

## Telegram Becomes Free Speech Flashpoint After Founder's Arrest

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Telegram, founded in 2013 by the Russian **entrepreneur** Pavel Durov, has grown into one of the world's largest online communication tools and is central to everyday life in countries like Russia, Ukraine and India for messaging, getting independent news and exchanging views.

The company's growth — it now has more than 900 million users — has been driven partly by a commitment to free speech. Telegram's light oversight of what people say or do on the platform has helped people living under authoritarian governments communicate and organize. But it has also made the app a haven for disinformation, far-right extremism and other harmful content.

Many were shocked when reports emerged on Saturday across French news media that Mr. Durov had been arrested in France on charges related to the spread of illicit material on the service. A French judicial official, speaking on condition of anonymity to discuss an ongoing investigation, confirmed on Sunday evening that Mr. Durov was in police custody. As word spread online over the weekend, news of his **detention** became a flashpoint in a continuing debate about free speech on the internet.

Elon Musk, the owner of X, which has adopted a similarly hands-off approach to content moderation, posted “#FreePavel” on his X account. “It’s 2030 in Europe and you’re being executed for liking a meme,” he also said.

Leonid Volkov, formerly a top adviser to Aleksei A. Navalny, the Russian opposition leader who died in prison last year, wrote on Telegram that although the platform had become a useful tool for criminals, Mr. Durov should be released. “Durov is not an ‘accomplice’ to the crimes committed by Telegram users,” he said.

The reaction over the news of the arrest showed how concerns about free expression, censorship and government oversight of online content are rising at a time when **regulatory** scrutiny of speech on the internet around the world has ramped up. National governments, especially those in the European Union, have intensified pressure on companies to address disinformation, online extremism, child safety and the spread of illicit material.

Telegram has long been on the radar of law enforcement agencies around the world because terrorist organizations, drug sellers, weapons dealers and far-right extremist groups have used it for communicating, recruiting and organizing.

Mr. Durov, 39, was arrested at Le Bourget Airport near Paris after landing on a private plane from Azerbaijan, according to French news reports. The French judicial official said on Sunday evening that his time in custody had been extended. Under French law, the initial 24 hours spent in custody can be extended to up to 96 hours, depending on the seriousness of the criminal accusations.

Representatives of the French police and Interior Ministry declined to

comment.

In a statement on Telegram on Sunday, the company said, “Telegram **abides** by EU laws,” adding, “Telegram’s CEO Pavel Durov has nothing to hide.”

In an interview on Telegram, George Lobushkin, a former press secretary for Mr. Durov who remains close to him, wrote, “This is a monstrous attack on freedom of speech worldwide.”

The arrest of Mr. Durov risked intensifying tensions with Russia. The Russian Embassy in France said in a statement on Sunday that it had asked the French authorities for clarification on news of the arrest.

Vladislav Davankov, the deputy speaker of the State Duma, a chamber of Russia’s Parliament, called for Mr. Durov’s release. He said the arrest could be an effort to gain access to information held by Telegram and “cannot be allowed,” according to Meduza, an independent Russian news organization.

Mr. Durov, whose net worth was estimated by Bloomberg at more than \$9 billion, has largely avoided the kind of public **scrutiny** faced by top executives of other large online platforms, including Elon Musk of X, Mark Zuckerberg of Meta, Shou Chew of TikTok and Sundar Pichai of Google.

Mr. Durov’s arrest has little **precedent**. While the European Union and United States government have summoned and questioned leaders of other social media firms, rarely has a major tech leader been arrested over what takes place on such sites. In 2016, the Brazilian authorities arrested a senior Facebook executive after the company failed to turn over information from WhatsApp as part of a drug trafficking investigation.

Of particular interest after Mr. Durov’s reported detainment in France could be what information Telegram would decide to share, or withhold. The French authorities may try to force Telegram to share information with them on criminal channels that, for instance, are used to sell firearms or coordinate terrorist attacks. Such a move could test Telegram’s claim to its users that it strictly safeguards their information.

A Russian **national**, Mr. Durov left Russia in 2014 after he lost control of Vkontakte, the rival to Facebook in Russia. The year before, he had founded Telegram, selling it as an uncensored and secretive way to communicate. The company is now based in Dubai, United Arab Emirates, and Mr. Durov has citizenship in France and the U.A.E., according to Telegram.

Telegram works as a standard messaging app, like iMessage or WhatsApp, but also hosts channels and groups in which large numbers of people can broadcast ideas and communicate.

Telegram’s popularity is partly rooted in moves that it made to allow the hosting of huge chat groups of up to 200,000 people, at a time when other social media, like WhatsApp, were taking steps to cut back group sizes in efforts to combat disinformation. Other functions, like the sharing of large files, no limits on sharing links and bots that can interact with users within channels, have helped make it a powerful tool for social organization and coordination.

Those capabilities, combined with the app’s minimal **moderation**, made it a

haven for individuals and groups that were banned from other platforms like Twitter and Facebook.

Reports of Mr. Durov's arrest were immediately met with criticism by fans of the service as an example of governments trying to censor free speech on the internet. Mr. Durov has generally kept a low profile, not doing many media interviews. On his personal Telegram channel, he muses about various topics, including his ascetic lifestyle, the countries he travels to and, more recently, how as a sperm donor he now has more than 100 biological children. On Instagram, he occasionally posts photos of himself shirtless.

Although Mr. Durov portrays himself as a crusader for free speech, many security experts have said Telegram is not sufficiently encrypted. Disinformation analysts also say that, by taking a light touch with moderation, the app has become a major **vector** for the spread of terrorist propaganda and far-right extremism.

Mr. Durov has linked the creation of Telegram to a run-in he had with Russia's security services, who he said broke into his apartment in an effort to force him to take down opposition political material on Vkontakte. More recently, he abandoned plans to issue a cryptocurrency through Telegram after scrutiny from the U.S. Securities and Exchange Commission.

After he left Russia in 2014, Mr. Durov said he traveled to Berlin, San Francisco, London, Singapore and other cities before making Dubai the headquarters for Telegram. Russia at one point tried to ban Telegram, but the company's troubles appeared to ease after a top company executive appeared in 2020 on a tech panel with Russia's prime minister.

Tucker Carlson, the far-right talk show host who interviewed Mr. Durov this year, said the arrest was "a living warning to any platform owner who refuses to censor the truth at the behest of governments and intel agencies."

Write a 3-5 sentence summary of the article below.