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Why Russia Can’t Quite Let Go of WhatsApp

By Sarkis Darbinyan

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A girl with a phone in the Moscow metro. **Sergei Kiselev / Moskva News Agency**

When Bloomberg published transcripts of confidential U.S.-Russia talks, Moscow fixated less on their content than on how they leaked, quickly pointing fingers at WhatsApp. The incident revived a long-standing anomaly: why, amid Russia’s sweeping digital censorship, the country’s most popular messenger had not only survived but was being used by officials.

That loophole is now closing. Not because of espionage or fraud, but because WhatsApp remains one of the last mass platforms for private, horizontal communication beyond state control, exactly the kind of space the Kremlin is determined to eliminate at the start of a politically sensitive year.

The only justification in Russian law for blocking services like WhatsApp is that they do not comply with laws for operating in the country. Meta has no representative office in Russia, as it is legally required to, nor does it pay fines for refusing to remove “unlawful content.”

Russian authorities cannot force the company to hand over message metadata or account data while it remains outside their jurisdiction because Meta refuses to store Russian users' data in the country.

In 2022, Meta was designated an "extremist" organization, and Facebook and Instagram were banned for "disseminating materials on Russian territory that contain calls for violence against Russian citizens, violations of citizens' rights, and threats to the constitutional order." WhatsApp, however, was left untouched at the time. Now it is being accused of the same "refusal to cooperate with law enforcement."

The second supposed justification is that Telegram and WhatsApp are used by scammers for extortion. But 15.7% of attacks came through messaging apps and fraud cases declined in 2025. Out of the nearly 300 billion rubles ($3.85 billion) that were swindled from Russians in 2024, criminals contacted victims by phone calls or SMS 45.6% of the time.

The national messenger Max is no exception. Scammers have already mastered it too. Even the Kremlin spokesperson Dmitry Peskov has said that blocking foreign messengers to combat fraud makes little sense, since scammers use whatever tools are available.

Russian security services have also argued that these apps allow the Ukrainian intelligence service to recruit Russians to carry out sabotage. It is natural to assume that the agency would focus its attention on the most popular app to cast the broadest net possible.

Viber was blocked in 2024 for this reason, as well as for hosting "illegal information." But Viber was only used by about a quarter of Russians, allowing authorities to test out their repressions on a smaller scale.

Max is harder for foreign recruiters to use because it is embedded in Russia's state digital ecosystem and assumes identifiable, domestically registered users. Whether this poses a real obstacle for the intelligence services is another question, especially since purchased and stolen accounts have already appeared on the platform.

Whether a Western service is blocked in Russia has little to do with whether it complies with Russian law. It depends on whether there is a Russian analogue available for substitution. Apple diligently complied with Russian authorities' demands, hid "foreign agent" podcasts from Russians and removed VPNs from the App Store. FaceTime was still blocked, however, under the pretext that it was being used to coordinate terrorist and fraudulent activity.

Like many Russian institutions, Apple chose compromise with the authorities to avoid total destruction and to allow Russians continued access to other apps and services. The company told human rights defenders that "the United States government has encouraged companies to continue to make communications services available to the Russian people because democratic principles are best aided through the availability of these services." It turned out that this was not entirely true.

Related article: Russia's Roblox Ban Makes Censorship Look Silly

In August, Russian authorities began restricting calls via WhatsApp and Telegram, while

sending messages and reading channels remained possible. Despite this, the number of users of both messengers did not change significantly. WhatsApp's average daily monthly reach barely changed from 82.07 million users in August to 81.24 million in October. Telegram's average daily reach during the same period increased by 127,700, exceeding 68 million users.

The unblockable, state-promoted and imposed Max grew 2.7-fold, but its average daily user base of 18.9 million still could not come close to WhatsApp and Telegram. Even methods of non-market competition proved insufficient to achieve the desired results.

Meta has often been criticized for being overly accommodating to the United States authorities. The largest number of requests for account data comes from the U.S. — around 140,000 per year — followed by India, the UK and Germany. In WhatsApp's case, Meta holds only account information and metadata; Instagram and Facebook offer more

Russia, by contrast, rarely sent official requests to Meta — no more than 56 per year — even before 2022. After Meta was designated "extremist" in Russia, the number dropped to just a handful. The approval rate, however, did not change: 0%. Since 2019, Meta has not fulfilled a single Russian request for data.

Russia sent far more requests to Apple and received data in as many as 88% of cases. In 2022, the number of requests fell tenfold, and in 2023–2024 by a hundredfold. The approval rate first dropped to 11%, then close to zero.

About 66% of Russians used WhatsApp and the Russian market accounts for just 3.22% of its global userbase of over 3 billion people. WhatsApp is very important for Russia, but Russia is a problematic and not particularly critical market for WhatsApp. It is unlikely that Meta will take any action.

As of December 9, the WhatsApp app was still available for download in the Russian App Store and Google Play. In some regions, users could send messages without a VPN, but the web version did not work. Apparently, the authorities are using the same techniques as with YouTube — Roskomnadzor deliberately degrades the quality of the connection and slows down data processing.

Related article: Moscow Judge Tosses WhatsApp Users' Class Action Lawsuit Against Roskomnadzor

The main enemy of authoritarian regimes is horizontal ties. Any association of citizens — even a non-political one like a building or school-gate chat — is potentially dangerous: organizations, even informal ones, have the capacity to mobilize groups of people whom the authorities do not control.

WhatsApp hosted building and parent chats, facilitated communication with elderly relatives and negotiations with clients. These everyday communications are now being forcibly transferred to a malfunctioning platform with dubious UX but complete transparency for the state.

Max comes preinstalled on new phones sold in Russia. Employees of state-funded

institutions, parents of schoolchildren and preschoolers are forced to use Max under threat of professional retaliation or trouble for their children. To avoid conflicts with management, people buy an additional cheap phone and install only Max on it, now so ubiquitous they're known as "Maxphones."

Not even loyalists want their correspondent to end up in the hands of the security services. This is not a conspiracy theory: Max, at least for now, does not spy on users or access data beyond what users themselves provide. But under the Yarovaya law, it is required to store and hand over user-provided information (such as name, date of birth, address), message texts, audio and video recordings and much more.

For officials, a "strong recommendation" to use Max seems logical. Many governments prefer to discuss matters of state importance in messengers under their jurisdiction. Unlike Max, however, such programs usually have end-to-end encryption.

Leaks are possible in WhatsApp, too. Hackers sold the phone numbers of 487 million WhatsApp users in 2022; in November 2025, researchers obtained phone numbers and photos with text from the biographies of public profiles.mThanks to end-to-end encryption, no actual conversations were leaked

Therefore, Russian officials' claims that WhatsApp was responsible for revealing the content of calls between U.S. presidential envoy Steve Witkoff and Russian presidential aide Yuri Ushakov, as well as between Ushakov and presidential envoy Kirill Dmitriev, are unfounded. In theory, Meta could have carried out a man-in-the-middle attack — intercepting traffic by substituting public keys — but taking such a risk for intelligence services would be excessive even for a loyal corporation. Most likely, this indicates that a participant's device (apparently Ushakov's) was hacked with software such as Pegasus, or a recording made with a bug or dicatphone

The Kremlin is not only blocking social media and messaging apps because it is afraid of the outside world, but because it's afraid of its own people. 2026 will see elections for the State Duma, which lawmakers have already used as a pretext to throttle communication even further.

For now, Russians are improvising. But every frustrating block whittles away at their perseverance. VPNs remain an option, but VPN protocols are also being actively blocked in Russia. The state is unconcerned about collateral damage: it wants to control citizens' everyday communication. Max has the ambitions of China's WeChat, but Russia's abilities at digital control lag far behind.

The views expressed in opinion pieces do not necessarily reflect the position of The Moscow Times.

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