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Russia Postpones Planned Surcharges on Mobile VPN Traffic Until Later This Year, Reports Say

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Svetlana Nafikova / Moskva News Agency

The Russian government has pushed back plans to introduce fees for mobile internet customers who use virtual private networks, or VPNs, Russian media reported Thursday, citing telecoms industry sources familiar with the matter.

Russia's Digital Development Ministry said in March that it would begin cracking down on the use of VPNs, a common tool that Russians have increasingly turned to in recent years to get around internet surveillance and censorship.

According to media reports at the time, the ministry initially asked mobile internet providers to charge customers who exceeded 15 gigabytes of international data traffic per month starting May 1. However, that deadline was allegedly moved to June 1 due to challenges with tracking VPN usage and billing.

VPNs work by routing a user's internet connection through servers outside Russia, thus allowing them to appear as if they are browsing from abroad and access blocked websites.

Related article: As Kremlin Cuts Off the Internet, VPNs Become a Way of Life

On Thursday, Kommersant and RBC reported that the introduction of the planned fees was once again pushed back and would likely be implemented after the State Duma and regional elections in late September.

A source cited by RBC said a "fully functioning" international traffic payment system would take three to four months to implement.

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

The proposed restrictions on VPNs follow months of mobile internet disruptions across the country and government-imposed slowdowns of popular messaging apps Telegram and WhatsApp.

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