

Russian government blocks messaging app Telegram

By Clara Weiss
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A Russian court issued a ruling Friday, April 12, to block the messaging app Telegram. In a months-long standoff with the Kremlin, the company's CEO had refused to grant the secret service FSB access to users' encrypted messages. The ban took legal effect on Monday, April 16.

The court hearing took just 18 minutes. Judge Yulia Smolina from the Tagansky court in Moscow ruled in favour of Roskomnadzor (Federal Service for Supervision of Communications, Information Technology and Mass Media), a national agency that is subordinated to the Ministry of Telecommunication and in charge of the massive censorship efforts of the Russian government. Pavel Durov, the head of Telegram, announced that the company would be using built-in methods to bypass the block for its 9.5 million users in Russia.

The ruling is based on the "anti-terror laws" signed by President Vladimir Putin in 2016, which have provided the legal basis for a massive crackdown on Internet and communication freedoms in the past two years. This is part of an international drive by capitalist governments to censor the Internet and block encrypted communication, in anticipation of mass struggles by the working class.

According to the Russian laws, telecommunications operators have to store their customers' phone calls and text messages for six months. Messaging services like Facebook and Telegram have to provide decryption keys to the FSB. Moreover, Russians are legally required to inform authorities about potential terrorist acts, and postal employees are required to inspect packages.

The standoff between Roskomnadzor and Telegram started in June 2017, when the Russian agency asked the company to register in Russia and hand over the encryption keys to the FSB. Telegram did register but refused to provide the encryption keys to the FSB. Last month, Telegram lost the case before the Supreme Court and then failed to comply with the 15-day deadline to

hand over the keys. The company can now appeal the recent court decision within 30 days.

There has been an outcry against the ban of Telegram on social media, with many users denouncing the step as a crackdown on freedom of speech and communication. One critic, "Artem," sarcastically wrote: "Well that's it! There will be no more terrorism, Telegram is blocked. Now we only have to ban reproductive organs in order to finally do away with rape!"

Many posts expressed anger over the measure as well as fears of impending blocks of other websites and platforms. Others announced that they would defy the ban. One Twitter user from Yekaterinburg, a major industrial city in the Urals, wrote: "Now that Telegram has been blocked I will use it more than ever. Out of principle."

Telegram has about 200 million users worldwide and is especially popular in the Middle East and Russia, because it allows for encrypted communication and works much better under conditions of poor Internet connection than other messaging apps. In Russia, many young people and even government employees make use of the messaging app.

The company was founded by Pavel Durov, dubbed the Russian Mark Zuckerberg, who also created the hugely popular Russian social media network *vkontakte*. In 2014, Durov was forced to resign from the board of *vkontakte*, by then a \$3 billion company, because he refused to shut down pages of politicians from the liberal opposition and hand over data from opposition and pro-Maidan pages to the FSB. He has since lived in emigration.

The crackdown on Telegram is in many respects symbolic. Telegram was the app most widely used in the organization of the mass working class protests in Iran last winter. The Kremlin no doubt fears a similar development in Russia where tensions are running high amid an escalating war drive by the imperialist powers

and growing poverty in the working class. The recent fire in a shopping mall in Kemerovo provoked mass outrage on social media, including anger over the initial blackout of the fire by the state media and the reaction of the authorities to the disaster.

The blocking of Telegram, whether or not the company can circumvent it, signals that the Russian government will take whatever means are necessary to prevent encrypted communication and the organization of protests via social media and chat apps. This is part of a broader effort by the Kremlin and governments internationally to censor the Internet and spy on communications.

In Russia, these efforts are well-advanced. Especially since the protest movement of 2011-2012, which was spearheaded by the pro-Western liberal opposition, the Kremlin has undertaken a systematic crackdown on freedom of communication on the Internet. The central agency overseeing these censorship and surveillance efforts on the internet is Roskomnadzor.

Internet access in Russia has grown massively over the past 15 years. Between 2004 and 2015, the percentage of the population with Internet access grew from a mere 8 percent to 70 percent (92.8 million people). An estimated 97 percent of all young people between 16 and 29 and 82 percent of those aged 30 to 54 use the Internet. Internet usage was more widespread in urban areas, with a coverage of 83 percent in Moscow and St. Petersburg and 71 percent in cities with a population of 100,000 compared to 66 percent in small towns and the countryside.

Under conditions where most media outlets are controlled by the state, or by the liberal opposition, which is widely despised in the working class, the Internet has become a central source for alternative information about politics. Moreover, given the extraordinary destruction of social and cultural infrastructure during the restoration of capitalism, the Internet today is the main source of culture (be it books, films or other media) for the vast majority of Russians.

While direct Internet censorship by the state has, so far, focused on pages associated with the right-wing liberal opposition, all laws, and especially the mass surveillance, are designed to prevent and target above all movements by the working class which would threaten not only the current Putin regime but the capitalist system as a whole.

The most important restrictions and surveillance measures now in place on the Russian Internet include:

- An Internet blacklist (since November 2012); the criteria for inclusion on this blacklist included initially

“child pornography” and the advocating of suicide and illegal drugs. Since 2013, the blacklist law also applies to content that is “suspected of extremism”, “calling for illegal meetings,” “inciting hatred,” and “violating the established order.” Websites deemed guilty of any of these are blocked at the initiative of Roskomnadzor.

- Providers of free public wi-fi are legally required to collect and store the personal information of all users, including addresses and passport numbers.

- The System of Operational-Investigatory Measures requires telecommunications operators, social media platforms, chats and forums to install hardware by the FSB which allows the agency to monitor users’ communications metadata and content, including phone calls, email traffic and web browsing.

Since 2014, social media platforms and telecommunications operators are also required to install equipment with Deep Packet Inspection (DPI) capabilities, which include direct eavesdropping. Access to data obtained through these means is available not only to the FSB, but also the Interior Ministry, the Russian police and the tax police, border patrol, as well as the Presidential Security Service, the Kremlin Regiment, and Parliamentary Security Services.

- The virtual elimination of legal encryption in messaging apps. As of January 2018, operators of messaging apps are also not permitted to allow unidentified users.

- Virtual Private Networks (VPN) and other devices to surf anonymously on the internet have been banned since the summer of 2017.

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