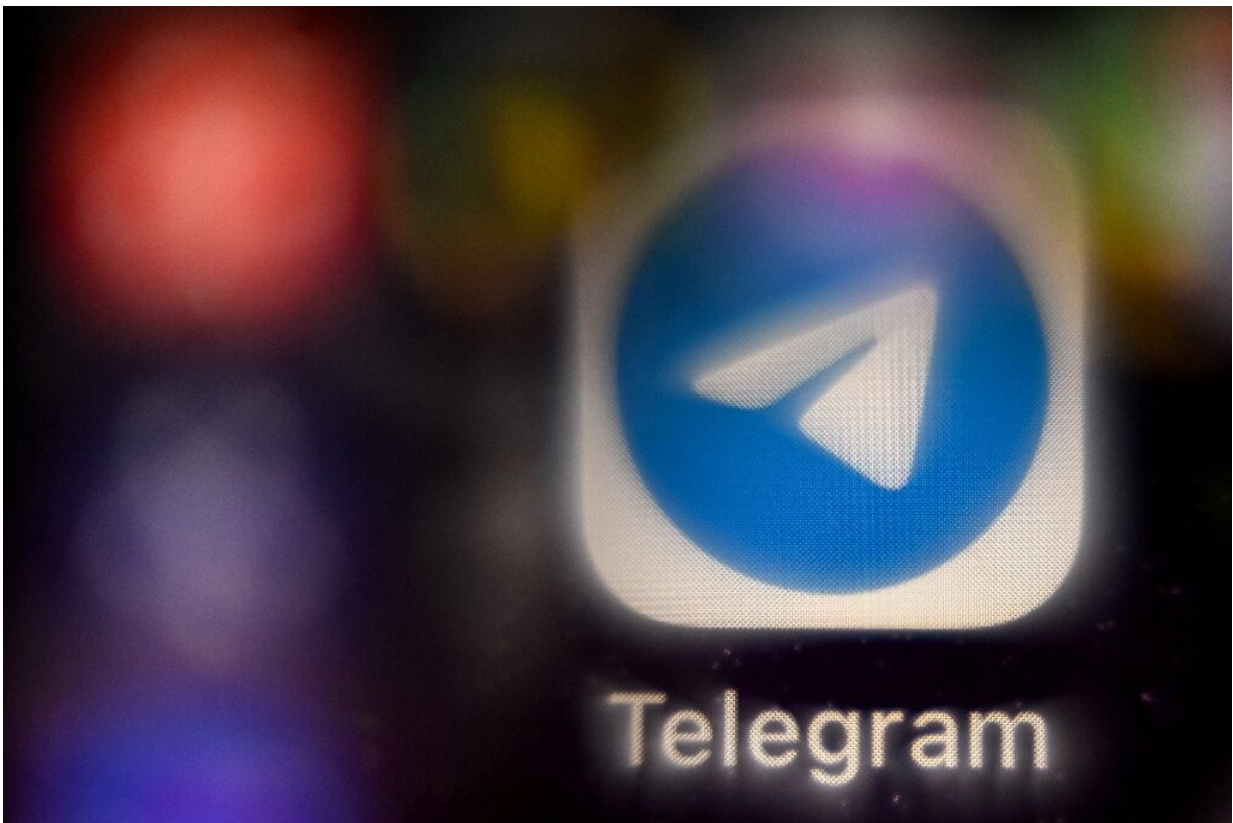


Telegram booms as Russia's digital landscape shrinks

March 19 2022, by Thomas Urbain



Telegram messaging app has boomed amid Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

The Telegram messaging app has become a go-to platform since Russia's invasion of Ukraine, despite concerns over its data security and defenses against misinformation.

It has benefitted from the gap left by Russia's blocking of Facebook and Instagram, offering a platform for mass messaging in a way similar to social media.

The platform also provides one of the last windows on Russia, but also an open channel to the horrors facing an under siege Ukraine.

"Our main hope is connected with Telegram channel," Galina Timchenko, director of the independent news site Meduza that Russia has moved to block, told the Committee to Protect Journalists.

According to daily figures provided by Telegram, the app has been downloaded over 150 million times since the beginning of the year, with the official figure of half a billion active users dating back to January 2021.

Prior to Moscow's invasion of Ukraine, Telegram benefitted from not using the same economic model of the big American platforms that generate revenue with data on their users.

Downloads jumped in 2021 when a report from ProPublica investigative journalists claimed that Facebook teams were viewing messages sent via WhatsApp, contrary to company assurances.

At the same time, Telegram has benefitted from the image of its creators, brothers Pavel and Nikolai Durov, Russian citizens who left their home country in 2014.

Under pressure from the authorities, Nikolai sold his stake in VK, which he had created, rather than hand over the personal data of activists to the government.

"Telegram is now a very nice revenge story, and we all love a good

revenge story," said Enrique Dans, a professor specializing in information systems at the IE Business School in Madrid.

"Will that be enough to make Telegram the world's favorite messaging app? That's a whole lot to say. The app still has a lot of things to demonstrate in areas such as security, encryption and business model," he added.

While the platform run from Dubai claims to be secure, it does not encrypt messages by default, as does the Meta owned WhatsApp says it does.

In addition, "Telegram's profile has grown enormously in recent weeks, and that has raised the stakes about the impact of misinformation on the platform, said Jamie MacEwan, a media analyst at Enders Analysis.

Messaging platforms in general have long faced criticism over their capacity to combat misinformation.

Contacted by AFP, Telegram said it employs "several hundred professional moderators to keep the [platform](#) safe for users", a team that is "constantly growing".

"Meta employs tens of thousands of moderators and huge problems still slip through the net," said MacEwan, "It is unclear how much investment in moderation Telegram can support on its current funding model."

The company's model was fully funded by Pavel Durov until 2018, before raising \$1.7 billion from investors, with the hope of launching its own cryptocurrency and becoming an alternative to Visa and Mastercard.

But the project fell through due to lack of regulatory approval in the United States, and the company repaid most of the funds.

Entirely free, Telegram started advertising last year, but with a reduced, highly regulated offering, and guaranteeing that it would not use users' private data for targeting.

In April 2021, the Russian business daily Vedomosti reported that the company was preparing to go public in 2023, and was aiming for a valuation of between \$30 billion and \$50 billion.

"The value that Telegram could eventually reach if it goes public depends strongly on its monetization strategy and Durov has not been very clear on that yet," said Dans.

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