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Roskomnadzor Tightens Restrictions on Telegram as Users Report Disruptions

By Mack Tubridy

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Oleg Yelkov / TASS

Russian state media regulator Roskomnadzor said Tuesday that it had imposed additional restrictions on the messaging app Telegram, accusing the company of failing to combat fraud and to protect the personal data of its users.

Since January, users across Russia have reported problems with Telegram's performance, including slow download speeds. While Roskomnadzor initially denied throttling the platform, reports of disruptions surged between Monday and Tuesday.

In a statement to the news outlet RBC, Roskomnadzor accused Telegram of failing to take effective measures against fraud and the app's alleged use by criminal and terrorist groups, as well as of inadequately safeguarding user data.

"As a result, Roskomnadzor will continue to introduce appropriate restrictions to ensure

compliance with Russian law and to protect citizens," the agency said in a statement.

Sources earlier told RBC that Roskomnadzor was throttling download speeds on Telegram.

Telegram founder Pavel Durov said the authorities were restricting the app in an attempt to force Russians to switch to Max, the government-backed messenger that critics argue was created for surveillance and political censorship.

"Restricting citizens' freedom is never the right answer. Telegram stands for freedom of speech and privacy, no matter the pressure," Durov said.

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The scope of the new restrictions was not immediately clear. Outage-tracking platforms showed a spike in complaints, though some users said they experienced no problems.

Several Russians told The Moscow Times that Telegram continued to function normally, even without using a virtual private network, or VPN, which many rely on to bypass internet restrictions.

Others reported that voice and video messages often failed to load, sometimes even when a VPN was enabled.

"Video messages haven't been loading well for me today," said a woman in St. Petersburg who asked not to be named.

"Files and photos are loading very slowly, and channels are taking a long time to open," said a woman in Moscow, who also requested anonymity. She said friends had reported similar issues.

Several users told The Moscow Times that the problems appeared limited to Telegram's mobile app, while the desktop version continued to work normally.

Text messages were generally unaffected, it appeared, with disruptions largely confined to media content such as voice notes, videos and images.

For many in Russia, the restrictions are more than a minor inconvenience: Telegram is widely used for work communications and document sharing, much as apps like Slack are used elsewhere, and the slowdowns already appear to be disrupting daily workflows for some.

Officials and government agencies also use Telegram to provide information to the public. Belgorod region Governor Vyachelsav Gladkov said he was "worried" the slowdown would hinder people's ability to receive emergency notifications during Ukrainian air attacks.

Related article: Western Tech Companies Are Capitulating to Russian Censors. Here's How Russians Can Fight Back.

Roskomnadzor began restricting voice and video calls on WhatsApp and Telegram in August

as part of what it described as an anti-fraud initiative, a move both companies criticized.

The Kremlin itself has said that blocking foreign messengers to combat fraud makes little sense since scammers use a variety of tools available to them.

Russian security services, however, allege that Ukraine employs both messaging apps to recruit people for carrying out acts of sabotage and assassinations inside Russia.

Roskomnadzor's restrictions on WhatsApp and Telegram come as authorities pressure Russians to download the messaging app Max, where a number of pro-Kremlin channels have slowly been migrating since the summer.

Max reached 70 million monthly users in December, making it the third-most used app in Russia. But it remains behind WhatsApp and Telegram, which, in December, had 94.5 million and 93.6 million monthly users, respectively.

Some Max users reported outages on Tuesday following the announcement of new Telegram restrictions, though the company said the app was operating normally.

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