The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Resisting the Kremlin's Communication Crackdown Requires New Thinking

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February 17, 2026

Erik Romanenko / TASS

Russian authorities have launched yet another attack against the free internet, throttling Telegram and WhatsApp. YouTube already lies vanquished.

Some Russian opposition groups, in particular, the late Alexei Navalny’s Anti-Corruption Foundation (FBK), announced campaigns against Telegram’s blocking, while figuring out relations among themselves on the fly. Yekaterina Duntsova’s Rassvet (“Dawn”) party has hurried to stake its claim on the issue.

All of their proposals for how to push back create the impression of taking action. However, they more closely resemble token activism rather than a systematic and well-thought-out policy. I’m not going to provide them with a ready-made plan. But I am going to suggest how they need to rethink the foundations of their approach.

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

The FBK's plan can be summed up in the following points: personalize responsibility for the restrictions to create targets for personal sanctions, pile pressure on tech companies to resist censorship and file suits in Russian courts.

Sunrise proposes to fight the possible blocking of Telegram and internet censorship through activism. Specifically, the party suggests a symbolic protest (for example, using the "@" symbol on social media profiles). They are also organizing information campaigns and discussions in support of digital freedom, while advocating for using democracy and shaping public opinion to pressure the government to end repressive internet restrictions.

All of these tools are familiar. They have also repeatedly failed to work.

Sanctions have long been turned to as a favorite instrument for Western governments. When in doubt, pass sanctions. Against whom? Well, against whoever feels appropriate. It gives the impression that by passing such measures, their authors make themselves look like they don't really know what they want to achieve with them.

Four years of war and the sanction regime have shown that without a system of lifting restrictions, personal sanctions don't produce pressure, but an indefinite black mark. They are a blunt tool that doesn't divide Russia's elite, but cements their status. They have no clear exit and no incentive to defect.

How many people who profiteered from the regime have split from it? Very few. Even the former head of Yandex, Arkady Volozh, only begrudgingly mumbled out his anti-war statements. All those other tycoons, the Avens and the Fridmans, for whom prominent members of the FBK signed letters requesting sanctions relief, have simply adapted to the pressure and kept living comfortably.

It is no less naive to think that Big Tech can be swayed to take part in the Russian opposition's political struggles. They operate within a world of states and regulators. Asking them to help the Russian people is not a strategy.

The idea of filing lawsuits in Russian courts is even more ludicrous. There is hardly anything to discuss there. It's just noise, something to make it look like they're doing something — which might be the whole point.

But the core problem with such campaigns runs deeper. The fight against digital censorship is once again being treated as activism. Yet digital authoritarianism is a system of control. It can only be countered by an alternative system — one of digital resistance.

Related article: Why Russia Can't Quite Let Go of WhatsApp

Digital resistance is not about rallies or political statements. It is systematic work aimed at reducing the state's control over the information space and increasing the cost of repression.

Its purpose is not simply to restore access to individual websites. Its task is to break the regime's monopoly on information, strengthen coordination within society, and undermine the authorities' ability to dictate their own version of reality.

Here's what that means in practical terms.

First, support the development of technologies that bypass censorship and ensure resilient internet access. New protocols, tools to obscure and conceal web traffic — including the spread of networks and sites that do not require a traditional internet connection — have to be developed continuously to keep ahead of censors.

Second, diversify communication platforms. When all public communication is concentrated in a single service, blocking it becomes a political attack against society. When communication channels are distributed across different platforms, blocking a single app has less impact.

Third, create of widely distributed information networks. Here, if possible, dedicated support should be given to developing networks that do not rely on internet connectivity, which could prove crucial in the event of large-scale shutdowns or attempts to disconnect the country from the global web entirely. The existence of such networks — and those prepared to use them — would be critical during a political crisis. Not only that, but they would be vital in preserving the coordination of political movements during any potential "window of opportunity" that many speak of but for which few are preparing.

Fourth, target state digital infrastructure. These might consist of hacking, cyberattacks, disruption of normal operations (especially of agencies directly involved in the war effort and state security), along with other forms of direct struggle in cyberspace.

No small number of initiatives already exist that are developing the tools to circumvent censorship and preserve free access to information. Projects such as VPN Generator, promoted by activists, demonstrate that among experts there is both an understanding of the problem and a readiness to find workable solutions. However, these efforts remain fragmented, devoid of a common strategy or coordinated efforts.

Individual projects face criticism over varying security standards, levels of transparency and the composition of their teams. None of this negates their importance, but it highlights the absence of a system capable of uniting technological initiatives, ensuring security standards and directing resources toward the most effective projects.

Related article: Kremlin Downplays Impact of Telegram Restrictions on Frontline Communications

Opposition politics often lurches from one extreme to the other. One side calls to create a single command to lead the resistance, creating an immediate queue of crown princes eager to claim that singular throne. Meanwhile, others feel offended and refuse to do anything at all. Some scurry off to whine at PACE. The other side clings to the romantic idea that independent horizontal networks will organize themselves!

Neither model works. Attempts at centralization create competing groups unwilling to share the stage. Fully horizontal networks that lack coordination waste scarce resources, duplicate efforts and often end up breaking down.

We don't need a command center, but we do need coordination. Distributed networks are essential for resilience, making the system durable. But without coordination, they become a hodge-podge of disparate projects competing for resources rather than reinforcing one another.

Any political movement needs strategic planning**.** Someone must analyze the regime's actions, define the goals of digital resistance, and explain to society why it matters.

It also needs to coordinate its resources. Without a system to unite their efforts, their overall impact is sharply reduced.

Here, Russian entrepreneurs who have relocated to the West could play a significant role. Many of them have a vested interest in preserving a free information space and in Russia's long-term transformation. For example, we could consider such figures as Pavel Durov, the aforementioned Volozh and others.

It would also be logical to discuss allocating a portion of frozen Russian state assets in the West to such projects. These funds amount to hundreds of billions of dollars under sanctions control. Financing the infrastructure of Russian digital resistance would require only a small fraction of that sum, yet could carry strategic significance.

Identifying, consolidating and institutionally allocating such resources must become one of the key tasks of this new movement.

There also needs to be genuine political representation. Someone with a public mandate should take on the above activities by reaching agreements with governments, international corporations and Big Tech. Even ambitious NGOs are not suited to that role.

Such a coordinating body should not manage independent initiatives. It must strengthen their coordination. It must show leadership in its original and largely forgotten sense: not directly issuing orders, but articulating common principles and goals, defining priorities and supporting their implementation. For obvious reasons, such efforts could only be based and operate outside Russia.

Related article: Russia Forces Apple to Remove VPNs From App Store

History suggests that this model is more sustainable. In the 1980s, Poland's Solidarity movement was not a single organization but a system of interconnected ones — trade unions, underground publishers, student groups and intellectual circles. It had a coordinating center that formulated a strategy and pooled resources, yet the network itself remained distributed. The only way digital resistance in and beyond Russia can be built is along similar lines. Otherwise, it remains little more than a club of like-minded individuals.

The Russian émigré community is fragmented. Opposition groups compete among themselves. Currently, technologists mostly operate separately from politicians. Under a dictatorship, that plays into the authorities' hands.

Digital resistance cannot remain an activist niche. It must involve the IT community, journalists, entrepreneurs, students, diaspora groups and regional networks. Only broad participation can make digital infrastructure resilient.

The FBK and Rassvet raise an important issue. But their approach remains rooted in activism, not politics, which is simply not enough.

If digital censorship is part of the machinery of dictatorship, then digital resistance must become part of the strategy of its destruction. Without a mandate, coordination, a unified effort and a political strategy, such campaigns will amount to little more than the imitation of struggle.

Russia does not need another protest or short-lived campaign. It needs a new strategy of resistance.

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