The Moscow Times
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Russia's Antitrust Agency Confirms Advertising Ban on Telegram, Meta Platforms and YouTube

March 10, 2026



Yulia Morozova / Moskva News Agency

Russia's Federal Anti-Monopoly Service (FAS) said Tuesday that advertising on restricted online platforms like Telegram, YouTube and Instagram is illegal, coming after lawmakers from the lower-house State Duma called on the agency to provide clarity on the issue amid reports that some users were facing fines for putting up ads on Telegram.

In a statement, FAS said the de facto advertising ban was linked to restrictions the state communications regulator Roskomnadzor has introduced against several online platforms for a wide range of reasons, including accusations of "extremism" and allegations that platform owners are failing to protect user data and moderate criminal activity.

"Given that Roskomnadzor is restricting access to the social networks Instagram and Facebook, the video hosting service YouTube, VPN services and the messengers Telegram and WhatsApp, FAS considers advertising on these platforms to be a violation of advertising

laws," the statement read.

"If Roskomnadzor takes measures to restrict access to platforms... advertising on such resources is prohibited," it said, adding that violators of the ban could face fines of up to 500,000 rubles ($6,300).

FAS had said last week that both advertisers and content creators could face legal penalties for placing ads on Telegram, marking the first official statement suggesting such a ban. However, the agency's statement on Tuesday made it clear that its interpretation of federal laws goes beyond Telegram and applies to any platform Russian authorities aim to restrict or block in the country.

Related article: State Duma Lawmakers Demand Clarity on Alleged Telegram Advertising Ban

Roskomnadzor, which has gradually introduced restrictions on Telegram's features since August, released its own statement last week that appeared to back the FAS position that advertising on messaging app is illegal, but offered no further explanation.

The media regulator did not immediately respond to the latest FAS statement affirming that other platforms like Instagram and Facebook, both of which Russia banned in 2022 for "extremism," were also covered by the advertising ban.

State Duma lawmakers had demanded last week that FAS offer clarity on what legal risks users faced when advertising on Telegram.

The ban comes amid mounting restrictions on Telegram, which has around 90 million users in Russia. Authorities in Moscow claim the messaging app is being used by criminal and terrorist groups, as well as Western intelligence agencies, to sow chaos in Russia.

Telegram has repeatedly denied allegations that it is failing to crack down on criminal activity on the app and to protect user data. The company has accused Russia of creating a pretext to ban the platform in order to force Russians to switch to the state-backed messaging app Max, which critics say was created for mass surveillance and censorship.

Unconfirmed reports in February suggested Russia could move to block Telegram entirely as early as next month. The FSB security service is currently investigating the company's founder, Pavel Durov, on allegations of aiding and abetting terrorism.

President Vladimir Putin appeared to suggest last week that Telegram represents a "danger" to Russian military personnel, some of whom have said they rely on the messaging app for frontline communications in Ukraine.

Original url:
https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2026/03/10/russias-antitrust-agency-confirms-advertising-ban-on-telegram-meta-platforms-and-youtube-a92179