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Explained: How Russia Is Cracking Down on the Internet and Messaging Apps

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Zuma / TASS

Since invading Ukraine, the Kremlin has made it increasingly challenging for Russians to access foreign websites, social media platforms and, more broadly, information that contradicts its narratives.

This clampdown is set to escalate as lawmakers have adopted new legislation introducing fines for searching for "extremist" content online and advertising VPNs. Experts warn that the amendments mark one of the most significant assaults on digital freedom in modern Russian history.

Russian authorities are also mulling the replacement of WhatsApp with a domestic app called Max.

The proposals come as mobile internet outages blamed on Ukrainian drone threats have plagued much of the country.

The Moscow Times takes a closer look at the future of internet and communication freedom in Russia.

Online search censorship

On Tuesday, the State Duma approved in their third and final reading amendments that introduce fines for the intentional search and access of "extremist" materials online, including through VPN services. The proposed changes also penalize advertising VPNs.

Until now, Russian law did not penalize users simply for searching online — only for creating or distributing prohibited content. Once passed in the upper-house Federation Council and signed into law by President Vladimir Putin, it would take effect on Sept. 1.

Senator Artyom Sheikin, a co-author of the proposals, said the amendments are aimed at internet providers and technical intermediaries rather than ordinary users. Under the new legislation, individuals could be fined up to 5,000 rubles ($63) for searching for "extremist" materials.

The amendments have drawn criticism from pro-Kremlin figures and members of the Duma itself.

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Deputy State Duma Speaker Vladislav Davankov, an MP from the New People party, said that "this is the first time in Russia that someone could be fined not for distributing content, but simply for accessing it — often accidentally."

Yekaterina Mizulina, head of the Kremlin-aligned Safe Internet League and a vocal supporter of online censorship and denunciations, also voiced concern, saying that the legislation could hinder her organization's work.

Around 30% of the League's work involves monitoring extremist content and forwarding it to law enforcement, and this could be considered unlawful under the new rules, Mizulina said. She added that even police officers themselves could face legal risks for monitoring similar material.

Messenger restrictions

Russian officials also appear to be eyeing a ban on WhatsApp — one of the country's most widely used messengers, with an estimated 100 million users. While WhatsApp's parent company Meta was designated an extremist organization and banned in Russia shortly after the invasion of Ukraine, WhatsApp itself was spared at the time.

WhatsApp "should prepare to leave the Russian market," Anton Gorelkin, the first deputy chair of the State Duma's Information Policy Committee, said last week. The messaging platform is "very likely" to be included on a government list of software from so-called "unfriendly" countries that will be subject to new restrictions, he said.

Putin last week instructed the government to draft proposals by Sept. 1 on how to further

restrict the use of software, including “communication services,” from countries officially deemed "unfriendly" by Russia — which includes the U.S.

Two sources close to the presidential administration and a State Duma official told the exiled news outlet Meduza that WhatsApp is almost certain to be blocked, with the security services leading the charge to do so.

“There’s a 99% chance it will happen,” one Kremlin-linked source told Meduza. “They’ll tell us to switch to Max [Russia’s messenger] for all interactions with the government or affiliated organizations.”

The new Max messenger, currently in its testing phase, is expected to become Russia’s national messaging platform similar in function to China’s WeChat, which has faced accusations of surveilling users and sharing data with the government.

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Beyond offering basic messaging, audio and video calls, Max aims to integrate services like signing official documents, making payments and communicating with schools and government agencies.

Russian Telegram channels have accused Max of collecting user data including IP addresses and activity logs as well as reserving the right to share that information with third parties and government agencies.

Max’s chats are not end-to-end encrypted, meaning its developers can access users’ messages and share them with security services.

Over the past week, around 680 bots posted more than 2,400 comments criticizing WhatsApp and promoting Max as "a secure alternative messaging app” under posts on social network VKontakte mentioning WhatsApp and the potential ban, the exiled news outlet Vyorstka reported, citing the data from the Botnadzor (Bot Watch) project.

While the authorities have yet to make a final decision on blocking foreign messaging apps, Vyorstka said that WhatsApp and Telegram have experienced at least four short-term outages across various regions of Russia since early July. The independent business outlet The Bell said these outages were intentional rather than technical malfunctions.

Internet outages

At least 40 Russian regions have experienced mobile internet outages in recent weeks as Ukrainian drone attacks on Russian regions have become increasingly frequent, according to the independent media outlet Govorit NeMoskva.

While the most widespread disruptions took place during Victory Day in May and Russia Day in June, people also reported internet problems on regular days.

Some experts argue the shutdowns are not just about countering drones, but may also serve as testing tools designed to advance the “sovereignization” of Russia’s internet.

Dmitry Zair-Bek, head of the human rights group Perviy Otdel, said this could explain the mobile internet shutdown in the Sverdlovsk region, which has not come under Ukrainian attack at all.

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