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New Rules Keep Tourists From Buying Russian SIM Cards, Operators Complain

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Sergei Vedyashkin / Moskva News Agency

Russia's mobile operators say almost no foreign tourists bother to buy local SIM cards under new identification rules that have made the process too onerous, the RBC news website reported Wednesday.

Under new rules introduced earlier this year, visitors seeking to get a Russian phone number are required to register on a government services portal, obtain the local equivalent of a U.S. Social Security number, submit biometric data at a bank and sign a contract in person at a mobile retail outlet.

Since July, foreigners who want to buy a Russian SIM card and mobile phone plan have been required to register with the Unified Biometric System (UBS), a government-run database that collects biometric data.

Authorities say the measure, which includes a ban on handing over SIM cards or mobile phone numbers to anyone other than close family members, is aimed at curbing scams, spam or

communication block bypasses with anonymously used of rented out SIM cards.

“It’s almost impossible without knowing Russian or having a local helper,” Andrei Rego, vice president of the mobile giant MTS, said at a telecom forum in Moscow.

One in three foreigners who start the process give up midway, while most never attempt it, Rego was quoted as saying.

Related article: So You Want to Travel to Russia. Here’s What You Should Know.

He said foreign users on Russian networks have dropped fivefold this year to under 3 million, with tourists now accounting for less than 1% of new SIM cards, down from 20% in 2024.

MTS had proposed a workaround of letting tourists pre-register via the ruID app before entering Russia.

This workaround would allow tourists to buy a two-week Russian SIM card upon arrival after uploading passport scans, photos and voice samples, then having that data verified automatically at border checkpoints.

Longer-term visitors would still need to complete the full verification process.

Russia’s Digital Development Ministry has not yet commented on MTS’ proposal.

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