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Suspected Government Tests Disrupt WhatsApp and Telegram Calls in Russia

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Mika Baumeister / unsplash

Users across Russia began reporting problems making voice and video calls via WhatsApp and Telegram on Sunday, according to online platforms that monitor the status of websites and services.

An anonymous telecoms industry source told the Kommersant business newspaper that the disruptions may be related to the "selective blocking" of calls on the two messaging apps, which Russian authorities reportedly began testing on Aug. 1.

Both WhatsApp and Telegram have experienced at least four short-term outages across various regions of Russia since early July, according to the exiled news outlet Vyorstka.

The disruptions come amid reports that authorities are considering blocking access to WhatsApp, a move that could force Russians to switch to a domestic app called Max.

Currently in its testing phase, Max is expected to become Russia's national messaging

platform, similar to China's WeChat, which has faced accusations of surveilling users and sharing data with the government.

Max has also been accused of collecting user data, including IP addresses and activity logs, as well as reserving the right to share information with third parties and government agencies.

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Kommersant reported in December that state communications watchdog Roskomnadzor and Russia's Ministry of Digital Development, Communications and Mass Media were considering blocking voice calls in messaging apps like Telegram and WhatsApp as an anti-fraud measure.

In late May, Russia's four major mobile operators asked authorities to block calls on foreign messaging apps, arguing the move would redirect traffic to traditional voice calls, combat scams and help avoid an outright ban on the apps, journalist Ksenia Sobchak reported on Saturday. She later cited telecoms industry sources as saying Roskomnadzor was likely behind the current disruptions.

Roskomnadzor and major mobile operators have not publicly commented on the WhatsApp and Telegram outages.

Meta, WhatsApp's parent company, was designated an "extremist organization" and banned in Russia in 2022, though WhatsApp itself was spared.

Russian authorities tried and failed to block Telegram from 2018 over its refusal to give the Federal Security Service (FSB) encryption keys to access private messages.

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