EK Strategic Communications Center

Russia Watch February 2026

Kremlin Blocks Telegram: In-Depth Strategic Analysis

The Kremlin’s Information Control Strategy, Internal Contradictions, and the Durov Factor

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Executive Summary

On February 10, 2026, Roskomnadzor officially confirmed tighter restrictions on Telegram's operation, linking them to "noncompliance with Russian law" — refusal to remove prohibited content and, according to the agency, insufficient measures to combat fraud.

Thousands of users reported problems with the messenger, which were also confirmed by objective measurements of file-download speeds (inside Russia, speeds were recorded at tens of kilobytes per second, while outside the Russian Federation — in megabytes, meaning the difference was tens to hundreds of times).

The same day, it became known that the YouTube blockade had effectively been finalized: the service's domain was removed from the National Domain Name System, making access to the platform in Russia possible only via VPN[1,2]. According to Mediascope data for December 2025, Telegram's monthly audience in Russia was 93.6 million people; YouTube — more than 80 million users; while the state messenger Max had about 70 million installs but substantially lower media consumption[3].

The Kremlin's strategy amounts to a gradual "crowding out" of audiences from independent global platforms into state-controlled services. The ideological framing for this policy was previously set by Vladimir Putin at the "Direct Line" on December 19 last year, where he stated: "Now we can say with confidence, and this is very important, that Russia has achieved full digital sovereignty"[4].

In practice, this "sovereignty" is being implemented not through one-time bans, but through the gradual degradation of access — a model previously applied to YouTube and now being reproduced with respect to Telegram. The shift to the state messenger Max is effectively coercive and is being sabotaged by society in various ways.

Sources close to the presidential administration, cited by independent media outlets[5], describe the current tightening as a trial phase ahead of potentially harsher decisions and directly link it to the State Duma elections in fall 2026 — amid fears of public reaction to a potentially "too high" result for the ruling party against the backdrop of a real decline[6] in United Russia's ratings back to prewar levels. Sources also speak of contradictions among different decision-making centers inside the Kremlin: the political bloc responsible for elections and managed agenda-setting views Telegram as an important tool for monitoring sentiments and political mobilization, while the security services consistently press for tighter control.

According to sources, domestic-policy curator Sergey Kiriyenko in this situation will likely try to avoid a direct confrontation with the security-services block and may view a partial audience shift into the state messenger Max as an acceptable compromise. The development of Max is institutionally beneficial to the VK ecosystem, which is headed by Vladimir Kiriyenko, Sergey Kiriyenko's son.

At the same time, by the elections Max will not have time to become a nationwide messenger that the public uses as a primary source of information, unlike Telegram, into which the Kremlin has invested enormous financial resources. According to the independent outlet Forbes, on February 10 the Max team sent channel administrators from various media outlets recommendations to "remind your audience about your channel in Max and urge them to subscribe" via their other media platforms.

In the election context, the topic of internet censorship remains "permitted" for criticism, which once again suggests infighting on this issue within the authorities — with the presidential administration on one side, which considers Telegram a convenient vehicle for distributing propaganda and disinformation, especially on the eve of important parliamentary elections that are meant to serve as another demonstration of "nationwide" support for Putin's course.

On the other side are the security services, who favor total repression and Russia's maximum isolation inside a fully controlled ecosystem. In summer 2025, the censorship topic became a trigger for protest actions permitted by the authorities, and now, after a new wave of restrictions, pseudo-opposition parties fully controlled by the presidential administration are using the censorship theme as part of their election campaigns — acting, on the one hand, as a lightning rod for the anger of a worn-out public, and, on the other, hoping to strengthen their position within the power vertical by accumulating protest votes, which will be falsified but still serve as indicative signals for the Kremlin.

On February 12, Sergey Mironov[7], the leader of the Kremlin-controlled party "A Just Russia" stood out with an aggressive statement at a briefing: "[At the front] the guys are shedding blood, and their only connection with family and loved ones is through Telegram. What are you doing, idiots? Idiots! People are raising money for the 'special military operation,' and their only way to communicate with loved ones is through Telegram. <…>. [Those who are slowing Telegram] are scoundrels. Scoundrels! People are dying for Russia, for the Russian World, and what are you doing? Think again".

National propaganda covered Telegram's performance problems very cautiously, avoiding emphasis on the deterioration of user experience and focusing primarily on comments from State Duma deputies, especially from relevant committees. These deputies are traditionally used by the Kremlin to generate mixed public signals within the overarching frame of "ensuring security," while simultaneously testing society's reaction.

Notable was a broadcast by the Kremlin's key propagandist Vladimir Solovyov[8], who on February 11 on his own propaganda channel "Solovyov Live" carefully but consistently criticized the decision to "restrict" Telegram, stressing Telegram's importance for the military as well as the underdevelopment of Russian alternatives — Max and VK — and the loss of audience for propaganda media, primarily referring to his own assets (Solovyov retransmits broadcasts on Telegram, has one

of the largest channels, and also his own content grid): “We solve important tasks. We tell what is happening at the front. And for our sizable audience, including outside our homeland, for whom Max — even when video broadcasts appear there — will be inaccessible. What are we supposed to do now, based on that?”.

Also illustrative was the position of Belgorod Oblast Governor Vyacheslav Gladkov[9]: expressing concern on February 11 about Telegram being slowed as the main channel for delivering operational information to residents, he simultaneously urged citizens to register on the Max messenger to receive messages related to security. After him, another regional leader also urged a shift to Max[10]: “Due to the unstable operation of ‘Telegram,’ I will post photo and video content in Max”.

Telegram restrictions triggered noticeable irritation among Z-bloggers and the military. For pro-war authors, the messenger remains the key platform for fundraising, disseminating frontline information, and maintaining their audiences; for the military, it is a practical tool for communication and coordination.

Against the backdrop of the Starlink shutdown, unstable access to Telegram leads to delays in transmitting coordinates, complicates the exchange of UAV data, disrupts interaction between units, and hinders rapid responses to changing conditions. In video appeals published by the Russian monitoring channel lpr1, servicemembers say Telegram has become effectively the “only chain” of communication with various structures and agencies, that coordination of counter-UAV efforts was “set up with great difficulty,” and that new restrictions undermine this process; their remarks include a direct question to the regulator — did anyone ask those on the line of contact about the consequences of such decisions[11]. The channel’s publications also claim that throttling disrupts coordination and may lead to losses, while the authorities are pushing the shift to Max and VK “by force”[12].

The sensitivity of this issue for the state is reflected in the unusually swift response from presidential press secretary Dmitry Peskov[13]. He said it is “hard and impossible” to imagine

a situation in which frontline communications are provided through Telegram or another messenger, while emphasizing that Roskomnadzor is acting within the law and that "the law must be followed". "Dmitry Sergeyevich, I fully agree with you. It's hard to imagine. But that is exactly how everything is. Unfortunately… ," replied the largest Z-author (2.9 million subscribers) Yuriy Podolyaka[14].

In parallel, Z-author Anastasia Kashevarova[15] noted that her sources assure her: "Don't worry, they'll keep Telegram". "There is no decision to block it. On the contrary, there is rather an understanding that it's possible to reach an agreement with it on complying with Russian laws," Kashevarova comments. Taken together, these signals suggest that the Kremlin is increasing pressure and materially worsening Telegram's performance, but still allows for the possibility of successfully pressuring the messenger's leadership and its founder, Pavel Durov. The latter has spoken out against pressure and restrictions on freedom.

Against this backdrop, VPN becomes the key condition for access to information. According to Google Trends, interest in VPN rose from 43 points in October 2025 to 83 in February 2026. At the same time, pressure on circumvention is also intensifying: by early 2026, 439 VPN services had been blocked, and Roskomnadzor has been consistently restricting key protocols. Despite this, public attitudes toward blocking remain more critical than supportive: according to the state polling service VTsIOM, 39% of Russians do not support restricting access to foreign platforms, and 22% approve of bypassing blocks[16].

Under these conditions, scaling up VPN usage, normalizing their everyday adoption, and systematically leveraging alternative communication channels - such as TikTok and VK comment sections - become strategic priorities for independent media and activist groups, since preserving Russians' access to independent information depends directly on these efforts.

From YouTube To Telegram: A Step-By-Step User “Crowding-Out” Tactic

On February 10, 2026, Roskomnadzor (RKN — Russia’s communications and internet regulator) **officially confirmed** the introduction of Telegram “restrictions” and explained them as “noncompliance with Russian law” — refusal to remove “prohibited content,” “insufficient measures to counter fraud,” and problems with “personal data protection.”

This step continued a phased campaign to push users out of the messenger: on August 13, 2025, RKN restricted calls in Telegram and WhatsApp, and on October 22, 2025, the regulator acknowledged that it had begun to “partially restrict” other messenger functionality as well. In essence, this mirrors the same scenario used for blocking YouTube: instead of announcing an outright “block,” access is degraded step by step so that part of the audience migrates to alternatives on its own, without perceiving what is happening as a political decision[17].

The independent St. Petersburg outlet Rotonda described how this looked “on the ground”: a source in the telecom market reported that on the morning of February 10, RKN began slowing Telegram via a centralized system installed at providers, and that media files were the first to degrade most sharply — voice messages, images, and video — while text continued to go through for some users[18]. Uneven access was also visible at the regional level: according to monitoring sites, certain regions were hit more noticeably at first, and then the wave reached Moscow and St. Petersburg; at the same time, different cities recorded different depths of degradation — for some users only text loaded, while for others both messages and attachments were affected.

In parallel, the Kremlin decided to complete the process of blocking access to YouTube. On February 10, it became known that the YouTube domain had been removed from the records of the National Domain Name System (NSDI) — infrastructure created under the “sovereign Runet” law. As a result, devices stopped receiving the service’s IP addresses, and access became possible only via VPN[19,20,21].

Links To The Elections And Contradictions Inside The Kremlin

Sources at independent media outlets close to the Presidential Administration (AP) describe the tightening of Telegram restrictions as a trial run ahead of a potentially harsher phase and directly link it to the State Duma elections in fall 2026. One Kremlin-adjacent interlocutor puts the motive bluntly: "This is a test. (The really harsh part) comes a bit later," clarifying that a full block could become an option in September due to fears about how society would react to an "overly high" result for the ruling party — if the previous election target was built around the "55 for 55" formula (55% turnout and 55% for the ruling party)[22], then updated source reporting now points to a "70% for United Russia" benchmark — a demonstration of "nationwide" support[23].

At the same time, independent outlets, citing sources, describe a conflict inside the Kremlin. The political bloc responsible for elections, campaigning, and managing the "agenda" opposes a full block, viewing Telegram as a politicized but useful platform — "both for assessing public moods and for campaigning" — and also as an important channel for propaganda and for monitoring society's reactions. In the sources' account, tightening decisions are ultimately pushed through by the security services, for whom Telegram represents the risk of uncontrolled information exchange and potential self-organization.

In this logic, as independent-media interlocutors put it, the messenger "should not be a destabilizing platform," and restrictions should be introduced gradually so that the audience understands in advance that "it's time to look for alternatives" and that this alternative is "known to everyone" — a hint at the state messenger Max.

Meduza additionally notes that a source close to the AP who works on elections says directly that decisions on blocks are made by the security services, and for the political and information bloc they "mostly work against us," because they "raise social tensions" and destroy "well-established communication networks (with readers) via channels."

In this context, the key figure is Sergey Kiriyenko, First Deputy Head of the Presidential Administration and curator of domestic politics: according to Meduza's source, he "won't pick a fight" with the security services, and also allows for a personal institutional interest in audience spillover into Max: "If some people move from Telegram to Max, then VK gets a brownie point [from the country's leadership]." This overlaps with the fact that VK (Russia's social network and state-controlled service ecosystem) is headed by Vladimir Kiriyenko, Sergey Kiriyenko's son. Another Meduza interlocutor describes the situation more broadly as a test of "much larger-scale blocks," "under which anything could end up," adding: "There's a sense that the experience of blocking the internet in Iran inspired our security services."

Chronologically, the tightening followed soon after a Security Council meeting on February 6, which Vladimir Putin convened with key figures from the security and "digital" blocs — Nikolai Patrushev, Anton Vaino, Sergey Lavrov, Alexander Bortnikov, Sergey Naryshkin, Maksut Shadayev, and others — where "measures to ensure information security in the sphere of communications and mass media" were discussed[24].

Reactions From Key Voices And National Propaganda

Narratives in national propaganda around Telegram restrictions were shaped primarily by comments from State Duma deputies, whom the Kremlin regularly uses as public messengers to "test-drive" potentially unpopular decisions and gauge public reaction. At the same time, the statements were contradictory. Aleksandr Yushchenko, Deputy Chair of the State Duma Committee on Information Policy (KPRF), said that the issue of slowing Telegram "was not discussed" in the Duma, but allowed that Roskomnadzor could impose restrictions in case of legal violations[25]. Yevgeny Popov, deputy chair of the same committee and a United Russia deputy, expressed doubt that this was a full block and urged waiting for the regulator's official explanations, emphasizing Telegram's importance for users[26].

In parallel, national propaganda carried harsher positions as well. Andrey Svintsov, deputy chair of the State Duma committee on information policy (LDPR), called Roskomnadzor's actions "absolutely correct," claimed Telegram "fails to comply with roughly 70%" of the regulator's requirements, and allowed for a full block within six months[27,28]. Anton Nemkin, a United Russia deputy, insisted the restrictions are "phased and reversible" and could be lifted if Telegram cooperates with the authorities[29]. The hardest framing was set by Andrey Gurulyov, a United Russia deputy, who tied Telegram restrictions to the "Russia — NATO confrontation" and said Russians would "have to endure" the inconvenience[30].

At the same time, on February 10 national propaganda covered Telegram restrictions with notable restraint, avoiding heavy emphasis on the story or emotional language. The response largely boiled down to online outlets and short news items quoting deputies and Roskomnadzor[31]. According to sources, this media strategy reflects awareness that the decision is unpopular and a preference to introduce it gradually while simultaneously measuring public reaction[32].

Pressure On Durov

The tightening of Telegram restrictions can be viewed as a bargaining tool aimed personally at the messenger's founder, Pavel Durov. Roskomnadzor's statements, as well as recent commentary from national propaganda and State Duma deputies, have been structured around demands to "comply with Russian law" and "increase cooperation," effectively addressing not an abstract company but its owner.

The pressure logic is built on the principle of reversibility: it assumes that if Telegram changes its stance, pressure can be eased, while refusal to engage means losing a major Russian market and audience. A source close to the Presidential Administration told Verstka directly that the authorities will, for now, "mess with" Durov, but there is still no final decision on a full block of the messenger[33].

This approach fits into a broader context of Durov's complicated relationship with Western regulators: his attempts to develop projects in the United States and the European Union were accompanied by conflicts with authorities, and criminal proceedings in France over allegedly insufficient action against illegal content became an additional pressure factor. Durov's public criticism of Western leaders has been regularly used by Kremlin propaganda, reinforcing an image of an entrepreneur in conflict with multiple jurisdictions at once.

Against this backdrop, a June 2025 investigation by the independent outlet IStories (Vazhnye Istorii) is notable for alleging possible ties between Telegram's infrastructure and Russian telecom companies and figures who worked with the FSB. The journalists claimed that part of the messenger's server infrastructure was serviced by entities that also held contracts with the security services, and they pointed to Telegram architecture features that could potentially enable analysis of user traffic[34].

In response, Telegram representatives said that all servers belong to the company itself, are not located in Russia, are not serviced by third parties with access to data, and that the messenger has "never transferred personal messages to third parties"[35]. After the new round of restrictions on February 10, 2026, Durov publicly spoke out against the pressure, stating that "Russia is restricting access to Telegram in an attempt to force its citizens to switch to a state-controlled app built for surveillance and political censorship," recalling that "8 years ago, Iran tried the same strategy — and failed," and emphasizing that "Restricting citizens' freedom is never the right answer," because Telegram, in his words, "stands for freedom of speech and privacy, no matter the pressure."

Z-Authors' Irritation

Notably, the tightening of Telegram restrictions triggered a sharp reaction not only among opposition audiences, but also among Z-authors, for whom Telegram is a core infrastructure for coordination, fundraising, communications, and real-time information. A pro-war Telegram channel focused on survival and battlefield medicine, "Tactical Medicine Courses," joked that a block is a "timely decision" that will "help" the guys on the front line "right now," reminding readers that "in addition to Starlink not working, now Telegram won't either"[36].

The Z-author Fighterbomber framed what was happening as a demonstration of managerial impotence, saying: "Unfortunately, we can't shut off Starlink for [the Ukrainian army]. But we can shut off Telegram for Russians!", directly linking Roskomnadzor's actions to the worsening situation for Russian troops[37]. In the same vein, the major Z-channel "Two Majors," oriented toward the frontline agenda, wrote that for mobile fire groups Telegram "has long remained the only communications channel," especially where "radios don't work," while Starlink has already "dropped off," emphasizing that communications problems mean a return to "working like in 2022–2023 — via radio stations," with direct risks for personnel[38].

A servicemember identifying himself as the creator of the "Albatross" group, in an address published by the monitoring project lpr1, said Telegram had been a "key tool" for data sharing on drones and asked Roskomnadzor a direct question — "did you ask us?", warning that depriving troops of this tool could end in a "storm"[39].

The lack of functioning communications alternatives, on top of already existing problems after the Starlink shutdown, makes internet censorship in its current form a factor that Z-authors increasingly and directly link to weakening command-and-control, communications, and security at the front.

What Changes For Audiences And Independent Media

By February 2026, Russia is living under conditions of systemic internet restrictions: Meta (Facebook and Instagram), X, Discord, Signal, Viber, Snapchat, and FaceTime are blocked or severely restricted; YouTube is effectively blocked; and Telegram is now being restricted in stages.

In this configuration, VPNs have effectively become the main way to access information and external platforms, which is reflected in demand: according to Google Trends, interest in VPNs rose from 43 points in October 2025 to 83 in February 2026, approaching the annual maximum.

At the same time, the state is intensifying pressure specifically on VPNs: in March 2024 a ban on disseminating information about ways to bypass blocks took effect; in September 2025 a ban on VPN advertising followed; by early 2026, 439 VPN services had been blocked; and in December 2025 Roskomnadzor began systematically restricting key VPN protocols[40].

Public attitudes toward blocking remain more critical than supportive: according to an October survey by the state polling service VTsIOM, 39% of Russians "rather do not support" restricting access to foreign platforms, while 24% support it, 30% are indifferent, and 7% were unsure; 22% approve of bypassing blocks, 17% do not, and another 55% are neutral[41].

Against this backdrop, Telegram played a special role for a long time. After YouTube became effectively inaccessible, Telegram remained one of the key mass platforms where different viewpoints were present and where independent media could reach audiences without a VPN. According to Mediascope data for December 2025, Telegram's monthly audience in Russia was 93.6 million people, making it the second-largest messenger

by reach after WhatsApp (94.5 million), while the state-promoted messenger Max ranks third with 70 million[42].

However, media consumption differs fundamentally: in fall 2024, Telegram channels were read by tens of millions of Russians (up to 54% of the population, according to Mediascope), while on Max, according to independent pollster Russian Field (November 2025), only 4% of Russians read channels — about 5.8 million people — despite extensive administrative promotion of the service through pressure on public-sector employees[43]. Industry analytics show a similar gap: according to Telega.in for Q4 2025, the combined audience of the top 30 Telegram channels was estimated at about 87 million subscribers, while on Max it was about 1.4 million — dozens of times smaller[44].

If Telegram is further weakened, the key risk is a break in the connection between independent newsrooms and a significant share of the domestic audience, because Kremlin-controlled platforms (VK, Odnoklassniki, Max) remove independent content quickly. In an environment where VPN use is being constrained technically and stigmatized legally and publicly, the main danger is a shrinking audience that can still be reached. Therefore, for independent media the most universal response remains normalizing VPNs as an everyday tool, distributing clear instructions for bypassing censorship, and building backup communications channels (newsletters, mirrors), despite their more limited reach.

At the same time, counter-disinformation projects should continue to expand their work, using a variety of formats to deliver information that the Kremlin cannot and will not be able to fully control[45]: TikTok formats, distributing content in VK comment sections, and other channels are becoming an almost exclusive way to reach a broader Russian audience, extending far beyond Telegram or any single platform.

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