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Russian Websites Begin Blocking VPN Users as Internet Controls Tighten

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Evgenij Razumnyj / Vedomosti / TASS

Major Russian websites and online services have begun blocking users who try to access them with virtual private networks, or VPNs, as the government ramps up its efforts to restrict the censorship-circumvention tools.

The e-commerce platform Ozon and the streaming service Kinopoisk are among several platforms now displaying "access denied" or similar messages to website visitors using a VPN, The Moscow Times was able to confirm.

Similar disruptions have been reported on various banking and ride-sharing apps. Some popular platforms, including the social network VKontakte and the retailer Wildberries, remained accessible with VPN on Wednesday.

The companies have not provided an official explanation for the restrictions, but they

coincide with an April 15 deadline reportedly set by Russia's Digital Development Ministry for more than 20 major platforms to curb VPN usage.

Russia's Digital Development Minister Maksut Shadayev said last month that his agency had been tasked with "reducing the use of VPNs." He linked the push to what he described as "long, difficult and ultimately unsuccessful" talks with foreign tech companies over compliance with Russian laws.

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The VPN restrictions follow months of mobile internet disruptions across Russia and government-imposed slowdowns of the messaging apps WhatsApp and Telegram.

Anonymous sources in the IT and telecoms industry told the independent news outlet The Bell that a special unit in the FSB security service, which was previously accused of trying to poison the late opposition activist Alexei Navalny, is behind the recent internet crackdown.

Six people in Russia told The Moscow Times on Wednesday that they remain unable to access Telegram without a VPN, a problem that began earlier this year. However, two Russians in the southern Krasnodar region said Telegram continued to work without issue for them.

The Kremlin said Wednesday that VPN use is not punishable by law in Russia and denied knowledge of plans to penalize it.

Downloads of VPNs surged in Russia after authorities started blocking Western social media platforms and scores of Russian independent news outlets following the 2022 invasion of Ukraine.

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