

Russia Tests Face, Voice Recognition Ahead of eSIM Integration – Izvestia

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Yaroslav Chingayev / TASS

Russia is testing face- and voice-recognition technology to identify mobile device users as it moves toward approving eSIM technology which allows consumers to switch easily between carriers, the pro-Kremlin Izvestia newspaper has reported.

The Central Bank is overseeing a pilot project that uses personal biometric data to remotely [open](#) accounts despite concerns over state surveillance, data storage and privacy rights. Already supported by the iPhone 11 and recent Apple Watch models, eSIM replaces traditional SIM cards to authenticate users' identities with cellphone carriers.

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Russia's national banking biometric database could be used to authenticate eSIM users remotely, Alexei Chernetsov, the head of Rostelecom's Mobile Virtual Network Operator (MVNO) project, [told](#) Izvestia on Tuesday.

The publication did not indicate when the eSIM authentication system would go into force but quoted Deputy Prime Minister Maxim Akimov as saying earlier this month that the technology would “definitely” clear all regulatory hurdles within a year.

Tele2 was the [first](#) among Russia’s “Big Four” operators to begin using eSIM in the country, albeit in-person, this spring. The other three carriers were reported to have sided with the Federal Security Service (FSB) in [opposing](#) eSIM technology.

The Communications and Press Ministry is due to meet with operators and other industry players in early October to overhaul the national regulatory framework ahead of eSIM integration, according to Izvestia. Russia’s anti-monopoly watchdog, communications ministry and the FSB are reportedly scheduled to [approve](#) eSIM technology by January 2020.

Russia's state telecoms provider Rostelecom, which [operates](#) the country-wide biometric database, is [required](#) to share bank customers’ biometric data without their consent with the Interior Ministry and the FSB. The data collected includes facial images and voice recordings, and may be expanded to iris recognition, palm and fingerprint scanning, according to Rostelecom.

Rostelecom was reported to have [gathered](#) only 15,000 face and voice samples for the database in one year of operation.

Stanislav Shakirov, the founder and technical director of the Roskomsvoboda internet rights group, criticized the eSIM authentication move using banking biometric data as prone to government abuse.

“Handling biometrics will lead to state agencies’ being able to spy on not only people whom the courts have allowed them to spy on, but all others as well,” Shakirov told The Moscow Times.

“With the amount of [abuses](#) in Russia, biometrics processing should be banned altogether,” he said.

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