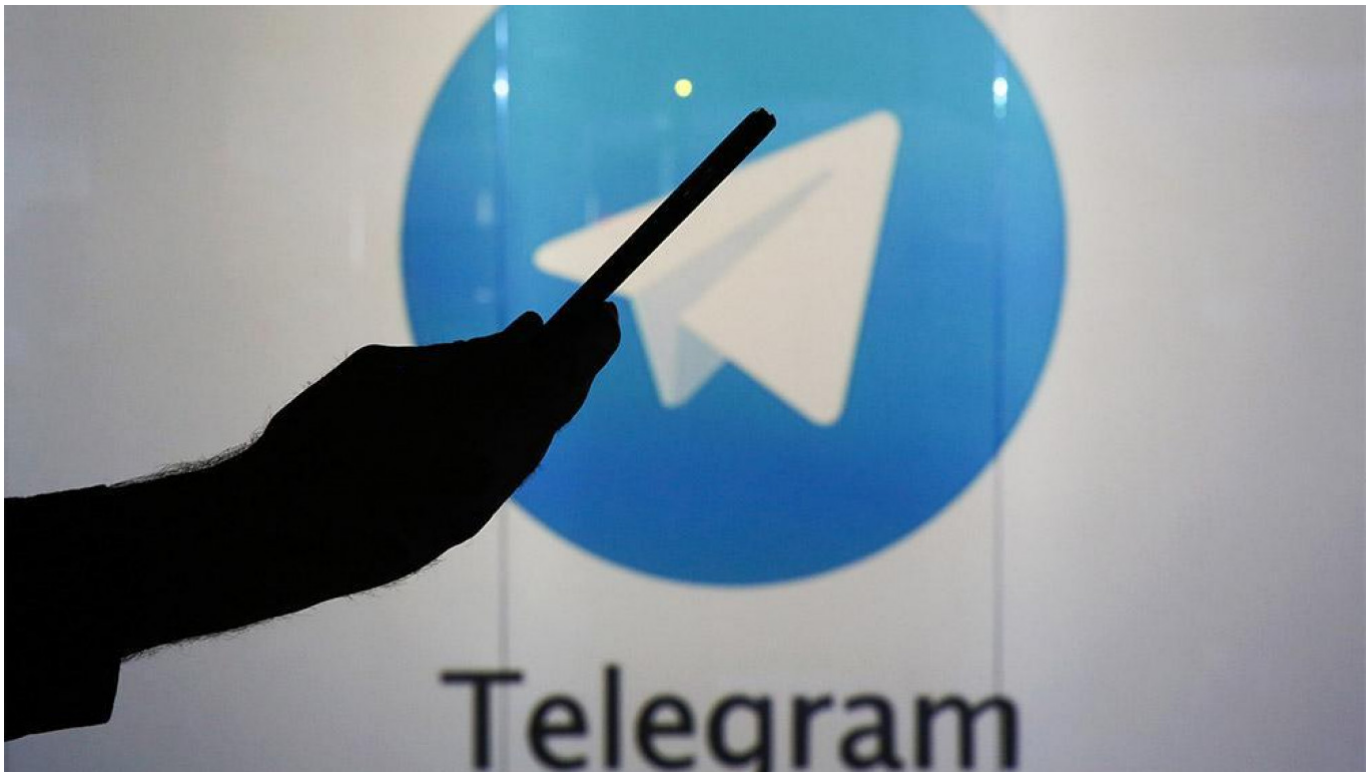
The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
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Russia Just Banned Telegram: What Happens Next?

It is still unclear when the restrictions will come into effect.

By Evan Gershkovich

April 13, 2018



The popular messaging service Telegram was banned in Russia on Friday after a protracted battle with authorities.

During a hearing in the morning that lasted less than 20 minutes, a judge in Moscow sided with Roskomnadzor, Russia's state media watchdog, demanding that the messenger be blocked "immediately." The judge did not allow Telegram to appeal the decision.

It remains unclear, however, when the restrictions will actually come into effect, and on Friday afternoon the messenger was still accessible in Russia.

The company's founder and chief executive Pavel Durov responded to the ruling, saying the company would not allow Russian authorities to decrypt users' private conversations.

“Telegram will use built-in methods to bypass any blocks,” Durov wrote on social media network Vkontakte, which he co-founded.

Why was Telegram blocked?

The saga between Russia’s authorities and Durov began in mid-2016 when lawmakers introduced so-called anti-terrorist laws that require “information disseminators” to register in a state database and to decrypt personal information for the Federal Security Services (FSB).

After an Islamic State (IS)-linked suicide-bombing in the St. Petersburg metro last April left 16 people dead, the FSB claimed the perpetrators planned the attacks using Telegram.

To aid its investigation and prevent future attacks, the FSB demanded that the company hand over the “encryption keys” that would allow authorities to read private conversations.

Telegram refused, citing free speech. (On Friday, Durov wrote: “Human rights should not be compromised out of fear.”) Two prominent Russian journalists also later sued the FSB, citing confidential access to sources. They lost the suit.

Related article: 'Privacy Is Not for Sale' — Telegram CEO Blasts Russia’s Decision to Ban Messaging App

All the while, Telegram has claimed the company does not even have access to the encryption keys which would decipher users’ messages.

According to Andrei Soldatov, an independent journalist and co-author of “The Red Web,” the current standoff between Durov and the FSB, which goes back to his time at Vkontakte, was never about the encryption keys at all.

“Because Telegram uses end-to-end encryption, this means that encryption keys are generated each time anew,” he explained. “So there is no use in handing them over.”

“This was just a pretext,” Soldatov added.

How long before the ban takes effect?

It is unclear when Telegram will actually be blocked. The Interfax news agency late on Friday cited an unnamed source close to Roskomnadzor as saying providers would be pressured to block access to Telegram on April 16 — but the report has not been confirmed.

When Wikipedia was briefly blocked in 2015, it “took months” for the ban to actually take effect, Soldatov notes.

Roskomnadzor has been coy about how long it will take to implement the decision. “Imagine a war is going on and you ask: ‘When will you attack?’” the state-run television channel NTV cited a Roskomnadzor spokesperson as saying on Friday. “Well, in the near future. When exactly — I will not say.”

Will Telegram be inaccessible in Russia once it is blocked?

As the news spread on Friday, independent media outlets, bloggers and Telegram itself published instructions on how to keep using the app once Roskomnadzor goes through with its restrictions.

This can be done through VPNs, which disguise a user's IP address — a person's physical location on the web — to a location outside Russia.

Related article: How Telegram Channeled Russia's Political Intrigue

According to Soldatov, the availability of VPNs means blocking the messenger will be a "challenge" for the watchdog. Even though Roskomnadzor banned VPNs last year, they are still available en masse in Russia.

"It will be easier for them to stop new users from downloading the app because it can pressure app stores to stop offering the service," he said. "But users who already have the application downloaded can continuously change their IP addresses."

What other options do Russians have?

Telegram is not the first messaging service to be blocked in Russia, and other encrypted messengers like Signal and WhatsApp are still available. (On Friday, Russia's Foreign Ministry tweeted that it would be using Viber, and invited others to do the same.)

But Telegram, which said last month that it now has 200 million users worldwide, many of them in Russia, has become a part of the country's political life.

The messengers "channels" feature, which allows users to broadcast messages to a wide audience — some of which are run by anonymous self-described Kremlin insiders — has played a key role.

Even as the government has worked to shut down the messenger, many of its officials rely on it. "Indeed, we use it to communicate with journalists," Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov told journalists last week. "But the law is the law."

According to Abbas Gallyamov, a former Kremlin speechwriter turned political analyst, the contradiction is typical for the Russian state.

"There are a lot of differences between the various government structures," he said. "Peskov won't argue with the FSB. The siloviki" — officials with ties to law enforcement — "will win out. Peskov will just switch to a different messenger."

But if Peskov will be able to deal with the loss, will ordinary Russians?

"It won't be a big loss for political society," Gallyamov said. "More and more people are saying that they've signed up for these anonymous channels, but that they've muted them."

"It's like coffee," he added. "It's tasty, people like it, but they can live without it. People can

also live without Telegram.”

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