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Telegram Founder Durov Slams Russia's Internet Censorship as a Boon for U.S. Spying

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Pavel Durov. **Giuseppe Cacace / AFP**

Pavel Durov, the billionaire founder of Telegram, on Friday criticized Russia's internet censorship and domestic tech policies, arguing they unwittingly play directly into U.S. cyber espionage.

"Censorship and internet blocks have only pushed Russia further away from 'digital sovereignty'," Durov wrote, referring to the country's years-long aim to isolate its web infrastructure and reduce reliance on foreign technology amid souring relations with the West.

Days after Apple removed Russia's state-backed messaging app Max from its App Store, Durov asserted that any domestic or foreign app running on iOS and Android was "exposed to targeted U.S. surveillance and censorship through backdoors and app stores."

“It’s just changing the packaging without changing the core reality. Nothing but Potemkin villages with a distinct flavor of corruption,” Durov wrote in a post on his Telegram channel.

Earlier this week, the FSB security service accused major web hosting services of helping Western intelligence agencies spy on high-ranking Russian officials through their iPhones.

Related article: Apple Removes Kremlin-Backed Messaging App Max From App Store

Durov, who lives in Dubai and holds UAE and French citizenship, also criticized Russian authorities for triggering a brain drain among tech workers who are capable of building a domestic smartphone operating system.

“The Russian official who broke the internet and threw the country back by decades under the guise of ‘digital sovereignty’ deserves a national security medal — from the U.S.,” Durov wrote.

Durov’s Telegram has become more difficult to use in Russia without a virtual private network, or VPN, as authorities slow download speeds and block video and voice calls on the platform.

Russian authorities argue the clampdown on messaging apps like Telegram and WhatsApp is based on security concerns as the country faces an increasing number of attacks blamed on Ukraine and its allies.

Telegram has dismissed accusations of enabling criminal and terrorist activity, calling the restrictions an attempt to force Russians to switch to Max, which critics, including Durov, say was created for mass surveillance and censorship.

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