

The Blocking of Telegram Messenger: Who among the Russian Elite is «In Favor of» It and Who's «Against»

On April 13, Moscow Tagansky court granted Roskomnadzor media regulator's request to block the Telegram messaging app in Russia. On April 16, Roskomnadzor started blocking the app. Faced with catastrophic consequences of the decision for the Russian Internet community, the regulator had to revisit it and unblock almost three million IP addresses on April 28, which proved that the court decision couldn't be implemented effectively.

Blocking Telegram stirred a lot of controversy in Russia and involved security services, government ministries, the Security Council, and the Presidential Administration. The conflict was triggered by Pavel Durov's refusal to hand over message encryption keys to the Federal Security Service (FSB). All major interest groups in the case agree on that, but then their interests begin to diverge.

Conflicts' Participants

Security Council Secretary Nikolai Patrushev. He most frequently briefed Vladimir Putin on the need to block Telegram at the Security Council meetings. Patrushev supports the complete blocking of the service. The Deputy Communication Minister Alexei Sokolov worked on the technical aspects of the messenger's blocking. Sokolov is Patrushev's protégé who previously worked as his advisor. Patrushev essentially assumed political responsibility for the decision to block the messenger. But the impossibility to quickly implement this decision seriously undermined his position and generated talk of his possible ouster from the post of the Security Council Secretary. Nevertheless, Patrushev himself is still trying to increase his influence over the Internet sphere: on April 11, he proposed creating a voluntary Internet patrolmen service that will be tasked with raising the patriotism of the younger generation.

Igor Shchegolev's influence group. The Aide to the President Igor Shchegolev, his protégé Roskomnadzor head Alexander Zharov, and the Deputy Communications Minister Alexei Volin became both lobbyists and implementors of the political decision to block Telegram. There are both political and administrative reasons behind their behavior. The political aspect comes from the significant escalation of the competition over the communication industry between the Shchegolev group, which also includes the creator of the Safe Internet League [Konstantin Malofeev](#), and the Yuri Kovalchuk group. Kovalchuk managed to oust Shchegolev's supporters from large companies like Rostelecom. Shchegolev saw his efforts to block Telegram as a way to demonstrate his effective work to the president and maintain his positions after the Kremlin's personnel reshuffles. But the attempts to block Telegram failed and Roskomnadzor came under fire for its inability to implement the court's decision (some even accuse the block proponents of setting Vladimir Putin up and discrediting the court). As for the administrative reasons, Shchegolev was trying to get his man appointed to be the Communications' Minister. The Shchegolev group also includes the president's Internet advisor, German Klimenko, who actively defended Roskomnadzor's efforts to block Telegram.

FSB Information Security Center (ISC). The Center is responsible for monitoring the Russian Internet segment. It belongs to the FSB Counterintelligence Service and advances FSB interests in the efforts to force Pavel Durov to hand over the messenger encryption keys to the FSB. However, unlike the Shchegolev group, the ISC only wants Durov to surrender the encryption keys, believing the blocking of the messenger to be excessive, since it will make monitoring and analysis of Telegram messages more difficult.

Information and Special Communications Protection Center (IPC) headed by Andrei Ivashko. The IPC, which is part of the FSB Science and Technology Service, is the ISC's competitor. The IPC has long lobbied for disbanding the ISC and acquiring its functions. The ISC has lost much of its strength after its operatives were [accused](#) of [treason](#) in connection with the Anonymous International (Shaltai Boltai) project. Failure to quickly block Telegram dealt a blow to the ISC and became a possible pretext for the IPC lobbying efforts to eliminate the ISC and assume its functions.

Sergey Chemezov. Chemezov is one of the most ambitious players in the Telegram blocking game. He has no personal connection to the decision to block the messenger but hopes to get serious political and personnel dividends out of Shchegolev's failure. First of all, he wants his man to be appointed the head of Roskomnadzor and would also like to transfer control over the agency from the Ministry of Communications to the Prosecutor's General Office or the Ministry of Internal Affairs (especially if the Yaroslavl governor and the former Federal Protective Service official Dmitry Mironov is to become the new internal affairs minister, which is being actively discussed now. The President's Chief of Staff Anton Vaino, who is close to Chemezov, took part in authorizing the blocking of the channel but didn't actively lobby for it. Rostec is also a partner of the Citadel holding (Alisher Usmanov's sphere of influence), which [produces SORM eavesdropping equipment](#) and is the FSB largest supplier. In this respect, the Rostec very closely cooperates with the FSB Science and Technology Service.

Sergey Ivanov. The former president's chief of staff remains one of the most influential figures within Putin's inner circle. Ivanov also became Chemezov's close associate (they're cooperating on a number of projects). The Chemezov-Ivanov group also has ties with the FSB. The FSB Counterintelligence Service chief [Vladislav Menshchikov](#), who is in charge of the Information Security Center, has close contacts with Ivanov and Chemezov.

Sergey Kiriyenko. Kiriyenko, who is responsible for domestic policy in the presidential administration, officially took a neutral position on Telegram blocking, but he is essentially playing his own game against Roskomnadzor behind the scenes. While he certainly supports the court's decision to block the messenger (it's telling that the Expert Institute for Social Research that has close ties to him decided not to use its Telegram channel after the court made its decision), it's in his interest to get more influence over the Russian internet segment. One of the ways to expand this influence would be transferring Roskomnadzor's functions from the cabinet of ministers to the Kremlin. Such a change is unlikely at this point, though. Besides, Kiriyenko is close to the Yury Kovalchuk group, which is interested in Shchegolev's and his team's ouster from the key positions in the Presidential Administration and the Ministry of Communications.

Communications Minister Nikolay Nikiforov. Nikiforov's relations with the Shchegolev group are problematic. Despite the fact that Roskomnadzor is officially part of the Communications Ministry, Nikiforov has little control over the regulatory agency. That's exactly why the communications minister distanced himself from the events around Telegram blocking and is trying to keep a low profile now. The young technocrat's work generally satisfies both Prime Minister Medvedev and the Presidential Administration. Nevertheless, lack of political weight may prevent Nikiforov from staying in the minister's office for much longer.

Public critics of Telegram blocking

It's important to stress that no one within the Russian elite directly opposes the court's decision on Telegram blocking. However, many influential political players criticized Roskomnadzor for its inefficiency and extremely painful consequences of the blocking for the Russian Internet segment.

The Chairman of the Federal Antimonopoly Service **Igor Artemyev** publicly criticized Roskomnadzor for the damage it inflicted on the Russian Internet sector with its "rolling Telegram blocking."

Chechen head **Ramzan Kadyrov** continues to use Telegram as a matter of principle, claiming that the messenger works perfectly well in his republic. Kadyrov is an old adversary of the FSB and uses Telegram blocking as another chance to get back at federal security services.

Deputy Prime Minister **Arkady Dvorkovich**, Medvedev's right-hand man, openly acknowledged that he continued to freely use Telegram.

Alexei Kudrin stated that Telegram blocking threatened Russia's digital economy.

Duma Speaker **Vyacheslav Volodin** doesn't comment on the situation personally. However, it's notable that Duma International Committee Chair **Leonid Slutsky** recently opened his own Telegram channel. He would hardly have taken such a step had Volodin supported Roskomnadzor's actions. Besides, A Just Russia Party leader **Sergey Mironov**, who is also somewhat mindful of the position expressed by the Duma leadership, offered sharp criticism of Roskomnadzor.

There are a few central reasons behind the stalled implementation of Telegram blocking. First, the authorities' alienation from competent expert discussions on this subject prevented an adequate assessment of government's technical capabilities to block Telegram. Vladimir Putin, who is quite unfamiliar with Internet technologies, was promised a quick fix of the Telegram problem, but the inability to deliver on the promise led to panic and the blocking of millions of IP addresses. Second, Putin himself acted rather passively in this case: he just vaguely understood the problem and hence agreed with Patrushev and the FSB that Telegram should either hand over the encryption keys or be closed for Russia. But no one discussed with the president how it would be done out of fear to discuss problematic issues. Therefore, the implementation of the Telegram blocking decision wasn't unequivocally sanctioned by Putin, which eventually led to the elite's conflicting feelings toward Roskomnadzor's actions: a large part of the establishment directly or indirectly opposed the blocking and supported Telegram.

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