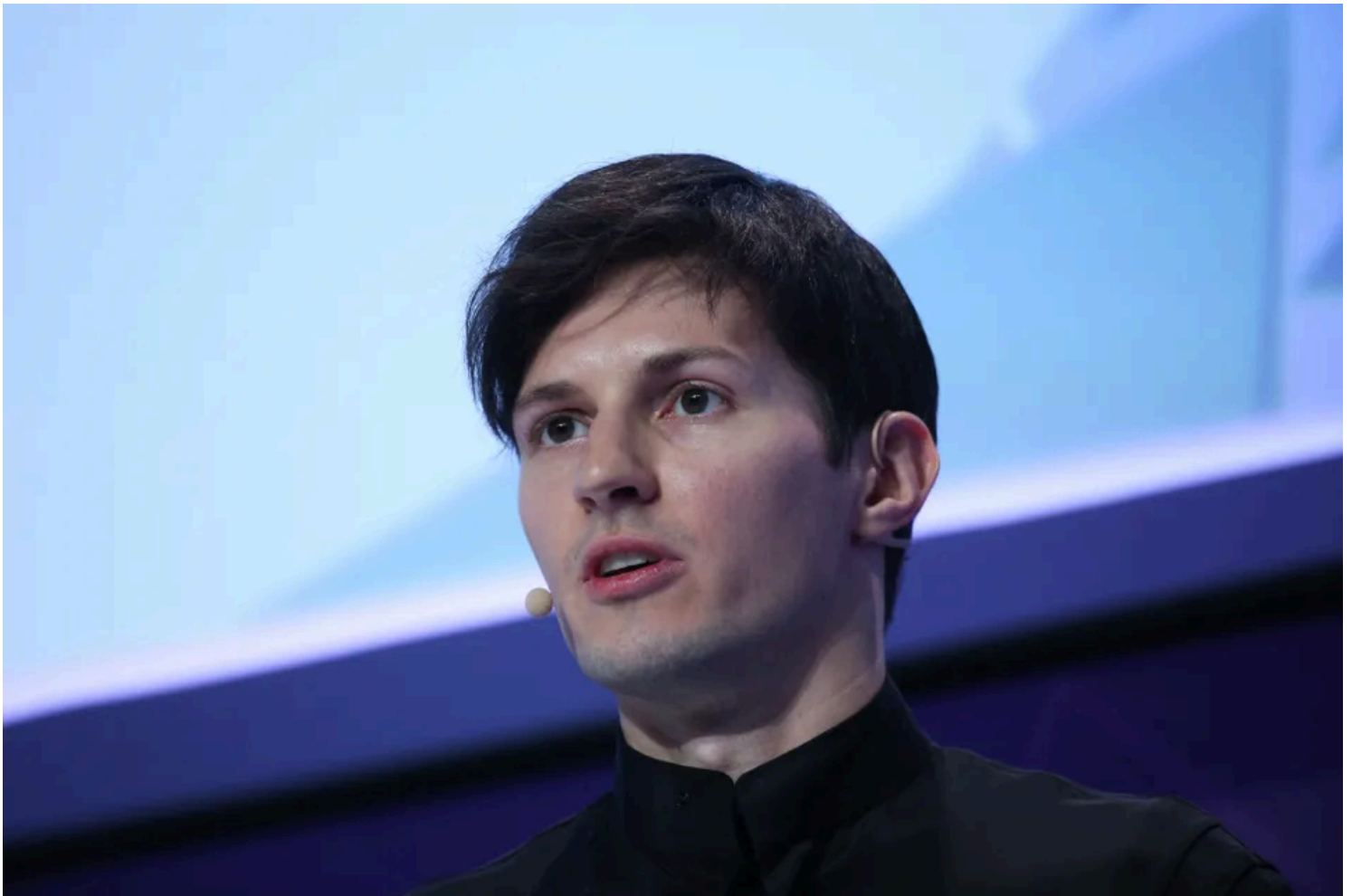


DARREN LOUCAIDES SECURITY AUG 25, 2024 6:01 PM

Pavel Durov's Arrest Leaves Telegram Hanging in the Balance

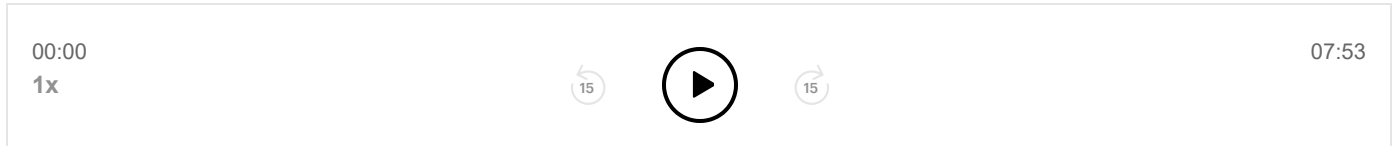
Durov has reportedly been detained in France over Telegram's alleged failure to adequately moderate illegal content on the messaging app. His arrest sparked backlash and left some associates asking, what now?



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AT AROUND 8 pm on Saturday evening in France, [Telegram](#) founder and CEO Pavel Durov was arrested as he exited his private jet at Le Bourget Airport, outside Paris. He was flying in from Azerbaijan. According to [TF1Info](#), the French outlet that first broke the news of his arrest, Durov was accompanied by a bodyguard and a woman. As best as anyone can tell, he spent the night in a French jail cell.

Durov's unexpected detainment came after an arrest warrant was issued by OFMIN, a new law enforcement office that began operations in November and is tasked with preventing violence against minors. Durov's arrest is reportedly part of a preliminary investigation into a startling array of alleged offenses—drug trafficking, cyberbullying, organized crime, and the promotion of terrorism—deemed to have been permitted on Telegram, which Durov [claimed in July](#) has 950 million users.

Investigators speaking to French media were unsure why Durov risked landing in the country given that he was on France's wanted persons list. According to an unnamed police source who spoke to [Reuters](#), investigators saw Durov's name on a passenger list ahead of his private jet's arrival.

Representatives from OFMIN declined to answer questions about the investigation and redirected WIRED to France's Ministry of Justice, which did not immediately respond. The Paris Prosecutor's Office said in an email that a full press release is expected to be published on Monday.

Durov is reportedly in the crosshairs of French authorities due to both a lack of moderation on Telegram and a lack of cooperation with police requests. Reuters reported that a cybersecurity gendarmerie unit and France's national antifraud

police unit were leading the investigation. The investigative judge is also specialized in organized crime.

Telegram did not respond to requests for comment from WIRED. John Hyman, Telegram's chief investment officer, declined to comment "currently." The Telegram News channel posted on Sunday evening that it was "absurd" to claim that an owner or its platform were responsible for abuses of that platform, noting that Durov has "nothing to hide" and travels frequently in Europe. "We're awaiting a prompt resolution of this situation."

Although France has yet to officially confirm the arrest, the Russian embassy in Paris was quick to accuse French authorities of not clarifying the reasons for Durov's detention or facilitating consular access. "As of today, the French authorities are, at the present time, not cooperating on this issue," the embassy said in a statement. "We are in contact with P. Durov's lawyer." Durov became a French citizen in 2021. Based in Dubai, Durov also has United Arab Emirates citizenship.

Questions over lack of moderation on Telegram have plagued the company for years. Islamist extremists and far-right activists have both organized on the platform, and at times used it to incite violence. Since Russia's invasion of Ukraine and the war in Gaza, Telegram has found itself at the heart of geopolitics—both as a vital source of information for people on the ground and a dangerous source of disinformation and sometimes graphic content. Durov always claims to be "neutral" and to have no political affiliations.

"Civil society has had a complicated relationship with Telegram over the years," says Natalia Krapiva, a lawyer at the digital rights group Access Now. "We have defended Telegram against attempts by authoritarian regimes to block and coerce the platform into providing encryption keys, but we have also been raising alarms about Telegram's lack of human rights policies, reliable channel of communication, and remedy for its users." Krapiva stresses that French authorities may try to force Durov to provide Telegram's encryption keys to decrypt private messages, "which Russia has already tried to do in the past."

The hashtag #FreePavel has been spreading online, including via X's CEO, Elon Musk, who has posted numerous times about Durov's arrest. "POV: It's 2030 in Europe and you're being executed for liking a meme," he wrote on Saturday night in

response to a post about the Telegram CEO's detention. "The need to protect free speech has never been more urgent," Robert F. Kennedy Jr., who on Friday endorsed Donald Trump for US president, wrote on X, where he referred to Telegram as "uncensored" and "encrypted."

While Telegram is frequently described as an encrypted messaging app, messages are not end-to-end encrypted by default, and senior executives previously told WIRED that they view the platform as a social network. This is largely due to Channels—a one-to-many broadcast feature that allows unlimited subscribers to view posts.

One of the posts that has gained the most traction on X was by right-wing former Fox News journalist Tucker Carlson, who alluded to the oft-repeated but debatable story that Durov left Russia because the government tried to take over his company. "But in the end, it wasn't Putin who arrested him for allowing the public to exercise free speech. It was a western country," Carlson wrote in a post that has so far been viewed at least 5.7 million times. Carlson also linked to an hourlong interview he did with Durov earlier this year, one of the first and only interviews the Telegram CEO has given in recent years.

In Durov's absence, Telegram's future looks uncertain to some: "I am in shock, and everyone close to Pavel feels the same," says Georgy Lobushkin, former head of PR at VK, a social network Durov cofounded, who is still in regular contact with Durov. "Nobody was prepared for this situation." Asked if he worried about Telegram's future and who could run the company in Durov's absence, Lobushkin says: "[I] worry a lot."

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TFIInfo, which first broke the news in France of Durov's arrest, reported that it was "beyond doubt" Durov would remain in custody during the investigation. "Pavel Durov will end up in pretrial detention, that's for sure," one unnamed investigator told reporters.

"No one in Telegram was prepared for such a scenario," says Anton Rozenberg, who worked with Durov from the early days of VK in 2007, before working for Telegram from 2016 to 2017. Rozenberg foresaw Durov acquiring the best legal defense money could buy. "But without him, the messenger may have huge problems with management, all crucial decisions, and even payments," he added, given Durov's personal involvement in running the company. Rozenberg saw no obvious replacement for Durov, who makes key decisions on nearly all matters at Telegram—financing, development strategies, product design, monetization, and content moderation policy.

For now, everything can be expected to continue as normal, says Elies Campo, who directed Telegram's growth, business, and partnerships from 2015 to 2021.

"Depending on how long this is going to last, it's like a government, right? There's this structure, there's self-momentum." Campo adds that the company's staff is small enough—around 60 employees—that the infrastructure won't be affected.

The challenge, Campo concedes, would be if Durov needs to be physically present to pay providers—something Rozenberg also flagged.

"As far as I know, Pavel did the payments," Campo says. "So what's going to happen when there needs to be some payments for infrastructure providers, or providers in terms of connectivity—and he's still under arrest?"

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