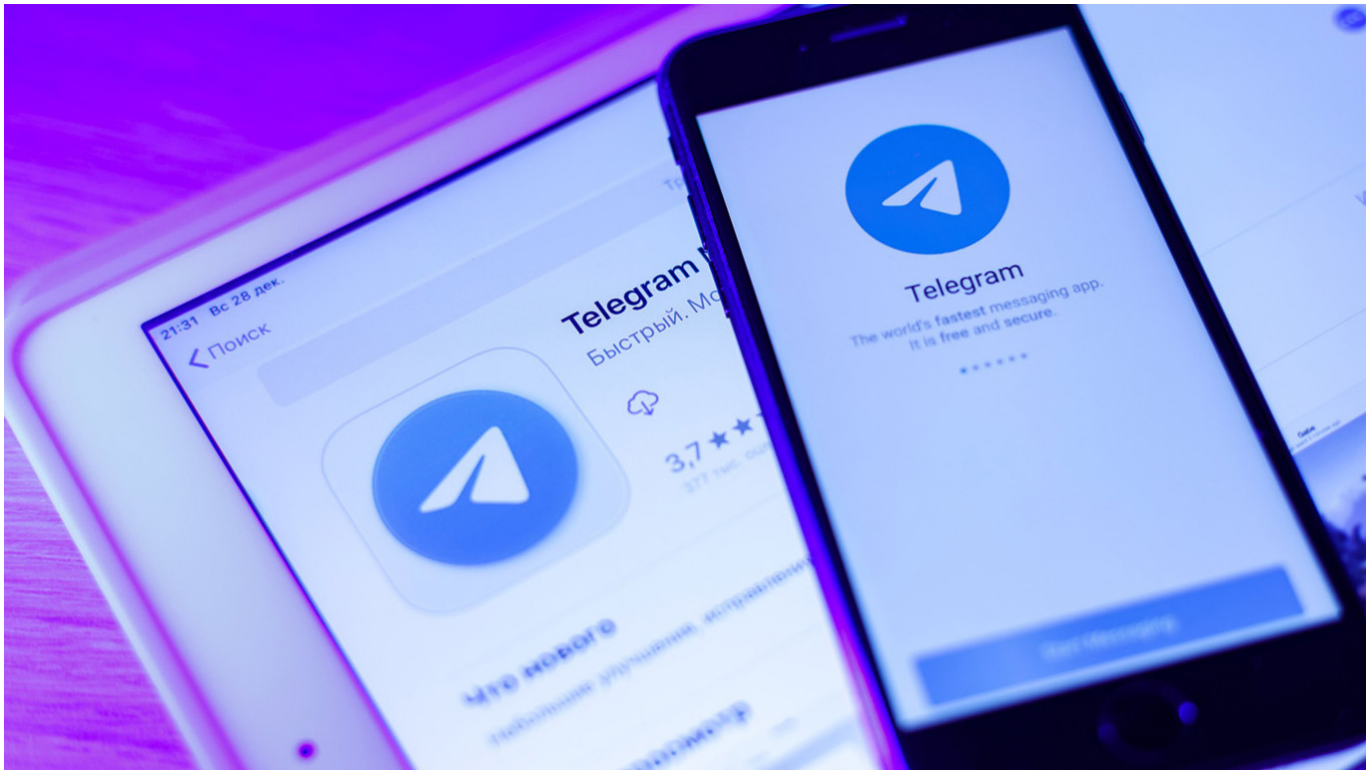
The Moscow Times
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INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Telegram Outages Reported Across Russia as Block Rumors Swirl

By Mack Tubridy

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Moskva News Agency

People across Russia began reporting problems accessing Telegram over the weekend, raising speculation among tech industry experts that the government may have already moved to block the messaging app ahead of an anticipated crackdown next month.

Russia's Main Radio Frequency Center, an agency of the media regulator Roskomnadzor, said at least one-third of outage complaints that began emerging around Saturday came from Moscow, followed by St. Petersburg and several other cities across the country's 11 time zones.

The Moscow Times spoke with more than a dozen people in Russia who said they were experiencing problems accessing Telegram, though the disruptions varied. They spoke on condition of anonymity due to the risks of talking to media outlets designated as "undesirable."

Several Russians in St. Petersburg said they could not open the mobile version of the app without using a virtual private network, or VPN, a tool that can be easily purchased and is used to bypass state censorship.

One woman there said she could still connect through the desktop version, but download speeds had slowed dramatically and media files sometimes failed to load. A man said he could still use Telegram without using a VPN.

In Moscow, people said they were experiencing similar problems. One man said he could open Telegram on his computer over Wi-Fi without a VPN.

In the southern Saratov region, one person said Telegram channels take around 20 seconds to load, though the app still opens over Wi-Fi.

Roskomnadzor has not commented on the latest problems with the popular messaging app.

The Moscow Times contacted Telegram for comment.

Related article: In Moscow, a Week of Mobile Internet Shutdowns Makes Life a Real Pain

"Over the last 24 hours, Telegram has effectively stopped working through some providers if you are using Russian IP addresses," Vladislav Voytenko, who writes about the tech sector, told Kommersant FM on Monday.

"As for using Telegram via mobile internet, you can basically forget about it," Voytenko added.

Moscow has long flirted with the idea of blocking Telegram, an app with around 90 million users in Russia and one that has become a critical tool for free speech in an otherwise tightly controlled media environment. Russia unsuccessfully tried to block the platform in 2018 and 2020.

However, the government's latest campaign to restrict access to the app looks different.

In August, Roskomnadzor blocked voice and video calls on Telegram as an anti-fraud measure. And last month, it began throttling download speeds, making it difficult for users to access media content such as voice notes, videos and images.

Authorities in Moscow argue that their clampdown on Telegram, as well as the Meta-owned messaging platform WhatsApp, is based on security concerns as the country faces an increasing number of attacks blamed on Ukraine and its Western allies.

Sources told the RBC news outlet last month the decision to block the platform was "final," and that Telegram could be made inaccessible inside Russia as early as April.

On Monday, Moscow's Tagansky District Court fined Telegram 35 million rubles ($431,000) for failing to remove content relating to extremism, drugs and child pornography.

Meanwhile, Russians in Moscow and St. Petersburg have reported significant mobile internet

outages over the past week, though disruptions to internet access have become a common occurrence throughout the country in recent years as the military jams signals in an effort to thwart Ukrainian drone attacks.

The Kremlin has said the ongoing disruptions to mobile internet services in Moscow and other regions are necessary for ensuring security and are being carried out in accordance with the law.

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