EK Strategic Communications Center

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Telegram Under Pressure: Kremlin's Information Control Strategy and Internal Contradictions

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EK Strategic Communications Center

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Executive Summary

Kremlin extends digital blackout to Telegram via phased degradation. February 10: Roskomnadzor officially restricted Telegram (93.6M monthly users), citing noncompliance with Russian law. Speeds inside Russia fell to kilobytes per second — tens to hundreds of times slower than outside the country. Simultaneously, YouTube, Deutsche Welle, BBC, Radio Liberty, Current Time, The Moscow Times, Tor browser, Instagram, and Facebook domains were removed from the National Domain Name System (NSDI) — infrastructure built under the sovereign Runet law. WhatsApp was similarly removed earlier.

The result: all blocked resources are now accessible only via VPN. The tactic towards Telegram messenger mirrors the YouTube playbook: gradual degradation rather than an outright ban, nudging audiences toward state-controlled alternatives without announcing a political decision. Putin's framing at December 2025 Direct Line: Russia has achieved full digital sovereignty.

Internal Kremlin conflict: elections vs. security bloc. Presidential Administration sources describe current restrictions as "trial phase" directly linked to September 2026 State Duma elections — fears about public reaction to potentially "too high" result for United Russia (new target: 70% for ruling party, up from previous "55 for 55" formula) against backdrop of ratings declining to pre-war levels. The political bloc responsible for elections and managed agenda-setting views Telegram as an important tool for monitoring sentiments and political mobilization.

The security services on the other hand consistently press for tighter control viewing messenger as "destabilizing platform" enabling uncontrolled information exchange and self-organization. According to sources, domestic-policy curator Sergey Kiriyenko "won't pick a fight" with security services as he have a vested interest in shifting audiences toward Max (the VK ecosystem is led by his son Vladimir Kiriyenko). February 6 Security Council meeting with Patrushev, Bortnikov, Naryshkin, Shadayev

discussed "information security measures" — restrictions followed immediately.

Controlled opposition weaponizes censorship as permitted criticism. Kremlin allows systemic opposition parties to criticize restrictions — acting as "lightning rod" for public anger while accumulating protest votes. February 12: Sergey Mironov ("A Just Russia" leader, fully Kremlin-controlled) aggressively attacked restrictions. National propaganda covered restrictions cautiously, avoiding emphasis on user experience degradation, focusing on State Duma deputy comments to "test-drive" unpopular decisions. Key propagandist Vladimir Solovyov carefully criticized decision on own channel "Solovyov Live,".

Z-community reacts to military communications disruptions. Pro-war commentators describe the recent restrictions as a significant setback, especially following the Starlink shutdown. A video appeal from a servicemember, shared by monitoring channel lpr1, emphasized that Telegram serves as the sole remaining backup for coordinating mobile fire groups, counter-UAV operations, rapid responses to changing conditions, drone-related data exchange, and communication between units.

They warned that denying troops access to this tool could result in severe consequences. Presidential press secretary Peskov responded promptly, falsely claiming that it is “hard and impossible” to envision frontline communications relying on a messaging app, and affirmed that Roskomnadzor is operating within legal boundaries.

Pressure on Durov as bargaining lever. Restrictions structured as reversible: if Telegram "complies with Russian law," pressure can ease; refusal means losing major market. Context: June 2025 IStories investigation alleged possible ties between Telegram infrastructure and Russian telecom/FSB-linked figures. Durov publicly responded Feb 10: "Russia restricting access to force citizens to switch to state-controlled app built for surveillance and political censorship..." Pressure exploits Durov's conflicts with Western regulators (France criminal proceedings, EU/US regulatory battles) to position him as embattled entrepreneur facing multiple jurisdictions.

Why it matters

Elite fragmentation accelerates under wartime pressures. Telegram restrictions expose three competing power centers: (1) Political bloc prioritizes electoral management, views Telegram as useful propaganda/monitoring tool; (2) Security services demand total information control, view messenger as destabilization risk; (3) Military/Z-community requires functional communications infrastructure for combat operations.

No coherent strategy reconciles these imperatives. Kiriyenko's institutional conflict of interest (son heads VK/Max ecosystem benefiting from Telegram migration) undermines policy credibility. National propaganda's cautious coverage + Solovyov's criticism + controlled opposition's weaponization = regime uncertainty about managing backlash. PA sources describe restrictions as "test" — admission regime unsure how far it can push without triggering unmanageable response.

Domestic political impact: Information control threatens electoral legitimacy narrative. Kremlin faces impossible tradeoff before September 2026 elections. Target of 70% for United Russia requires appearance of overwhelming support, but aggressive information control risks exposing coercion mechanics. VPN interest surged from 43 points (Oct 2025) to 83 (Feb 2026) approaching annual maximum — indicating mass circumvention normalization.

Pseudo-opposition (Mironov) weaponizing censorship as permitted criticism creates dangerous precedent: accumulates protest sentiment within controlled channels but signals genuine public anger regime must acknowledge. Max messenger fundamental failure despite administrative pressure. Coercive migration to state platforms exposes that "digital sovereignty" means surveillance infrastructure, not genuine alternatives.

Military operational impact: Communications infrastructure collapse. Z-community testimonials confirm Telegram functions as critical military infrastructure — not just propaganda channel.

Tactical implication: restrictions degrade Russian command-and-control infrastructure during active combat operations. Presidential administration forced into damage control (Peskov's swift response) acknowledging sensitivity, but cannot resolve fundamental tension: security services demand total control vs. military operational requirements.

Conclusions

(1) Information control degrades military capability: Kremlin's digital sovereignty project directly undermines combat operations. Starlink + Telegram restrictions eliminate communications infrastructure troops depend on. Security services' ideological priority (total control) conflicts with military necessity (functional communications);

(2) Electoral strategy exposes coercion mechanics: 70% target for United Russia requires information blackout to manufacture consent, but VPN normalization, public opposition, and Max's fundamental failure demonstrate population resisting coercive migration. Pseudo-opposition weaponizing censorship as permitted criticism creates uncontrollable variable: protest sentiment channeled but not eliminated;

(3) Elite consensus fracturing under incompatible imperatives;

(4) Durov pressure reveals strategic vulnerability: Kremlin relies on bargaining with individual (Durov) because lacks capacity to build genuine alternatives. Reversible restrictions = admission of weakness.

If Durov refuses compliance, regime faces choice: accept communications infrastructure loss or reveal information sovereignty is fiction;

(5) Mass circumvention normalizes resistance: VPN adoption surge + everyday workarounds becoming standard practice = population developing technical literacy to evade control. Each restriction teaches citizens how to circumvent next one.

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