

The case “Paul du Rove”: A struggle for freedom of opinion

Why “Telegram” has come under pressure

by Isabel Villalon*



Isabel Villalon.
(Picture ma)

Pavel Durov, arrested in Paris, is a naturalised Frenchman. His ‘telegram’ from Dubai became a disruptive factor for Emmanuel Macron. At Le Bourget private jet airport in Paris, the Russian-French-Emirati national Pavel Durov is arrested by

the French public prosecutor’s office for the “protection of the interests of minors” (OFIM).

Durov, who was granted French citizenship in an extraordinary express procedure in August 2021 without ever having resided in France (and francophonised his name to *Paul du Rove* as an April Fool’s joke that was taken seriously by the authorities), was initially courted by the West. After all, he had not only left Russia but had also figuratively given President *Putin’s* regime the finger. As the founder of the Russian messaging platform *Vkontakte* (VK), he refused to disclose the data of the user groups of Ukrainian Euro-Maidan activists to the Russian authorities. Another Russian freedom hero in exile?

Durov silver-plated his stake in VK by selling it to an oligarch with close ties to the Kremlin for 300 million US dollars in 2013. This gave Putin control of the most important messaging platform in Russia. Pavel Durov and his brother used the money to set up the globally recognised messaging platform *Telegram*, which was launched in the same year.

Telegram grew to an incredible 900 million users worldwide during the Covid-19 years, which were characterised by censorship and manipulation, as a liberal alternative to large US platforms. (My personal profile was irrevocably deleted twice by the operators of *Twitter* during this time).

The newly renamed Monsieur du Rove was invited to several meetings by the various French secret services to set up the famous “back door” for their espionage and surveillance activities on the platform. In other words, to secretly disclose the identity, geographical location and data of users. However, Paul du Rove didn’t think much of it and behaved like his alter ego Pavel Durov in Russia at the time – brilliant, slick and tough as nails. *La Liberté* above all else.

Dubai was chosen as Telegram’s headquarters, far away from European endeavours and new laws that force the operators of messaging platforms to moderate, i.e. censor, the content of messages published by users in accordance with the law. As a result, Telegram has increasingly become an immensely disruptive factor for the *Macron* government, both domestically and for the Atlantic alliance in the wider geostrategic context.

Participants in the major protests in France used Telegram to coordinate and set up the roadblocks that paralysed the country. President Macron repeatedly called on the National Assembly to cut off social networks and platforms on the internet to stop the protests.

However, France’s foreign policy was also jeopardised by Telegram. Its position of power in the Sahel region of Africa (Mali, Niger, Chad), France’s largest uranium-producing region, has been severely undermined by insurgent local generals and Russian mercenaries from *Wagner’s* troops. De facto, the Sahel region is currently a military and economic loss for France. Both the insurgent putschist warlords and the African corps of the Russian Wagner mercenaries use Telegram as a means of communication.

In the Ukraine conflict, the situation appears to be somewhat different, with both the Russian military and their Ukrainian opponents using the same service, although the Ukrainians are now supposed to use the *Signal* platform at the behest of the top.

The peak of Telegram freedoms was then reached with the Israeli Iranian cyber conflict.

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The Iranians recently managed a large-scale hacking operation. Thousands of documents from the Israeli Ministry of the Interior, the military administration and the Ministry of Health containing highly sensitive data were siphoned off by the Iranians and publicised on Telegram in chunks. The Israeli government intervened with the operator of Telegram without success.

Now the trap has been sprung. France's public prosecutor's office has accused Durov of complicity in terrorism, paedophilia, money laundering, drug trafficking and the illegal use of technology that cannot be viewed by the state. He faces a maximum sentence of twenty years.

Both the new owner of Twitter, the US-South African tech mogul *Elon Musk*, and the founder and operator of the *Rumble* platform, *Chris Pavlovski*, have vehemently spoken out in favour of Pavel Durov. However, the French judges have approved a request to extend his detention to 96 hours, which indicates a lengthy trial.

Meanwhile, in an act of apparent selflessness, the owner of the *Meta Group* (*Facebook*, *WhatsApp*, etc.), *Mark Zuckerberg*, publishes a letter to the US parliament. Zuckerberg regrets that the *Biden-Harris* government allowed itself to be pressurised during the Covid pandemic and prevented Covid-specific topics from being discussed on the platforms. The same applies to news about the discovery of a laptop containing compromising content belonging to the son of US President Biden.

This is an unprecedented stab in the back to the current US government and paves the way for a *Trump* presidency during the election campaign. However, it also shows the extent to

which social networks and platforms are now being infiltrated and coerced by political power.

Twitter, *Telegram*, *Rumble*, *Signal*, *Facebook*, *WhatsApp* and whatever they are all called are our replacement for an independent fourth estate that no longer exists. A fourth estate that, traditionally in democratic forms of government, was supposed to control and keep the political and economic elites in check in the service of the citizens. But the digitalisation of the press, the online business of the major newspapers, ultimately became its downfall.

Fewer and fewer readers want to pay for news that was initially put online for free in the hope of generating advertising revenue. The model did not work out, as the search engine companies now pocket most of the advertising revenue. This ultimately forces traditional publishers either into the hands of oligarchs or into the arms of subsidy-happy governments, who then control, manipulate or completely stop the flow of news for their benefit. Small, independent media like this one often fight an unequal battle as David against Goliath.

A phalanx of willing media lawyers is ready to throw itself into the fray for the next best Goliath and make horrendous claims for damages. Claims for damages for the slightest published mosquito poo that would send such a medium into bankruptcy within a very short time.

Therefore, we readers and authors must learn (me first) to read between the lines in future and to write between the lines in invisible mental ink. Welcome to the new age.

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