

Telegram's Durov says French spy chief asked him to ban conservative Romanian voices

By Reuters

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Founder and CEO of Telegram Pavel Durov delivers a keynote speech during the Mobile World Congress in Barcelona, Spain February 23, 2016. REUTERS/Albert Gea/File Photo Purchase Licensing Rights

Summary

- Centrist European lawmakers wary of Romanian hard-right
- French spy agency, foreign ministry deny seeking to ban accounts
- Russian-born Durov being investigated in France
- Telegram says it will not block protesters' voices

PARIS, May 19 (Reuters) - Pavel Durov, the founder of the Telegram messaging app, has accused the head of France's foreign intelligence agency of asking him to ban Romanian conservative voices ahead of the country's elections, adding he refused the request.

Russian-born Durov is currently under [judicial supervision in France](#), holed up in Paris' glitzy Crillon hotel after being placed under formal investigation for [alleged organized crime on Telegram](#).

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He said it was there that Nicolas Lerner, who leads the DGSE foreign spy agency, approached him.

"This spring at the Salon des Batailles in the Hôtel de Crillon, Nicolas Lerner, head of French intelligence, asked me to ban conservative voices in Romania ahead of elections. I refused," Durov wrote on X late on Sunday.

"We didn't block protesters in Russia, Belarus, or Iran. We won't start doing it in Europe."

The centrist mayor of Bucharest, [Nicusor Dan](#), won Romania's presidential election on Sunday in a shock victory over George Simion, a hard-right, nationalist rival who had pledged to adopt a path inspired by U.S. President Donald Trump's politics.

The Romanian result was a [relief for EU leaders](#) in Brussels, where there is concern that popular anger with mainstream elites over migration and cost of living pressures could bolster support for far-right parties and erode unity on the continent over how to deal with Russia.

France's DGSE said in a statement its officials had indeed met with Durov various times over the years "to firmly remind him of his company's responsibilities, and his own personally, in preventing terrorist and child pornography threats."

However, the DGSE "vigorously refutes the allegations that requests to ban accounts related to any electoral process were made on these occasions," it said.

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Simon said it was not known whether the allegations were true, and if Durov had been warned, "Telegram was certainly not the only one approached," he told Reuters.

Durov's accusation was reposted on X by U.S. billionaire Elon Musk, one of various powerful figures on the U.S. right who have accused European nations of suppressing far-right voices.

"Wow," Musk wrote.

Durov had earlier on Sunday while polls were open said he had refused a request by a Western government to silence conservative voices ahead of the Romania run-off vote.

"Telegram will not restrict the freedoms of Romanian users or block their political channels," Durov said, adding an emoji of a baguette that implied it was France.

The French foreign ministry denied any such interference and called on all to "exercise responsibility and respect for Romanian democracy."

Romania's president-elect Dan said on Sunday Durov's comments constituted "unauthorized interference by a social media platform in the electoral process" and "a clear attempt to influence the outcome of the Romanian presidential election."

The arrest of Durov last year ignited a debate about free speech online. Musk, who criticized the arrest of Durov, is [also being probed](#) by French prosecutors over alleged algorithmic bias on X.

Musk has used X to personally support right-wing parties and causes in countries including Germany and Britain, leading to concerns about undue foreign interference.

Earlier this month, OpenMinds, a tech company focused on countering authoritarian influence, said it found that 24% of Romanian-language Telegram channels were spreading what it called [Kremlin-backed disinformation](#).

Telegram said at the time users receive only the content they explicitly subscribe to.

Reporting by Sudip Kar-Gupta and Juliette Jabkhiro in Paris, Luiza Ilie in Bucharest, editing by Gabriel Stargardter, Alexandra Hudson

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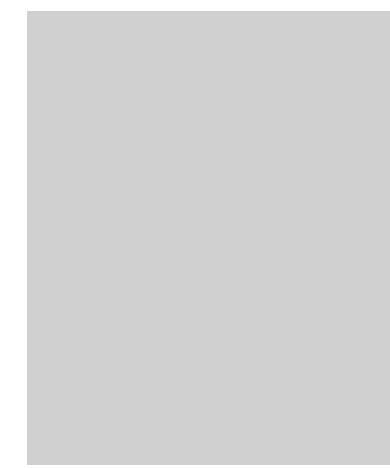
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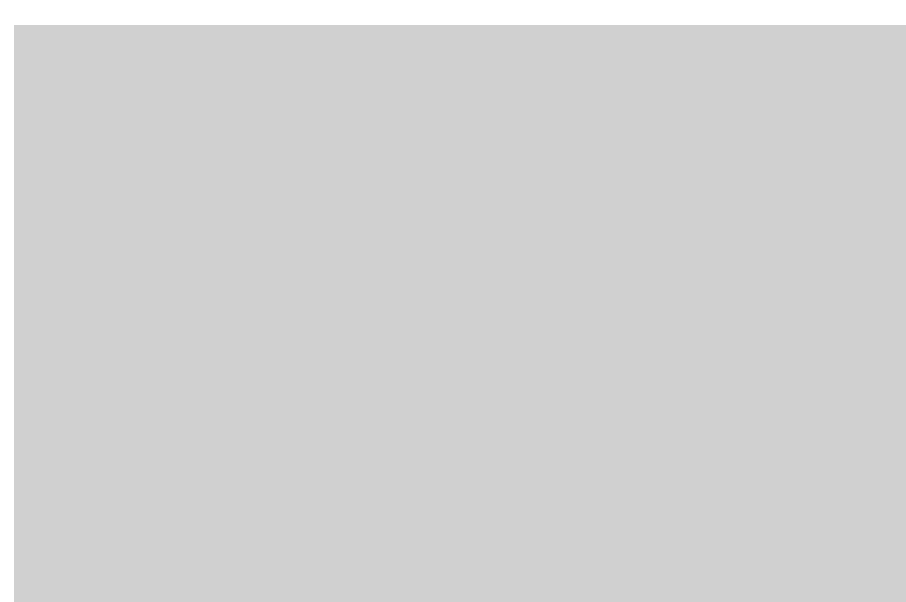


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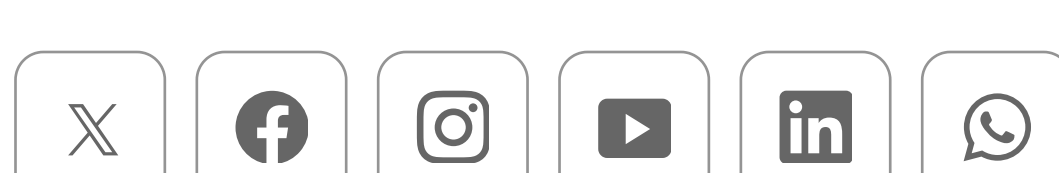
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