

Telegram Boss Durov Charged, Banned From Leaving France

By [Sylvie Maligorne for AFP](#), [Guillaume Daudin for AFP](#) and [Stuart Williams for AFP](#)

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Screenshot

France on Wednesday charged Pavel Durov, the founder and chief of Telegram, with a litany of violations related to the messaging app and banned him from leaving the country while allowing the billionaire to walk free after four days under arrest.

Durov, 39, was charged on several counts of failing to curb extremist and illegal content on the popular messaging app following a hearing with investigating magistrates in Paris.

Russian-born Durov was arrested at Le Bourget airport outside Paris late Saturday and questioned in subsequent days under arrest by investigators.

He was granted conditional release against a bail of five million euros and on the condition he must report to a police station twice a week as well as remain in France, Paris prosecutor Laure Beccuau said in a statement.

The charges concern alleged crimes involving an organized group including "complicity in the administration of an online platform to enable an illicit transaction."

Durov has also been charged with refusing to share documents demanded by authorities as well as "dissemination in an organized group of images of minors in child pornography" as well as drug trafficking, fraud and money laundering.

His lawyer David-Olivier Kaminski said it was "absurd" to suggest Durov could be implicated in any crime committed on the app, adding: "Telegram complies in all respects with European rules concerning digital technology."

Separately, Durov is also being investigated on suspicion of "serious acts of violence" towards one of his children while he and an ex-partner, the boy's mother, were in Paris, a source said. She also filed another complaint against Durov in Switzerland last year.

'Not political'

The tech mogul founded Telegram as he was in the process of quitting his native Russia a decade ago. Its growth has been exponential, with the app now reporting more than 900 million users.

An enigmatic figure who rarely speaks in public, Durov is a citizen of Russia, France and the United Arab Emirates, where Telegram is based.

Forbes magazine estimates his current fortune at \$15.5 billion, though he proudly promotes the virtues of an ascetic life that includes ice baths and not drinking alcohol or coffee.

Numerous questions have been raised about the timing and circumstances of Durov's detention, with supporters seeing him as a freedom of speech champion and detractors as a menace who wilfully allowed Telegram to get out of control.

Le Monde newspaper reported Wednesday that Durov had met President Emmanuel Macron on several occasions prior to receiving French nationality in 2021, via a special procedure reserved for those deemed to have made a special contribution to France.

The Wall Street Journal added that at one lunch in 2018, Macron — who along with his team was in the past an avid user of Telegram — had suggested it should be headquartered in Paris, but Durov refused.

According to a source close to the case, confirming a story first published on the Politico news site, both Pavel Durov and his elder brother Nikolai, a lower-profile figure seen as the mathematical brain behind Telegram, have been wanted by France since March this year.

In a post on X to address what he called "false information" concerning the case, Macron said Durov's arrest was "in no way a political decision" and it was "up to the judges to rule."

In Moscow, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said the charges were very serious and thus needed "no less serious evidence."

Among those voicing support for Durov is fellow tech tycoon and chief executive of X, Elon

Musk, who has posted comments under the hashtag #FreePavel.

After the charges, Musk posted a meme on X of a surveillance camera attached to buildings inscribed with France's motto, "liberty, equality, fraternity."

'Near total absence'

Durov left Russia a decade ago as he was setting up Telegram amid an ownership squabble concerning his first project, the Russian social network VKontakte.

But his departure from Russia was reportedly not an abrupt exile: according to the Vazhnye Istorii news site, citing leaked border data, he visited the country more than 50 times between 2015 and 2021.

Telegram has positioned itself as a "neutral" alternative to US-owned platforms, which have been criticized for their commercial exploitation of users' personal data.

It has also played a key role since Russia's invasion of Ukraine, used actively by politicians and commentators on both sides of the war.

The Paris prosecutor said the French judicial authorities had been made aware of the "near total absence of a response" from Telegram to requests from the authorities and had first opened an investigation in February 2024.

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