

NEWS DEFENSE

'Russians do everything via Telegram.' Pavel Durov's arrest upends Kremlin military comms.

Although Durov publicly distances himself from Moscow, his platform has become vital for Russian army coordination in Ukraine.

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Telegram is the primary vehicle for pro-war military bloggers and media — as well as millions of ordinary Russians. | Dan Kitwood/Getty Images

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BY VERONIKA MELKOZEROVA

KYIV — French authorities detained Pavel Durov on allegations that his Telegram social media platform was being used for child pornography, drug trafficking and organized crime — but the immediate freakout came from Russia.

That's because Telegram is widely used by the Russian military for battlefield communications thanks to problems with rolling out its own secure comms system. It's also the primary vehicle for pro-war military bloggers and media — as well as millions of ordinary Russians.

“They practically detained the head of communication of the Russian army,” Russian military blogger channel Povernutie na Z Voine said in a Telegram statement.

The blog site Dva Mayora said that Russian specialists are working on an alternative to Telegram, but that the Russian army's Main Communications Directorate has "not shown any real interest" in getting such a system to Russian troops. The site said Durov's arrest may actually speed up the development of an independent comms system.

Alarmed Russian policymakers are calling for Durov's release.

“[Durov’s] arrest may have political grounds and be a tool for gaining access to the personal information of Telegram users,” the Deputy Speaker of the Russian Duma Vladislav Davankov said in a Telegram statement. "This cannot be allowed. If the

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allowing access to the platform and any communications that users thought was encrypted.

French President Emmanuel Macron said Monday that the arrest of Durov was "in no way a political decision."

The Russian embassy has demanded that it get access to Durov, but the Kremlin has so far not issued a statement on the arrest.

"Before saying anything, we should wait for the situation to become clearer," said Kremlin spokesperson Dmitry Peskov.

However, officials and law enforcement agencies were instructed to clear all their communication from Telegram, the pro-Kremlin channel Baza reported.

"Everyone who is used to using the platform for sensitive conversations/conversations should delete those conversations right now and not do it again," Kremlin propagandist Margarita Simonyan said in a Telegram post. "Durov has been shut down to get the keys. And he's going to give them."

Telegram's dark side

Telegram's lack of moderation has made it a haven for illicit gun and drug trafficking in the West, and a tool of communication, recruitment of saboteurs and propaganda in the East, Nazar Tokar, head of Kremlingram, an investigative group of activists studying Telegram's security and its potential ties to the Kremlin, told POLITICO.

"Russians do everything via Telegram. They are recruiting agents and people for counter-activities. Today in Ukraine, a popular campaign is to recruit people who would burn Ukrainian military cars. And it is quite successful. They coordinate their military efforts using it," Tokar said.

Telegram denied accusations that it was allowing dangerous content, saying it abides by EU laws, including the Digital Services Act. It insisted its moderation meets industry standards and is constantly improving.

"It is absurd to claim that a platform or its owner is responsible for abuse of that platform. Almost a billion users globally use Telegram as a means of communication and as a source of vital information," Telegram said in a statement.

Tokar argues that Telegram has become so popular not just because it is convenient and fast, as well as having its own cryptocurrency and many free functions, but because it allows access to a seamy underworld of illicit activities.

“You just install the free app and get easy access to buying guns, drugs, explicit and violent content ... anything. It is all available simply by searching. And this is not so easily available anywhere in other messengers,” Tokar said.

Despite the platform being used by the Russian military, Telegram denies any ties to the Russian government, adding that it is “essential for freedom of speech.”

While the Kremlin has clamped down on most other social media platforms, Telegram has not been banned or limited, Tokar said. That's despite Durov saying he fled Russia in 2014 after the Kremlin demanded access to data on his previous social media company V Kontakte about Ukrainian pro-democracy protesters who took part in the country's 2014 revolution.

Ukraine's military largely uses the Signal platform for its communications, but most government agencies, including the president's office, have Telegram channels. It is also widely used for personal messages and blogs by Ukrainian soldiers and civilians.

Durov's arrest has revived a heated discussion in Ukraine about whether Kyiv should ban the platform, Tokar said.

But Telegram is much more important to Russia than to Ukraine.

“I think that the Russians are panicking because they are trying to predict possible outcomes for their essential communications tool and are trying to protect themselves and remove information from there. But everything will depend on the French government and the courts — whether they will imprison Durov, or come to an agreement and release him and he in return will provide them with some information — we do not know yet,” Tokar said.

CORRECTION: This article has been updated to correct Margarita Simonyan's function. She is a Kremlin propagandist.