

Franco-Russian billionaire Pavel Durov, founder of Telegram app, arrested in Paris

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On Saturday, French border guards and military police arrested 39-year-old Franco-Russian billionaire Pavel Durov, the founder of the Telegram encrypted messaging app, in transit at Le Bourget Airport in Paris. Durov was jailed as a flight risk and charged with 12 crimes involving narcotics trade, child pornography, organized crime and providing unauthorized cryptographic services.

French President Emmanuel Macron took to Twitter yesterday to defend the arrest, warning against “false information” on Durov’s arrest. He claimed, “The arrest of the president of Telegram on French soil took place as part of an ongoing judicial investigation. It is in no way a political decision. It is up to the judges to rule on the matter.”

In reality, the arrest and jailing of Durov is transparently politically motivated, reactionary and lacks any substantial legal foundation. It aims to assist the NATO powers in their war with Russia in Ukraine and pave the way for escalated attacks on democratic rights, including Internet privacy and freedom of information, in the countries where Telegram’s 900 million users are located. These include above all countries in the former Soviet Union, the Middle East and India.

In particular, officials of NATO governments and of the far-right Ukrainian regime have repeatedly called to ban the app, which is very popular in Ukraine, accusing it of being a conduit for “Russian propaganda” that cuts across their war against Russia.

Durov is a Russian citizen who left Russia in 2014 to live in Dubai and acquired French citizenship after coming into conflict with the Kremlin over his refusal to hand over information from the VKontakte social network to Russian state authorities. He was arrested on Saturday at Le Bourget Airport in the company of his

bodyguard and his assistant, Julia Vavilova, who were both left free.

The 12 charges he faces stem from an initial investigation secretly launched against Durov by the French Office on violence against minors (Ofmin). None of the charges target Durov’s own conduct but instead involve the argument that Durov is personally responsible for alleged criminal activity by others using the Telegram app. This concocted legal argument has led to what *Le Monde* confessed was a “world premiere” in terms of the arrest of executives of major social media.

Immediately after the arrest, a French police investigator gloated to TF1 news: “[Durov] screwed up tonight. We don’t know why. ... Was he just transiting through France? Anyway, now we have him in the bag.”

Another said Durov would not be allowed to leave jail even after the initial investigative detention ends tomorrow: “Pavel Durov will end up in provisional detention, that is certain. On his platform, he allowed people to commit an incalculable number of crimes and misdemeanors which he did not try to moderate or cooperate with us about.”

The coverage in both Russian and pro-NATO media makes clear, however, that the arrest is bound up with NATO’s prosecution of the war with Russia and attempts to limit popular opposition to the war, both in Ukraine and internationally.

Russian media are publicly worrying that the arrest and detention of Durov could have a devastating impact on the operations of Russian forces in Ukraine, who extensively use Telegram. “Telegram might become a tool of Nato, if Pavel Durov is forced to obey the French intelligence services,” *Moskovsky Komsomolets* declared. “Telegram chats contain a huge amount of

vitaly important, strategic information. ... If Telegram crashes, how is [our army] going to fight?”

University of Maastricht Professor Marielle Wijermars commented to France24: “Telegram is widely used in the army and the political establishment for communications; and it is evident that many Russian officials must fear that France will pressure Telegram’s boss to get access to their communications.”

Telegram has also emerged from the outset of the NATO-Russia war in Ukraine in 2022 as a source of information and footage of the war, unfiltered by NATO and Ukrainian media, notably on the massive losses of Ukrainian troops and NATO equipment. The availability of this information, refuting false official narratives of the Ukrainian army’s supposed victories against Russia, soon attracted the hostility of NATO governments and pro-NATO media.

“As the war in Ukraine rages, the messaging app Telegram has emerged as the go-to place for unfiltered live war updates,” US National Public Radio noted in 2022, complaining that it risked inciting opposition to the NATO war. “Telegram, which does little policing of its content, has also become a hub for Russian propaganda and misinformation. Many pro-Kremlin channels have become popular ...”

Particularly this year, amid mounting opposition in the Ukrainian population to the war, officials of the far-right regime in Kiev demanded that Telegram be silenced. Ukrainian officials did not ultimately dare take this step, since fully 72 percent of the Ukrainian population uses the app. However, they repeatedly made clear that they viewed it as a posing a critical internal political threat, particularly if Durov did not agree to censor Russian sources on Telegram.

Ukrainian military intelligence official Andriy Yusov told German state broadcaster Deutsche Welle (DW) that Telegram is a threat to “information and not only information security” of Ukraine. Ukrainian officials repeatedly complained that Telegram’s anonymity and privacy meant that their intelligence services, who are infamous for their brutal suppression of political dissent, could not identify and track down the identity of people posting materials they disliked.

Ukrainian parliamentarian Yaroslav Yurchyshyn told DW that he could support a ban on Telegram “if the cooperation with Telegram won’t work,” because “the

price of such holes in information security, which allow Russian propaganda to penetrate into Ukrainian information products easily, is very high in our country. A matter of life and death for our citizens.”

It is not concocted allegations of supposed complicity in child pornography, but the NATO powers’ war against Russian forces in Ukraine and their attempt to censor news of that war to limit opposition in Ukraine and in the NATO countries, that drove Durov’s arrest. The arrest targets not only opposition to war in Ukraine but also in the NATO imperialist countries. Macron’s call to send troops to Ukraine to wage war with Russia is also massively unpopular, facing nearly 90 percent opposition in both Western Europe and the United States.

French and NATO officials also intend for the arrest of a Russian billionaire to undermine support for the war and for Russian President Vladimir Putin’s regime in Russia’s ruling capitalist oligarchy that emerged from the Stalinist dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991. Recently, Ukraine invaded Russia near Kursk—signaling that, despite the NATO-backed Ukrainian regime’s military reversals, NATO intends to escalate the conflict and compel a Russian surrender.

By arresting Durov, France and its NATO imperialist allies are warning Russia’s corrupt ruling elites that their overseas assets and their lives will not be safe until they fall in line with NATO policy and its plans for the dismemberment and looting of Russia.

This makes clear the utterly reactionary political forces behind the arrest of Durov and the further assault on Internet freedoms that it is setting into motion.



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