

1258

Baghdad, then a city of 1 million, falls to the Mongols as the Abbasid Caliphate is destroyed, with tens of thousands slaughtered, ending the Islamic Golden Age

1601

A fleet of five British East India Company vessels departs on its first voyage from London, led by James Lancaster commanding the “Red Dragon”; the journey lasts nearly 16 months



1689

Parliament of England adopts the Bill of Rights, establishing the rights of Parliament and placing limits on the Crown

1942

Germany’s planned invasion of England, Operation Sea Lion, is canceled by Adolf Hitler

Russia blocks WhatsApp, pushes domestic app

Kremlin says WhatsApp violated laws as critics warn of surveillance and restricted communications

● Kremlin urges 100 million users to switch to Max

● Critics call it a potential surveillance tool

● Telegram also facing “phased restrictions”

AFP | Moscow

Russia has blocked the popular messaging service WhatsApp over its failure to comply with local legislation, the Kremlin said yesterday, urging its 100 million Russian users to switch to a domestic alternative.

Moscow has for months been trying to shift Russian users onto Max, a domestic messaging service that lacks end-to-end encryption and that activists have called a potential tool for surveillance.

“As for the blocking of WhatsApp... such a decision was indeed made and implemented,” Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov told reporters.

Peskov said the decision was due to WhatsApp’s “reluctance to comply with the norms and letter of Russian law”.

“Max is an accessible alternative, a developing messenger, a national messenger. And it is an



People use their smartphones while sitting on a bench at a metro station in Moscow

alternative available on the market for citizens,” he said.

WhatsApp, owned by US social media giant Meta, said Wednesday that it believed Russia was attempting to fully block the service in a bid to force users onto Max.

“We continue to do everything we can to keep users connected,” it said.

Critics and rights campaigners say the restrictions are a transparent attempt by the Kremlin to ramp up control and surveillance over internet use in Russia.

They also say it will make it

harder for Russians to communicate abroad.

But Vilgelm, a 32-year-old engineer from Moscow, told AFP he believed the move would not isolate Russia.

“Given Russia’s weight in international affairs and trade, it is unlikely we would get a North Korea situation, where everything is completely blocked,” he told AFP.

Still, he finds it problematic that the authorities are “actively” promoting Max so aggressively.

“It all looks a bit too tempting,” said Vilgelm, who, like most people AFP spoke to, only gave his

first name.

‘Carrier pigeons’

The government directed manufacturers to include Max on all new phones and tablets starting last September, and it claimed 75 million users by December.

Released by Russian social media giant VK last year, it has been touted as a “super app” similar to China’s WeChat or Alipay, capable of doing everything from accessing government services to ordering a pizza.

Critics say the weak encryption, where messages are not



scrambled between devices, means communications could be easily intercepted and read.

Some Russians told AFP they were forced to download it by their employers.

Many schools, which use chat apps to communicate with parents, have also switched to Max.

“In late December, we received a message from my daughter’s homeroom teacher telling us that WhatsApp no longer worked at all,” said one Muscovite, who refused to give her name.

“All communication related to the children’s school activities would be conducted via the Max app,” she added.

Russia’s internet watchdog said Tuesday it would also slap “phased restrictions” on another popular messaging platform, Telegram, which it also accused of not complying with local legislation.

Zelensky slams IOC over helmet ban

AFP | Kyiv

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky said yesterday that the decision to ban skeleton racer Vladyslav Heraskevych from the Winter Olympics for refusing to ditch a helmet depicting victims of the war with Russia plays “into the hands of aggressors”.

Gestures of a political nature during competition are forbidden under the Olympic charter.

The International Olympic Committee said Heraskevych had failed “to adhere to the IOC athlete expression guidelines”.

The athlete had insisted he would continue to wear the headgear, which carries pictures of Ukrainian sportsmen and women killed since Russian forces invaded Ukraine in 2022, in his event at the Milan-Cortina Winter Games.

The IOC said in a statement: “(The decision) was taken by the jury of the International Bobsleigh and Skeleton Federation (IBSF) based on the fact that the helmet he intended to wear was not compliant with the rules.”



Ukraine’s skeleton racer Vladyslav Heraskevych holds his helmet, which depicts victims of his country’s war with Russia

A defiant Heraskevych posted on X: “This is (the) price of our dignity”, alongside a picture of his helmet.

Zelensky took aim at the IOC. “The Olympic movement should help stop wars, not play into the hands of aggressors,” the Ukrainian president said in a post on social media.

“We are proud of Vladyslav and of what he did. Having courage is

worth more than any medal.”

Athletes are permitted to express their views in press conferences and on social media, and the IOC had said on Tuesday it would allow Heraskevych to wear a plain black armband.

A further offer to allow him to carry his helmet into the mixed zone, where athletes talk to journalists after their race, was also rejected.

“Mr Heraskevych was able to display his helmet in all training runs,” yesterday’s IOC statement added. “The IOC also offered him the option of displaying it immediately after the competition when going through the mixed zone.”

Heraskevych has the option to appeal to the Court of Arbitration for Sport but CAS told AFP it had not heard from him.

Coventry plea

IOC president Kirsty Coventry met with Heraskevych early yesterday in a last-ditch attempt to persuade him to change his mind before his competition started.

Coventry, a former Olympic gold medalist in swimming, was in tears after the meeting, according to video images.

“I was not speaking to him in that room as a president, I’m speaking to him as an athlete,” she said.

“We have these rules in place to try and be fair and also to try and allow for us to do both things right -- to allow for athletes to express themselves, but also to allow for athletes to be safe.”

Nearly 800 flights cancelled as German pilots and cabin crew strike

AFP | Berlin

Almost 800 flights in Germany affecting about 100,000 passengers were cancelled yesterday, Lufthansa said, as pilots and cabin crew staged a one-day strike over a pensions dispute.

Airports in Frankfurt, Berlin, Hamburg and Duesseldorf were particularly affected, according to their websites, but most flights at Munich took off as scheduled.

Lufthansa denounced the strike and its “extremely severe and disproportionate impact” on passengers.

The company said its main Lufthansa airlines as well as its Eurowings, Discover Airlines and cargo operations were affected.

“Lufthansa is doing everything it can to limit the impact on passengers,” it added.

TOP
4

TWEETS

01



As the birthplace of multilateralism and the Geneva Conventions, and the home of both the World Health Organization and the International Committee of the Red Cross, #Geneva is the city where peace and health meet. There is no health without peace, and no peace without health.

@DrTedros

02



I look forward to welcoming EU leaders today in Alden Biesen for an informal retreat focused on competitiveness. This brainstorming exercise will help pave the way for a more autonomous Europe and a more resilient economy that delivers for our citizens.

@eucopresident

03



Job number one is easing the cost of living pressure that many people still feel. Today’s GDP figures show our economy is growing. That means more money back in your pocket. I know there’s more to do, but we are heading in the right direction.

@Keir_Starmer

04



Today launched Arctic Sentry, a new military activity that leverages our strength by bringing together NATO and Allied activities across the Arctic and High North. We are committed to ensuring Arctic security – and the security of the whole Alliance – together.

@SecGenNATO

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