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Russian 'Orthodox WhatsApp' Debuts Without Church's Endorsement

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Petr Kovalyov / TACC

A Russian faith-based messaging app nicknamed "Orthodox WhatsApp" has appeared on Google Play, though officials from the Russian Orthodox Church said they had no involvement in the project and questioned its purpose.

The Android app, officially called Zosima, was developed by the Innotech XXI Foundation and had initially been scheduled for release in November 2024. It was not immediately clear why its launch was delayed.

While first envisioned as a tool to connect parishioners with local churches and clergy, the app has since expanded into a broader social network similar to VKontakte, said Innotech XXI head Alexei Agapov. A trial version became available to the public on Sept. 23.

Despite its branding, church officials said they had not been consulted about the app.

"We are not aware of this project, and the initiative has not been discussed with the relevant

church institutions," said Vakhtang Kipshidze, a spokesman for the Moscow Patriarchate. "We believe that launching such projects without prior discussion is not the best idea."

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Agapov himself told Gazeta.ru that Zosima "cannot be considered Orthodox" unless it receives the blessing of Patriarch Kirill, adding that the platform could be used by followers of any faith.

Named after a sixth-century monastic saint, Zosima began as a side project of Innotekh XXI's efforts to restore churches in the Yaroslavl region. The app's official presentation is scheduled for Oct. 30.

The rollout comes as Russia has tightened restrictions on Western tech platforms.

Authorities blacklisted Meta, WhatsApp's parent company, as an "extremist" organization in 2022, though the messaging app itself was not banned. WhatsApp remains Russia's most popular messenger, even as the government recently began restricting its video call functions.

The Russian Orthodox Church previously launched its own messenger app in 2017, which was said to have connected 130,000 users with 15,000 churches.

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