Russian social network VK launches photo sharing app

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Russian opposition leader Alexei Navalny takes a selfie photograph with the media during a hearing at Moscow's Lyublinsky district court on May 13, 2015

Russia's most popular social network VK has launched a photo-sharing mobile application to rival Facebook's popular Instagram service.

Snapster, available on Apple and Android phones since the weekend, allows users to share pictures modified with digital filters.

The service also allows users to send pictures that automatically delete themselves after a certain time limit and to embed photos and comments on their VK accounts.

VK, sometimes referred to as the "Russian Facebook," was created in 2006 as Vkontakte ("in touch") by young Internet entrepreneur Pavel Durov. The social media network is far more popular than Facebook in former Soviet republics, where it has more than 100 million users.

Unlike its US rival Facebook, VK did not have a picture sharing service, leading Russia's selfie enthusiasts to turn to Instagram.

"This is VK's first service for mobile phones that functions independently from the social network, while being closely integrated to it," VK operations director Andrei Rogozov said in a statement on Monday. "We are creating a new global project that is not limited to the site's users."

The launch comes just over a year after Durov's departure from the VK group. The enigmatic founder resigned last year after an enduring conflict with Kremlin-linked shareholders.

Following Durov's departure, VK came under the control of Russian Internet group Mail.ru.

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