

Telegram: The global rise of libertarian chat app

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Telegram is hugely popular in former Soviet countries.

The boss of social media platform Telegram has been arrested in France, accused of allowing the sharing of illegal content.

The Russia-founded messaging platform has stayed out of the limelight in the West but has hundreds of millions of users across the world, and plays a key role in the Ukraine war.

Libertarian leanings

Pavel Durov, arrested after landing on his private jet in Paris on Saturday, launched the platform in 2013 with his brother Nikolai.

It claims to have 950 million users—up from 550 million in 2022.

Durov told right-wing American journalist Tucker Carlson in April that users "love the privacy, the freedom" of the platform.

Telegram has made great play out of refusing to hand over or sell user data, distinguishing itself from the business models of US rivals like Meta or Google.

In Russia and Ukraine, some of its news channels are more popular than traditional media.

But the platform has long been criticized for failing to moderate extreme content.

Durov, who has a net worth of \$15.5 billion according to Forbes, told the Financial Times in March he planned to improve the moderation mechanisms.

But "unless they cross red lines, I don't think that we should be policing people in the way they express themselves," he said.

However, he also said the firm only employs a few dozen people, which experts said may not be enough to provide a properly secure platform.

Russian origins

The 39-year-old made a name for himself in 2006 when he launched the social network VKontakte (VK) shortly after graduating from St Petersburg State University.

Millions joined up and it quickly became known as "Russia's Facebook", its popularity piquing the interest of the Kremlin.

He said he had to fend off demands from the Russian security services to hand over details of opposition groups using VK to organize.

And later he came under huge pressure to hand over the personal data of pro-European activists in Ukraine.

These experiences led to him forming Telegram, and eventually selling his stake in VK in 2014 and leaving Russia.

By 2017, he set up in Dubai, keeping at arm's length from tougher regulatory regimes in the European Union and the United States.

Durov has citizenship of the Caribbean island of Saint Kitts and Nevis as well as French nationality, which he picked up in 2021.

Legal troubles

French prosecutors accuse Telegram of failing to moderate content or collaborate with the authorities.

They have highlighted content involving fraud, drug trafficking, organized crime, glorification of terrorism and cyberbullying.

The firm has said it cannot be held responsible for what its users do—a defense long used by big tech platforms.

Several countries have tried to block Telegram in the past.

In 2018, Iran accused it of hosting violent opposition groups.

In the same year, Russia said it had failed to hand over encryption keys.

Last year, Brazil blocked it briefly for failing to provide data on neo-Nazi groups and Spain acted over intellectual property violations.

No profits yet

Telegram was fully funded by Durov until 2018, when it raised \$1.7 billion to launch its own cryptocurrency.

The crypto project collapsed after US regulators refused to approve it, and the company reimbursed most of the investment.

The [messaging service](#) began running ads in 2021 but insisted it would not use users' private data for targeting.

A premium subscription system followed in 2022.

Durov told the Financial Times his company was generating hundreds of millions in revenue and hoped to turn a profit soon.

He also did not rule out floating on the stock exchange.

Though he has repeatedly stated his mission is not about getting rich.

"For me everything in my life was about becoming free," he told Carlson, saying Telegram was about allowing others to express their liberty.

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