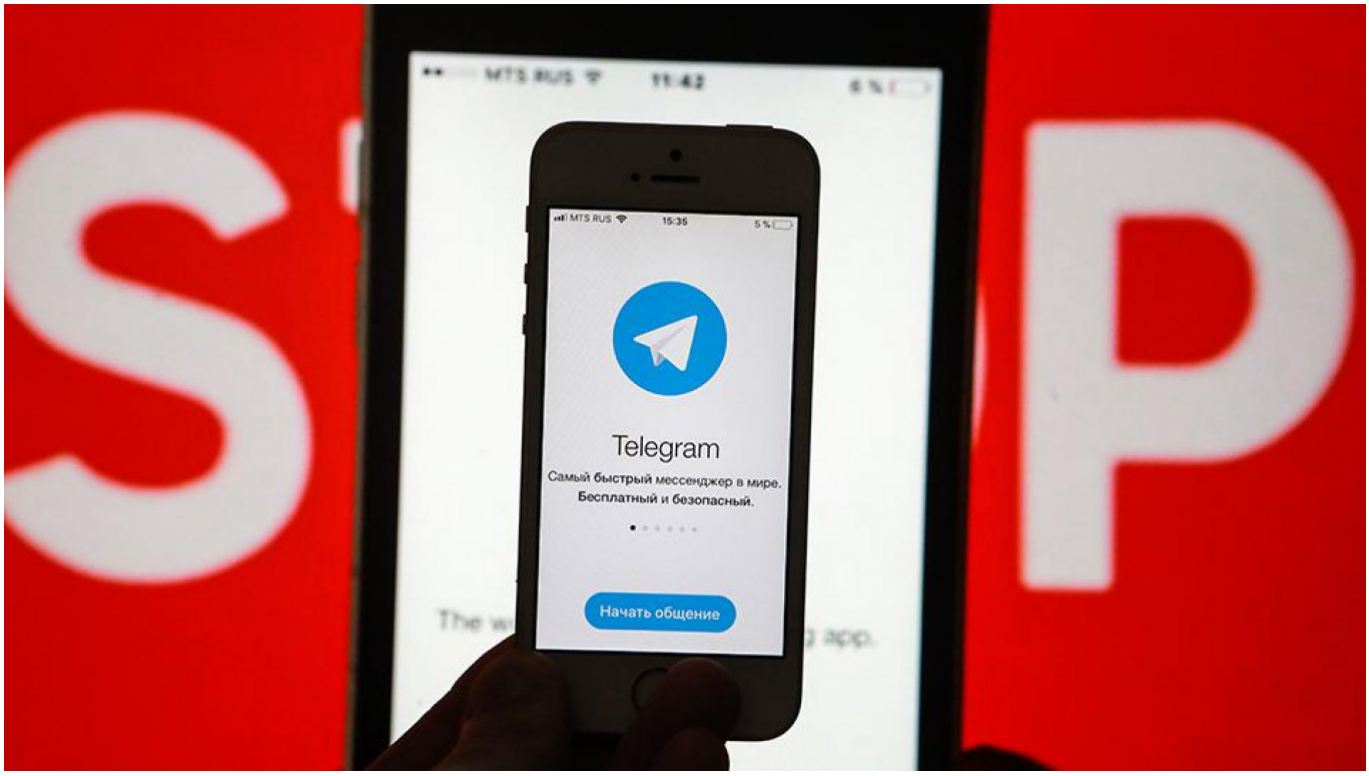
The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

As Kremlin Throttles Telegram, Russians Stand to Lose More Than Just Messaging

By Ned Garvey

February 12, 2026



Sergei Konkov / TASS

Russian state media regulator Roskomnadzor has tightened its restrictions on popular messaging app Telegram for allegedly failing to combat fraud and protect user data.

For its 93.6 million users in Russia — over 60% of the country's population — the loss of Telegram would mean much more than the loss of a messaging app. In many ways, it is the kind of all-in-one digital platform that the Kremlin envisions state-backed messenger Max becoming.

Beyond its function as a messenger, Telegram is a news platform, a way for officials and state agencies to interact with constituents, a microblogging platform, a frontline communications tool in the Ukraine war, a way for NGOs and news outlets to receive tips and even a business

tool.

Telegram is "the reason I can sometimes have an exorbitant amount of screentime," one Russian user told The Moscow Times. "If there is an app that I open first thing after I wake up, it will be Telegram. I get notifications from it all the f***ing time."

News

Almost every major news outlet or website in Russia has a Telegram channel, and some outlets publish on Telegram exclusively. Many channels have hundreds of thousands or even millions of followers, as well as dedicated staff managing them.

For many, Telegram is a one-stop shop for news. Users can curate folders of news channels, turn notifications on and off and read the news from a variety of sources without the added friction of visiting multiple websites.

And because posts are displayed in chronological order rather than ranked by an algorithm, users can follow breaking news in real time as events unfold.

Related article: Regions Calling: How Russians Are Adapting to WhatsApp and Telegram Throttling

Exiled news outlet Meduza has around 1.1 million Telegram followers, while TV Rain and the BBC's Russian service have 442,000 and 387,000 followers, respectively.

News outlets like Ostorozhno Novosti, Mash, Baza, Kontekst, Astra and many others publish primarily on Telegram. Some operate inside Russia, others from abroad. Some are independent, while others are seen as close to the state or security services. Many command audiences that rival or exceed those of traditional state or independent media.

And then there are the state-run and legacy media outlets like RIA Novosti, TASS, RBC, Interfax and Kommersant, which all have large and active Telegram channels.

Direct communication

Officials at all levels use Telegram to issue statements and communicate with constituents, from regional governors and ministries to exiled opposition politicians.

In the Belgorod region, which has faced constant power outages and disruptions to municipal services due to Ukrainian strikes in recent months, regional officials like Governor Vyachelsav Gladkov use Telegram to provide updates.

The Defense Ministry posts frequent updates and footage from the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, interviews with soldiers and more to its more than 600,000 followers.

For Russian opposition politicians in exile, Telegram remains one of the few ways to reach supporters inside Russia and organize demonstrations worldwide.

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky also posts regularly to Telegram, and posted an

emotional appeal to the Russian public at the start of the full-scale invasion in 2022.

Related article: Telegram's Free Speech Ethos Cannot Excuse the Horrific Crimes It Facilitates

For one person from Lipetsk in southern Russia, Telegram had been "the only place where both pro-government and opposition sources were available at the same time."

"And until the very last moment, it was the only place where opposition sources were available without a VPN," they said.

On the front lines

Russian troops, and to a lesser extent Ukrainian troops, use Telegram extensively for tactical and operational communication in the war.

According to Meduza, many Russian military divisions use Telegram chats to organize logistics and fundraising, download maps and communicate externally.

It is this external communication that makes the app so hard to replace.

"The app has enabled a sprawling network of interaction between frontline troops and pro-Kremlin 'war correspondents.' The soldiers provide the bloggers with exclusive content (including combat videos), which the bloggers then use to grow their popularity and convert it into fundraising for military equipment and uniforms," writes Meduza.

"Within a day after Telegram's slowdown, I received about five videos from anonymous military personnel complaining that they're completely screwed without Telegram," popular pro-war blogger Fighterbomber wrote in response to this week's Telegram throttling.

Alexander Kots, another pro-war blogger, described Telegram as a "powerful tool" in what he calls the "information war" — the ability to disseminate the Russian perspective to audiences abroad — and argued that Russian operatives would have a much harder time recruiting assets to carry out acts of espionage or sabotage in Ukraine using Max.

Despite the criticism from the pro-war blogging community, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov told reporters Wednesday it was difficult to "imagine that frontline communications are maintained via Telegram or some other messenger."

Related article: Everything You Need to Know About Max, Russia's State-Backed Answer to WhatsApp

Microblogging

Telegram is also home to a vast ecosystem of bloggers covering everything from fashion to sports, travel, history, anthropology and more.

Much like X or Bluesky, Telegram allows creators to post short updates, articles, links and multimedia content. But its far higher character limit offers more freedom.

One graphic designer from Moscow told The Moscow Times that she uses Telegram to run her own channels, follow her friends' channels and stay up-to-date with trends in her industry.

Another user living in Moscow said she has created Telegram folders for travel, culture and work, and uses the app to track events and discover things to do in her city.

Work

Several Russians told The Moscow Times that they used Telegram to talk to their colleagues and clients at work. In some cases, it is their primary workplace communication tool.

"It is definitely not ideal; normal companies use separate software. But if it is a small project, there is nothing you can do about it, you have to communicate via Telegram," one person said.

For some, it's also an indispensable tool to run their business. Many businesses run channels to promote their businesses and connect with clients.

But while the government moves to tighten the screws on Telegram, Russians who spoke to The Moscow Times appeared fairly unbothered.

"Everyone uses Telegram. Almost everyone has a VPN," the man from Lipetsk said. "After YouTube was blocked [in 2024], there was a turning point when everyone had already bought a VPN and stopped caring about further blockings."

Mack Tubridy contributed reporting.

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