small and medium-sized providers from the broadband internet market (they currently account for around 30% of the market) will lead to the emergence of an oligopoly of five entities fully controlled by the state: Rostelecom, VimpelCom, ER-Telecom, MTS and MegaFon. It can be assumed that these companies have been actively lobbying for the plan to be implemented. In an appeal to the government, the Association of Small Telecom Operators of the Regions of Russia (AMOR) highlighted the risk that Russians in certain parts of the country could lose access to telecommunications services, including in remote areas and frontline zones, where large companies have deemed operations to be unprofitable.

- **Despite negative reactions from the public, the administration and business, Putin is unlikely to abandon his plans to maximise control over the information sphere.** So far, he has ignored complaints from Russian entrepreneurs about mounting financial losses resulting from the blocking measures, as he continues to prioritise regime security over the state's economic interests. On the contrary, growing public discontent, fuelled by escalating internet restrictions and the deteriorating economic situation, is more likely to accelerate efforts to isolate Russians from independent sources of information and to reinforce the repressive aspects of governance. Although the government is unable to effectively block all independent sources and VPN services that enable censorship to be circumvented, its actions may prompt many citizens to abandon attempts to access independent news and to limit their communication with other internet users.