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I'm in Russia. By Blocking Telegram, the Kremlin Is Shooting Itself in the Foot.

By An Anonymous Writer in Russia

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People in a park near the Kremlin in Moscow. **Vasily Kuzmichenok / Moskva News Agency**

I'm in Russia, and have the feeling that someone has turned the absurdity dial right up to the max over the past couple of weeks. I had a similar feeling in the early days of the invasion, then again when mobilization was announced and when Alexei Navalny was killed. Many of my friends and colleagues share this feeling.

And on Instagram, I've come across dozens of videos in which Russians complain that they can no longer tolerate what is happening in the country.

Public discontent has accumulated for a whole host of reasons over the past few weeks. Tax hikes for businesses have led to a sharp rise in prices. Moscow has experienced first-hand what it means to live without mobile internet, something people in less central regions have already had to endure for months. In Siberia, the authorities have been seizing cows from farmers en masse and slaughtering them under the pretext of a foot-and-mouth disease

outbreak.

But the main catalyst was the unexpected blocking of Telegram.

Since the start of April, the messaging app has stopped working without a VPN, which the authorities are restricting access to and reportedly considering banning. Meanwhile, the Federal Antimonopoly Service has warned that advertising on Telegram will soon be banned.

With this heavy-handed ban, the Kremlin has angered even its long-standing supporters. It is difficult to overstate just how deeply Telegram is woven into the daily routine of the average Russian.

According to a study by MTS AdTech, the number of unique Telegram users in Russia stood at 105 million in November 2025. That is almost 72% of the country's population.

Telegram hosted neighborhood chat groups. People used it to rent flats, sell items, advertise their services, coordinate business and run blogs. Emigrants used it to keep in touch with their families, among many other things.

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An acquaintance of mine, a Russian army officer fighting in Ukraine, told me that military information security specialists had advised them against using the Russian messaging app MAX which, ironically, the authorities are actively pushing as a replacement for Telegram. So the Russian military continues to use Telegram on the front line to communicate with one another.

Most officials of any significance — from federal to regional — communicate with the public via Telegram channels. Governors of border regions use these channels to warn people about Ukrainian drone strikes and missile threats.

After the authorities blocked YouTube, Facebook, Instagram, X, Discord, WhatsApp and all independent media, Telegram remained the only uncensored platform. It hosts the full spectrum of views and opinions, from exiled Russian media to pro-war bloggers.

Moreover, it is precisely thanks to Telegram that pro-war bloggers have become so popular in Russia. Their entire audience, as well as their advertising revenue, depends on this messaging app. On Telegram, they raise money to support the Russian army.

With Telegram blocked, they stand to lose everything. It is no surprise that even these ultra-patriots have been thrown into a rage.

For example, the propagandist Anastasia Kashevarova writes about the blocking of Telegram: "Neural connections in the minds of some officials are dying, trust in those in power is dying, the aid to people that was built through horizontal connections on Telegram is dying and communication at the front is dying."

Conservative publicist Dmitry Olshansky, who supported the invasion of Ukraine, also

published a post full of disappointment in the authorities: "They devour social media and messaging apps, books and films, journalists and musicians; they devour everything they can get their hands on."

The blocking of Telegram was also criticized by the pro-war channels Rybar and Astra Militarum, as well as RT war correspondent Alexander Kharchenko and many others.

Officials are also unhappy with the blocking of Telegram. Even Sergei Mironov, leader of the A Just Russia party — which presents itself as social-democratic but supports the government — called those blocking the messaging app "scoundrels" and advised them to go to the front line.

"People are raising money for a special operation. For those [at the front], Telegram is the only way to communicate with their families and loved ones," he said.

The far-right LDPR party has expelled State Duma deputy Andrei Svintsov from its ranks after he publicly supported the blocking of Telegram.

But the main absurdity is that even Roskomnadzor, the very agency that is blocking Telegram, continues to use it. Just yesterday, Roskomnadzor congratulated Russians on Telegram on the anniversary of the creation of the Russian-language internet.

State Duma Speaker Vyacheslav Volodin and former president and well-known hawk Dmitry Medvedev continue to run their own Telegram channels. It is obvious that they all use a VPN.

Related article: Russian Lawmakers Still Prefer Telegram Despite Kremlin Push for State-Backed Max Messenger

People can see that the officials who are banning them from using the free internet and social media are themselves using VPNs. In other words, they are exposing their own hypocrisy.

Even my grandmother, who, like most pensioners, has always supported Putin, is not thrilled about the blocking of Telegram. She simply doesn't understand why it was necessary. Why can't she just write to or call her grandchildren, as she is used to doing? And my mother, who has always been apolitical, has asked me to set up a VPN for her.

Against this backdrop, even VTsIOM, the government-controlled public opinion service, is recording Putin's lowest approval rating since the start of the invasion. The ruling United Russia party's rating has also fallen.

Meanwhile, the spoiler New People party, which opposes the blocking of Telegram, has unexpectedly risen to second place in the opinion polls.

It is naive to hope that this mass discontent will lead to protests. Given the current risks and repression, this is simply impossible.

However, another important process is underway. The blocking of Telegram is a self-inflicted blow to the Kremlin's legitimacy. When a ban is so absurd that not even the regime's functionaries are complying with it, even loyalists view the authorities' actions as ridiculous.

In the words of political scientist Ekaterina Schulmann, the authorities' campaign against the free internet is reminiscent of the anti-alcohol campaign during the Perestroika era. Back then, the authorities encroached upon a sacred cow — something that had long been woven into the social fabric: alcohol consumption. This led to a sharp rise in the illicit production of alcohol.

The same applies now. Blocking Telegram will lead to a rise in cynicism towards the Kremlin's narratives and will prompt more and more people to download a VPN. This includes officials themselves, as well as those who previously had no interest in blocked information. All of this will lead to the erosion of the Russian political system.

Nevertheless, I expect the worst. It is likely that in the future we will see the use of VPNs criminalized and attempts to create a closed internet in Russia, modeled on Iran's system.

But I'd like to believe that the more absurd things get, the closer we are to this nightmare being over.

The views expressed in opinion pieces do not necessarily reflect the position of The Moscow Times.

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