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Russia Launches First 5G Networks After Years of Delays

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Alexander Avilov / Moskva News Agency

Russian mobile phone operators have launched their first commercial 5G networks across 16 major cities following years of regulatory disputes and Western sanctions, the Digital Development, Communications and Mass Media Ministry announced Friday.

The roll-out, ordered by President Vladimir Putin, comes amid regular mobile internet disruptions that authorities say are needed to thwart daily Ukrainian drone attacks across the country.

All four of Russia's major mobile operators launched 5G in Moscow, St. Petersburg and Yekaterinburg. Coverage in other major cities varies by operator.

The Digital Ministry plans to extend 5G coverage to 50 more cities by the end of this year, noting that 4G mobile networks already cover 90% of Russia's inhabited territory and that domestic mobile internet traffic has more than tripled in six years.

Friday's launch aims to bring high-speed internet access to 10 million people, officials said.

In Russia, the roll-out of 5G has been complicated by the fact that the military and security services have maintained exclusive control of the 3.4-3.8 GHz frequency range used for 5G internationally. Telecoms providers have unsuccessfully fought for access to that frequency range.

Instead, major mobile phone operators are allowed to use the 4.63-4.99 GHz frequency range, which means iPhones will still be unable to connect to 5G in Russia since they operate at a lower frequency.

The Digital Ministry said Android users will gain access to 5G "in the near future," while noting that access for iPhone owners "depends on a decision by the Apple corporation."

In addition to the longstanding dispute between mobile operators and Russian security services, the roll-out of 5G was hampered by telecom equipment giants Nokia and Ericsson exiting Russia after the full-scale invasion of Ukraine.

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