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Russia Turns the Switch off on LinkedIn

Russia bans the world's largest job searching engine. The business world is not impressed

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Zuma / TASS

LinkedIn, the major global professional social network, has finally been banned in Russia after a Moscow court upheld an earlier decision by Russian state media watchdog Roskomnadzor. LinkedIn stands accused of failing to comply with a 2014 federal law requiring internet companies that process Russian citizens' personal information to store their user data on servers located in Russia.

Many had considered the 2014 law unenforceable, and LinkedIn is hardly alone in processing user data away from Russian shores. Many observers think
LinkedIn was selectively banned
by Roskomnadzor to improve its negotiating position on data localization with other

companies.

“No one will stand up for LinkedIn, it’s not that popular in Russia and does not have specific interests in Russia,” - says David Homak, an IT entrepreneur and software engineer - “and what differs it from Facebook or Twitter is that for banning LinkedIn Roskomnadzor won’t get scolding from above. The defenseless position of LinkedIn makes it a perfect target.”

After the court decision Vladimir Putin’s spokesman Dmitry Peskov denounced allegations that banning LinkedIn is a next move towards censorship in Russia. “Roskomnadzor was acting according to the law” - he said.

LinkedIn sent it Russia’s users a notifying e-mail, claiming it’s disappointed with the ban, “which interferes with professional networking and the pursuit of economic opportunity for many of our Russia-based members.” LinkedIn claims it is currently “evaluating the decision and options.We expressed to Roskomnadzor, the relevant government agency, our interest in meeting to discuss their localization request directly.”

Russian authorities insist LinkedIn is no big deal. Deputy Prime Minister Olga Golodets, for example, claimed the disappearance of LinkedIn from the Russian Internet would not impact on the country’s labor market.

But Russian businesses and job seekers think otherwise.

Yevgeniya Dvorskaya, the founder of JungleJobs, a Russian search engine that connects recruiters with companies, said she was worried about the consequences of the potential ban for her business. Her company has over 500 professional recruiters on its platform, and using LinkedIn was essential in their work.

“This will be a real blow to the industry,” she told The Moscow Times. What makes LinkedIn so valuable for recruiters around the world is it’s easy to use resume database and social network function. Unlike conventional job search sites, it has extensive search settings. Most of its functions do not require paid subscription.

For Dvorskaya, the most important advantage of the site is that users do not openly declare they are looking for a job but, at the same time, they are open to new career opportunities. “Compared to regular job sites, it’s a much more subtle way of communication,” said Dvorskaya. The ban on LinkedIn will hurt Russian job seekers as much as recruiters, says Anna Imas, former general director at Job.ru, one of Russia’s largest job search engines. “We have been building many of our business relations via LinkedIn, and it will be sad if it gets blocked eventually,” he said.

Now, Russian users are likely to opt for local job search websites but here they will find that their options are limited. There is currently no Russian alternative to LinkedIn. Perhaps the nearest analog, MoiKrug, a professional network bought by Russian giant Yandex in 2007, has been gradually losing audiences and finally narrowed its scope down to a job search network exclusively for the IT sphere. In 2015, Yandex sold it to Tematicheskie Media.

Another competitor, Professionaly.ru, features more user-generated content and acts as a social network with job listings. The company claims to have over 6 million registered users,

but only about 30 percent of them are regular visitors that open the website once a month. Maria Lemeshkina, executive director of the platform, said she expected Linkedin's problems to have a positive effect on the company's market share. "We anticipate a new influx of users to our website." Regardless of the reasons for the LinkedIn ban, it seems unlikely to be Roskomnadzor's last move. The concern now is that the regulator will turn its sights to more popular foreign networking sites and internet services.

"You can still access LinkedIn from outside of Russia," LinkedIn said in its e-mail after the ban.

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