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From Banking to Taxis, Ukraine's Data Center Strikes Disrupt Everyday Life in Russia

By Moscow Times Reporter

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A man walks past the Yandex office in Moscow. **REUTERS / Anastasia Barashkova**

Andrei, a 39-year-old journalist from Moscow, looks at the notification on his smartphone and laughs.

"Damn! I can't log into my Yandex Pay account, but they're still charging me for a Yandex Music subscription that doesn't even work," he says.

When he tried to log in, the app displayed a message that said "Something went wrong" and asked him to try again later.

"It's a good thing I use another bank's card for most of my payments," he says.

Yandex Pay is one of dozens of services whose operations have been disrupted by Ukrainian

strikes on Russian data centers this month.

For many Russians, these outages have mostly meant temporary inconveniences and changes to their routines. But in a year that has already seen widespread fuel shortages, airport closures and e-commerce disruptions due to the war, they are the latest way in which the Kremlin's full-scale invasion of Ukraine has seeped into everyday life.

The data-center strikes have disrupted everything from taxis and car-sharing services, food delivery and maps to email, banking and streaming platforms.

Problems also arose for state agencies and private firms whose products rely on Yandex infrastructure, from dating apps to access systems for residential complexes and smart homes.

'Far more serious than we expected'

Connectivity to the Yandex Cloud platform fell to around 30% of normal levels following the Oct. 8-11 strikes, according to internet monitoring group NetBlocks. The disruptions affected 84 cloud services.

Yandex confirmed serious damage to one data center, the shutdown of another and infrastructure disruptions at a third. It has not disclosed the full extent of the damage or given a timeline for recovery.

In addition, all three of Yandex's supercomputers were likely severely affected, which could set Russia back years in the AI race, the science news outlet T-Invariant said.

After a further strike hit a VK data center in St. Petersburg on Sunday, users also reported disruptions on social network VKontakte, including photos failing to load.

As of Monday, Yandex Pay remained only partially available. The error message had been replaced with a reassurance: "Your money is safe. Some features are unavailable. Our engineers are working to get everything up and running again."

The Moscow Times reporter who wrote this article was still unable to access their full Yandex Taxi ride history on Monday.

A senior data analyst at Yandex told The Moscow Times that the company had been preparing for data center outages even before this month's strikes.

"But the scale turned out to be far more serious than we initially expected," and Yandex's rank-and-file employees were caught off guard, said the employee, who spoke on condition of anonymity to discuss sensitive internal matters.

"We had to drop everything and focus on urgent problems with our services," he said. "We managed to mitigate some of the effects quickly by switching applications to limited functionality, while in other cases recovery took several days."

He said it could take much longer to fully restore services.

“I don’t think anyone expects everything to be fully restored within a few days,” the employee said.

The analyst declined to discuss how Yandex was preparing for further Ukrainian strikes, saying that disclosing those plans could create a vulnerability for the company.

From bank accounts to court hearings

While the economic damage and longer-term consequences of the strikes remain unclear, the immediate disruption has been manageable for many users.

The names of the Russians interviewed for this article have been changed for their safety.

Robert, a barista in St. Petersburg, uses Yandex Pay as his main bank account. It’s where he receives his salary and other transfers.

“I use it for payments 99% of the time,” he said. “Luckily, I had almost no money in my account when the outage happened. I’d spent everything on big purchases shortly beforehand. So I wasn’t too worried about losing it forever.”

His access to his digital wallet was restored after several days. He said he has no plans to stop using Yandex.

“I always keep an alternative way to pay just in case — a little cash,” he said.

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The attack has nevertheless made him think about the war.

“It’s another reminder that the consequences of the war are getting closer to home — and growing in scale,” he said.

The disruptions also reached Yandex users outside Russia.

Yekaterina, a Russian woman who moved to Georgia after the invasion of Ukraine, said Yandex Go, a taxi service widely used across former Soviet countries, was temporarily unavailable in Tbilisi.

Nikolai, a Russian doctoral student in New Zealand, said he was unable to use Yandex Archives to research his dissertation.

“There weren’t many sources there, but the search was really convenient. So I sat down to write a chapter, wanted to quote something, and the archive was gone!” he said.

The data center strikes have also affected government agencies. The exiled news outlet Vyorstka reported that dozens of court hearings across Russia were disrupted due to technical problems.

Some government websites in the Kaluga region also went offline, Sarkis Darbinyan, an IT lawyer and founder of digital rights organization RKS.global, told The Moscow Times.

The outages have posed particular problems for small and medium-sized businesses whose products run on Yandex's infrastructure, especially its cloud platform, a Russian equivalent of Google Cloud.

Tatyana, the founder of fitness app FIT&ZEN, told customers that both the app and its web version were temporarily unavailable because of "technical problems at a Yandex data center."

"A major Yandex outage has affected many companies across the country, so unfortunately we're not alone in this," she wrote on the company's Telegram channel.

A strike on Yandex Cloud hits "thousands of Russian companies at once," Darbinyan said.

"After the Kremlin pushed Google and all its cloud competitors out of the country, Yandex played a very important role in the Russian internet, even though it did not have a dominant share of the data center market," he said.

The greatest risks face customers that cut costs by keeping all their data in a single availability zone without backups elsewhere, he added. These include small and medium-sized businesses, regional media outlets and government agencies.

Can Ukraine knock Russia's internet offline?

Darbinyan said the vulnerabilities exposed by the strikes are rooted partly in the structure of Russia's internet and the rules governing where companies can store their data.

Related article: Ukraine's Strikes on Yandex Data Centers, Explained

Earlier this month, the operator of Ukraine's Parkovyi data center moved copies of customers' data to backup sites in the European Union after it was hit by Russian strikes.

By comparison, Russian companies have little scope to do the same, Darbinyan said. Data localization laws and rules governing hosting, authentication services and critical information infrastructure require them to store data inside Russia.

Even so, Darbinyan said it would be difficult to take Russia's internet completely offline by striking data centers.

Despite the Kremlin's efforts to isolate it through its "sovereign internet" policy, Russia's internet remains a vast network built along the same lines as the global internet. It encompasses more than 200 data centers, hundreds of telecom network nodes and corporate server rooms.

Its greatest vulnerability is the concentration of commercial data center capacity in Moscow and nearby regions, with much of it owned by a handful of major companies: Yandex, VK, Rostelecom and Sberbank, he said.

Serious disruptions at those companies can therefore affect services nationwide.

Nor will it be easy or quick to replace damaged infrastructure. Russia obtains almost all the necessary equipment through parallel imports, while the AI boom has driven up prices, Darbinyan said.

“If strikes become regular, the market may simply not be able to keep up with replacing what’s been lost,” he said.

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