For Russia's Small Businesses, Instagram Ban Deals a Huge Blow

By [Felix Light](#) and [Jake Cordell](#)

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Woodworking craftsman Roman Golov built his business up from the ground over the past eight years.

Whittling everything from rocking horses to Orthodox icons in his backyard in Ivanovo, an industrial city 250 kilometers east of Moscow, the father of two painstakingly grew his business, occasionally falling back on casual security gigs to pay his bills. Accruing over 10,000 followers on social media, he was soon fulfilling orders from across Russia and sometimes abroad.

But at midnight Moscow time on Sunday, it all came crashing down.
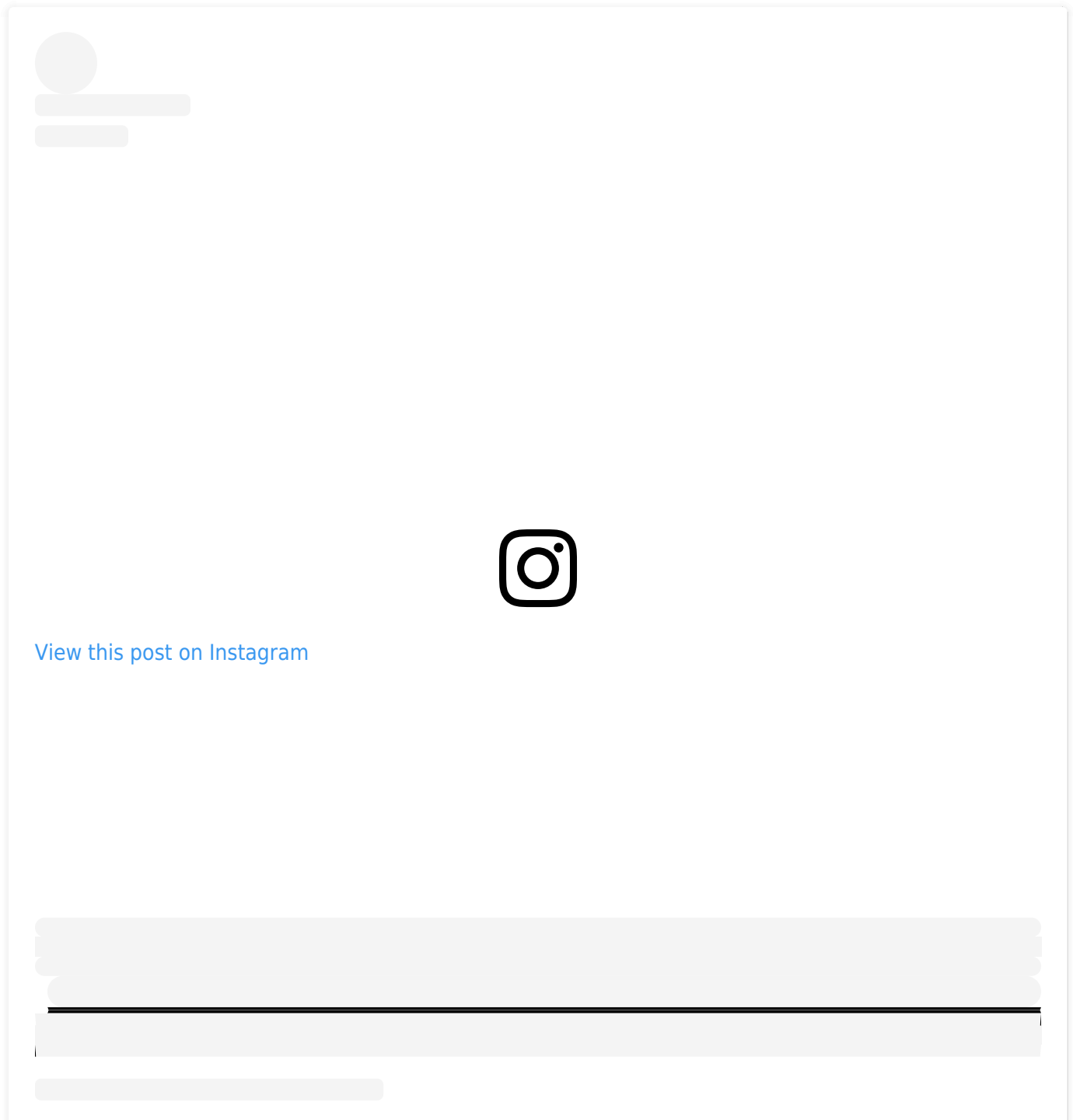
Instagram, the photo and video sharing app, was now blocked in Russia, ostensibly for inciting violence against Russian citizens.

For many beleaguered Russian entrepreneurs, the Instagram block is the latest in a series of blows amid Moscow's war in Ukraine, with the economy sinking, the ruble devalued and Russia cut off from worldwide payment systems. Even as harsh sanctions take time to make their presence felt, Russia's exclusion from Instagram and other digital services comes as a shock to those who have depended on it.

"There's not really any alternative to Instagram," Golov, 42, told The Moscow Times.

"The other platforms all either charge money, or aren't very good," he added, saying he has tried with little success to migrate his business to Telegram, an encrypted messenger app popular in Russia.

Embed:

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Russia's Instagram block was a long time coming.

The Kremlin has always had tense relations with U.S.-based tech giants, viewing them with suspicion as instruments of a Washington it saw as implacably hostile.

In 2016, authorities blocked professional networking website LinkedIn, accusing it of violating data retention laws.

In March 2021, amid widespread protests against the jailing of Kremlin critic Alexei Navalny, access to Twitter — which is popular among opposition-minded Russians — was deliberately throttled by the country's censorship agency, Roskomnadzor.

But when Russia invaded Ukraine on Feb. 24, the clampdown on Russia's once largely free internet accelerated at a breakneck pace.

On March 4, Russia blocked Instagram's Meta stablemate Facebook, citing the website's alleged "discrimination" against Russian state media.

A week later, after parent company Meta announced a rule change allowing calls for the death of Russians within the context of opposition to the invasion of Ukraine, Roskomnadzor clamped down even harder on the group — blocking Instagram completely. In its announcement of the ban, the censorship agency said that "messages shared on Instagram promote and encourage violent actions towards Russians."

The country's prosecutor general is also seeking to designate Meta as an "extremist" organization, a move that would see the company placed on par with terrorist groups and threaten WhatsApp, another messenger service widely popular in Russia.

But where Facebook had largely been a niche service — mainly popular among urban, liberal Russians — Instagram was another matter entirely.

Deeply integrated into Russia's online life, Instagram boasted over 60 million users in the country, according to the market data firm Statista — equivalent to around 40% of the Russian population.

With the app having partly superseded Russian-made social media services like VKontakte and Odnoklassniki, Russian celebrities have in many cases built enormous followings on Instagram.

Some, including reality TV star Ksenia Sobchak and YouTuber Yury Dud, have used it as a platform to state their opposition to the war.

Related article: [Russian Bloggers Bid Tearful Farewell to Instagram](#)

But for small businesses, many of which had come to depend on Instagram as an inexpensive platform for marketing, promotions, and even receiving orders, the block comes as a particular shock.

"For any new projects, this is a big blow," said a representative of All Your Friends, a Moscow craft beer bar.

"Instagram is the main communication instrument for the restaurant business."

Others, however, still have some hope that the state's patchy record at enforcing online censorship will continue to hold.

"In general, I'm very worried about the block," said Yuliya Kalugina, a Moscow photographer, who said she regularly finds new clients through Instagram.

"I really hope that it'll prove to be technically impossible, like what happened with Telegram," she added, referring to Russia's failed two–year attempt at blocking the encrypted messenger service.

"Conversion onto other social networks is extremely difficult."

Though Instagram will likely continue to be accessible in Russia using VPN (virtual private network) technology, which circumvents blocks, many Russians are unlikely to install VPNs, many of which are paid services.

Instead, some businesspeople are contemplating shifting operations to different platforms, including Telegram and VKontakte, Russia's Facebook equivalent.

In an email announcing the Instagram block, Russia's public services portal Gosuslugi invited onetime Instagram users to return to Russian–made social networks that sagged in popularity after Instagram rose to prominence.

However, few are under any illusions about the ban's consequences for business, even if they greet the news of the block — and the broader collapse of the Russian economy — with a weary acceptance of the need to adapt to a changed country.

"Instagram was an excellent tool," said Natalia Surinova, a Moscow photographer.

"But I'm ready to move to new platforms, and try and solve new problems."

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