

## The Kremlin bans WhatsApp

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17 February 2026

Since Thursday, the popular communication tool WhatsApp no longer legally functions in Russia. Along with Facebook and Instagram—all three social media platforms are owned by the US company Meta—WhatsApp was officially banned. The Kremlin's spokesman Dmitry Peskov told people that they should shift to the MAX app, a Kremlin-controlled app, modeled after the Chinese WeChat.

WhatsApp had some 100 million users in Russia, more than two thirds of the total population. An estimated 60 million people used it every day. Since the beginning of the war in Ukraine, it has been perhaps the most important tool for people to remain in contact with friends and family abroad.

WhatsApp has announced that it will continue to attempt to provide service to people located in Russia.

The ban on WhatsApp is the temporary culmination of a years-long effort by the Kremlin to shut down all means for encrypted and international communication. The promotion of virtual private networks (VPNs), which allow users to hide their personal IP online, and circumvent such bans, was prohibited last summer. Their use, while not entirely outlawed, has become extremely difficult. For well over a year, YouTube has only been available with severe slowdowns that often render it virtually dysfunctional.

Due to the great popularity of WhatsApp, the Kremlin took longer to shut it down. Voice calls on WhatsApp have been disabled for many months and since December, many had to use VPNs to access the app. Also in December, the Kremlin disabled calls via FaceTime, Apple's video communication app, and Snapchat.

The only app now remaining that allows, at least theoretically, for encrypted communication is Telegram. But it, too, has come under attack, above all through systematic slowdowns of the service.

At the same time, the Kremlin has forced people to

install the app MAX. Like the Chinese WeChat, it has multiple functions, including payments, but does not allow for encrypted communication and works with the authorities. Since August 2025, all phones sold in Russia have MAX preinstalled. According to the *Guardian*, it has now some 55 million users.

For almost a year, the Kremlin has also engaged in sometimes week-long shutdowns of online communications in entire regions. Although one reason for these slowdowns appears to be the drone war between Russia and Ukraine, which results in dozens, sometimes hundreds of drone attacks on Russian territory every day, the shutdowns have also been used to further the Kremlin's efforts to create an isolated Russian internet in which users are virtually barred from accessing information about, and communication with, the outside world.

While this campaign has escalated since the NATO-provoked invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, its aims and beginnings well predate the current war. Plans for the creation of a “Russian internet” which would be separated by an impenetrable firewall from the world wide web were made years before the war. The intensification of internet censorship and other means of encrypted communication also began well before 2022.

Reports indicate that the attacks on WhatsApp and Telegram have triggered widespread anger, among both the civilian population and soldiers at the front. With the war now soon entering its fifth year, both the human and the economic cost of the war are becoming ever more severe. In addition to the tens of thousands, if not hundreds of thousands of dead at the front, last year has seen a series of factory explosions, especially in the armaments industry, that killed dozens of workers.

The escalation of the censorship campaigns comes amid significant signs of unrest in the working class in

the US and internationally. The censorship of WhatsApp, in particular, is aimed not only at preempting encrypted communication but at isolating workers in Russia from developments abroad.

As the Putin regime is trying to negotiate a settlement of the war with the fascistic Trump administration, Russian press coverage of events in the United States—from the mobilization of ICE to the mass protests against Trump—has been minimal. This is not only a tactical move. The *World Socialist Web Site* has emphasized for years that in launching the invasion of Ukraine, the Kremlin was, fundamentally, seeking to improve its negotiating position with the imperialist powers. It now hopes it can achieve this goal.

But the Russian oligarchy also has definite political sympathies with Donald Trump and his far-right agenda. Although their historical origins differ vastly, the Putin regime, which has emerged out of the transformation of the Stalinist bureaucracy into a ruling oligarchy and the destruction of the Soviet Union, likewise defends the interests of a tiny elite which fears nothing more than a revolutionary challenge from the working class.

For many years, the Kremlin media has deliberately stoked racism over immigrants in both Russia and Europe. Since the beginning of the war, the Putin regime has also intensified its crackdown on democratic rights. This campaign has involved heavy promotion of the Russian Orthodox Church, which has close ties to the far-right, and “Christian values.” Although the right to abortion still exists on paper, in many regions it has become all but impossible to obtain one. The Kremlin has also engaged in an aggressive crackdown on real and potential opponents of the war. Most recently, a Russian court convicted members of a “Marxist circle” and sentenced them to draconian prison sentences. Their reading of writings by Marx and Lenin was cited prominently in the indictment.

Notwithstanding its political sympathies and the attempts to broker a deal over Ukraine with Trump, the Russian oligarchy is well aware that the geopolitical conflict with the US and the European imperialist powers is ongoing. In a recent comment, the *Nezavisimaya Gazeta* saw Vice President JD Vance’s visit to Azerbaijan as an indication that the South Caucasus “is no longer part of the CIS [Commonwealth

of Independent States]” and concluded that “NATO has arrived at our border in the Caucasus.”

The attempts to completely isolate workers and young people in Russia from the rest of the world and make it impossible for them to communicate safely must be seen in this broader context. Amidst the descent of the world into a new global conflagration, and a resurgence of social and political struggles by the working class, the Kremlin seeks to preempt what it rightly understands as its greatest threat: the linking up of workers in Russia with their class brothers and sisters around the world in a common fight against capitalism.



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