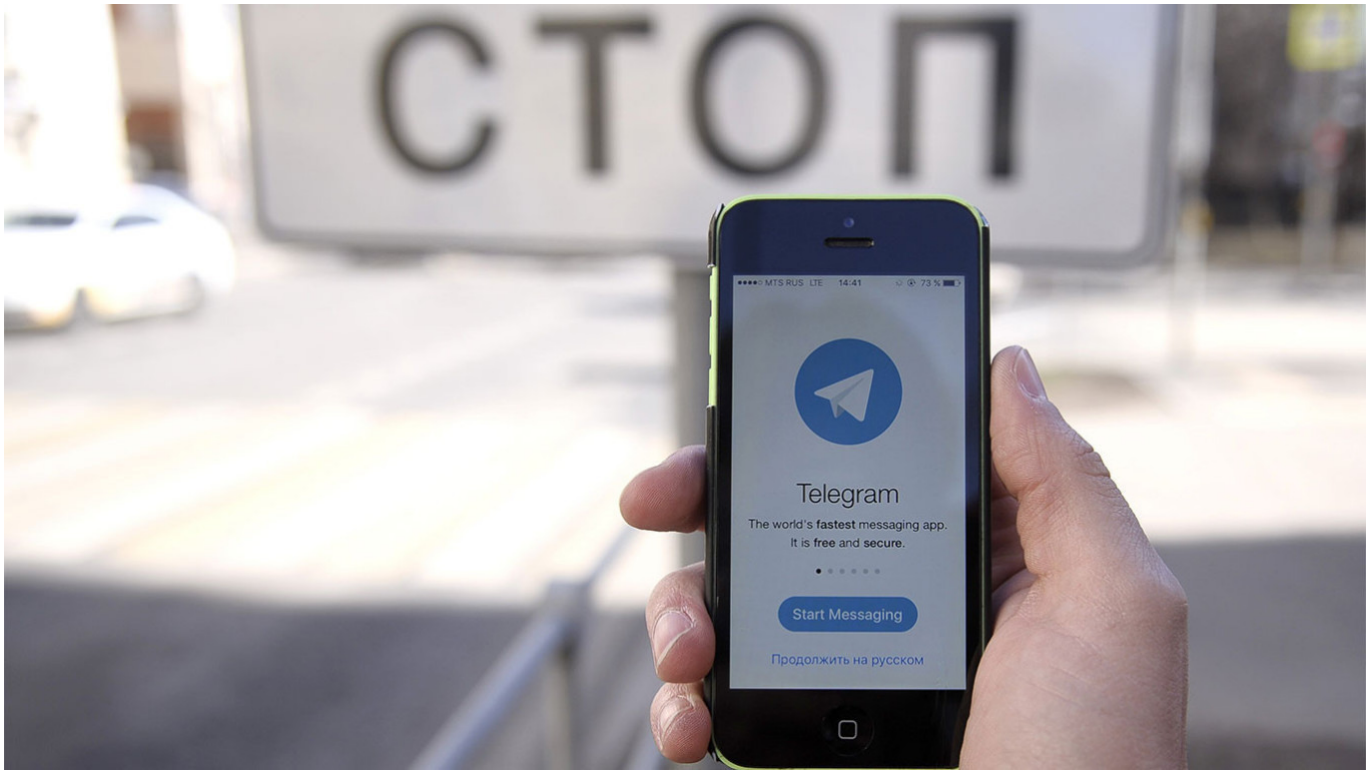
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Telegram Accused of Removing Popular News Channel at Russia's Request

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Alexandr Avilov / Moskva News Agency

The messaging app Telegram is facing censorship accusations after reportedly removing a popular Russian news channel whose alleged owners face criminal prosecution inside Russia.

VChK-OGPU, an anonymously run channel claiming to share insider information from Russia's security and law enforcement agencies, had 1.1 million subscribers when it was taken down overnight Monday.

On a backup Telegram channel, VChK-OGPU's owners wrote that the removal came at the request of the Russian Prosecutor General's Office, the Federal Security Service (FSB) and state media watchdog Roskomnadzor.

Telegram denied any involvement, saying the channel was "deleted by its owner, possibly as a result of unauthorized access," and that it was investigating the incident.

VChK-OGPU accused the company of lying and said that "our channel was deleted by

Telegram itself, and the account behind it was also blocked by Telegram."

The reported removal has raised alarm among anti-war Russians who see Telegram as one of the last uncensored platforms in the country, said Anastasia Burakova, an exiled lawyer and founder of the Russian emigre support group Kovcheg.

"If Telegram starts complying with Russian court orders... I don't even know where independent resources will go," Burakova said.

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VChK-OGPU's removal follows a December court ruling that fined Telegram 4 million rubles ($46,300) for failing to delete the news channel, along with 22 other channels.

Prosecutors sought their removal over an uncensored image of the Islamic State flag published during coverage of a deadly prison hostage crisis last August, according to the independent news site Mediazona.

The controversy also comes after the August arrest of Telegram's Russian-born founder Pavel Durov in France on charges of failing to curb extremist content.

Durov, a self-described libertarian and privacy advocate, has since pledged to meet French demands and was allowed to temporarily leave France for Dubai.

Russia's Justice Ministry designated VChK-OGPU a "foreign agent" in July 2024, claiming it was run by Alisher Abdullayev and Alexander Shvarev. The Interior Ministry has issued arrest warrants for both men.

Shvarev, a former journalist, was granted asylum in Latvia. Abdullayev is accused of defaming and extorting billionaire Alisher Usmanov in 2018.

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