Crime, Punishment, and Russia's Original Social Network

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Pavel Durov, founder of the Russian social network VKontakte, was home alone in his apartment in St. Petersburg on a weekend when a contingent of men in camouflage uniforms knocked violently on his door. He crept to the peephole and looked at them, standing there, before moving quietly to the window, only to see more men in the same uniforms waiting outside his building. He didn't answer, even as they shouted thickly through the door. Then his phone began to ring, over and over, with calls from unfamiliar numbers.

Durov knew why they were there. Just days before, he'd received a letter in the mail from the Federal Security Service of the Russian Federation, or FSB, a reincarnation of the Soviet Union's KGB, demanding that he take down VKontakte pages being used to organize protests opposing the re-election of Vladimir Putin.

Videos by VICE

But rather than heed orders to block them from the internet, Durov had pushed back: the day after receiving the letter, he beefed up the site so that it could accommodate even more posts per page. That same day, he tweeted a picture of the letter, along with text that translates to "the official response to a request for special services blocking groups," and a photo of a dog in a hoodie with its tongue sticking out.

But the FSB wasn't laughing—when they showed up at Durov's home, they had guns. "The security of the building later told me that the police were waiting for the instruction to break the door," he told Motherboard. After an hour, they left.

It was the first real battle in a war Durov would ultimately lose—a war for Russian freedom of speech on social media that is coming to a head again thanks to VKontakte's American counterparts, Facebook and Twitter.

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VKontakte, now known as VK.com, is Russia's most popular social network by far with 67 million monthly users as of January 2015, according to LiveInternet, a third-party site that tracks web traffic. It outstrips both Facebook and Twitter in the country and has a more diverse, less urban audience than either of the US-based networks. Globally, VK is the rare independently-created social network that dominates the country it was made in, in spite of Facebook's dominance and reach elsewhere.

Durov is often compared to Mark Zuckerberg; both high-profile internet moguls, both born in 1984. He shies away from formal press attention, preferring unassuming black clothes and averting his eyes in photos. But when it comes to his interactions with the public, he's far less calculated than his American counterpart: when one of his vice presidents received a large bonus, the man told the team "that he didn't work for money, as many of us often said," Durov told Motherboard. According to Durov, his coworkers challenged the VP to give his money away, so he started throwing it out the window. Durov told him that wasn't the creative way to do it, and showed him how to fold the 5,000 ruble ($140) bank notes into paper airplanes, which floated down into the street.

A Russian news report after Durov was seen throwing paper airplanes made of rubles out a window.

Durov was inspired to create a social network when a friend who had studied in America showed him an early version of Facebook, according to the *New York Times*. VK launched in beta in September 2006, and was incorporated in 2007. Even today, it looks like an early version of Zuckerberg's design.

For the first few years, VK functioned almost like a Russian Spotify: it was the source for all kinds of media, including black-market movies and music. "Almost everything was illegal," said Katya Romanovskaya, one of the minds behind the @KermlinRussia Russian-language parody account.

Social networks are notorious for their idle entertainment potential, but at the other end of the spectrum, political activists use them to disseminate rhetoric, news, and calls to action. When Putin announced his intent to run for president again in late 2011, opposition groups began to organize on VK, trading news, information, and, most threateningly to Putin's party, organizing public real-life protests.

On December 8, 2011, opposition leader Alexei Navalny, who was the admin of a protest event page on VK with more than 100,000 subscribers, wrote on his LiveJournal that VK had automatically locked the page due to the accelerating rate of activity. Durov came to the rescue. "For the sake of our group, Vkontakte changed their algorithms," Navalny wrote. He also posted a conversation with Durov where Durov claimed the government was trying to get VKontakte to block protest pages.

By now, VK had earned the full attention of the FSB, which is tasked with domestic counter-intelligence and surveillance, not unlike the CIA or KGB.

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The visit from armed police only strengthened Durov's defiance. That same day, he announced on his own VK page that the site had made several updates to the way groups and meetings worked to make them more visible and accessible to users. But he wrote on Twitter his move was not political: "I can not support any opposition, neither the authorities nor any party," he said. "VKontakte – 100% non-political organization."

Durov told Motherboard that VK's staff "treated Navalny and other activists exactly like the rest of our users, trying to provide the best service for them."

"If foreign sites continue to exist in a free field, and Russia begins to censor," Durov wrote, "VK could expect only a slow death."

He expanded this thought in an editorial with the Moscow news site Lenta.ru stating all the business reasons he could not go around giving opposition groups the banhammer: they would just find elsewhere to carry on their protests, driving them away from VK, making it a bad business move. “If foreign sites continue to exist in a free field, and Russia begins to censor,” Durov wrote, VK could “expect only a slow death.”

In seeming respect for his business principles, the Kremlin temporarily left the company alone, recalled Arseny Bobrovsky, another of @KermlinRussia’s authors.

But in early 2013, Durov’s troubles with the government started to pick up again. In March, the Russian news outlet Novaya Gazeta published what it claimed were a series of “hacked” emails between Durov and the Kremlin’s “chief ideologist” Vladislav Surkov, suggesting that VKontakte had been working with the FSB for years already.

“More people probably thought it was fake than not,” said Kevin Rothrock, editor-in-chief of RuNet Echo, an arm of the nonprofit blogging network for citizen journalism Global Voices Online. But it was part of the beginning of a public relations campaign against Durov, he said. On April 5, a car registered to VK vice president Ilya Perekopsky ran over the foot of a police officer. The driver fled the scene, but police claimed a week later it was Durov behind the wheel.

Durov at home in 2011. Photo courtesy Pavel Durov

On April 16, authorities staged a “raid” on the VK offices in Moscow, according to the *Moscow Times*. The given reason for barging into the offices was that it was “part of an inquiry into a hit-and-run collision.”

The next day, two of VK’s original investors, Vyacheslav Mirilashvili and Lev Leviyev, announced they were selling their collective 48-percent stake in the company to United Capital Partners, a private investment firm based in Moscow.

According to several sources, the investors wanted out because of a rift that had developed between themselves and Durov, though both men claimed no ill will publicly. The deal was orchestrated by Igor Sechin, described as Putin’s “right-hand man” in an op-ed at the *New York Times*. According to Interfax, VK was valued at $2 billion.

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The police kept requesting Durov for questioning regarding the hit-and-run. In late April, he fled Russia for Buffalo, New York, where he began working on a new project that would eventually become the messaging service Telegram. The hit-and-run case the police had been so doggedly pursuing was dropped entirely.

By this time, 88 percent of the company was held by Kremlin allies, and 12 percent by Durov himself. Ilya Shcherbovich, a friend of Putin and president of UCP, made a TV appearance where he publicly stated his wishes that Durov remain in charge of the company. Durov said he had no intention of selling his stake.

Durov’s enthusiasm for the site continued: through the end of 2013 he made triumphant posts on his VK page about the site’s growth compared to that of other social networks, including Facebook and WhatsApp. He posted an infographic showing that in October 2013, VK was the top Android app in Moscow.

100 percent of the site was now under financial control of Kremlin allies

In January 2014, Global Voices Online reported that the “Kremlin-connected” newspaper *Izvestia* circulated a rumor that Durov had resigned his post as head of VK, a claim that VK’s press secretary

denied. But just four days later, Durov confirmed he had sold his entire 12 percent stake to Ivan Tavrin of Megafon, a mobile operator whose second-largest shareholder was Alisher Usmanov, whose company bought the first large outside stake in VK back in 2011. “It became evident that the 12 percent stake didn’t give me any sensible voting power, but could be used to limit my freedom in critical situations,” Durov told Motherboard. This move closed the loop—100 percent of the site was now under financial control of Kremlin allies.

Though Durov had lost his financial investment, he remained at VK with the title “General Director” (the same as a CEO in the US) and redoubled his effort to stir up VK as a vector for activism. In February 2014, he circulated a video supporting the Ukrainian revolution on his own page, which now has over six million followers.

On April 1, he posted again, saying that he had resigned his position from the board of VK, claiming UCP was meddling too much in management and he had no “freedom” to run the company. Two days later, he claimed the resignation was an April Fools’ prank and attempted to withdraw the letter, but the shareholders said he didn’t follow the right rules for withdrawing. On April 22, Durov learned he had been fired.

Since then, VK’s leadership as a place for political activism has crumbled and even become unsafe. Those users have had to move on.

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Two months ago, Navalny—arguably Putin’s enemy number one these days—encouraged a Kremlin opposition group to use Facebook to organize a protest in Moscow for January 15. That was the day Navalny was set to receive his final sentence after years of tumbling through Russia’s byzantine legal system.

The protest page drew over 12,000 RSVPs. But around December 20, the page was suddenly blocked for users located in Russia. It was shut down by Facebook at the Russian government’s request, according to the Roskomnadzor, a federal body that oversees the internet on the Kremlin’s behalf.

Durov condemned Facebook for allegedly blocking the page, saying the company had “no guts or principles.”

Durov at the TechCrunch Disrupt conference in Berlin in 2013. Image: TechCrunch/Wikimedia

The censorship would seem to be at odds with Facebook’s values. In September, Facebook COO Sheryl Sandberg touted the social network’s role in the Arab Spring revolutions, claiming that the social network is still being used to resist oppressive governments. “People who want to do it, can,” she said.

Yet the precedent set by VK suggests something else. The social network has been essentially lobotomized. Since Durov’s ouster, the media sharing and political content has disappeared (meanwhile, violent homophobia surged). Most of the content shared on VK is sympathetic to the Kremlin, Rothrock said.

Facebook and Twitter are probably just one refused takedown request away from being blocked in Russia entirely, free speech advocates say, which presents a difficult choice for those social networks. According to a report Twitter released in February, the company received 91 takedown requests in the last six months. Twitter complied with 12 requests, but said that many of them were “attempts to suppress non-violent demonstrations,” and Twitter would not deny “several requests to silence popular critics of the Russian government and other demands to limit speech.”

Twitter is feistier about free speech, less likely to comply with vague governmental orders, and more transparent when it does. (Facebook, Twitter, and VK declined to comment for this story.) Facebook has publicly struggled to mediate how its users talk to each other—first hate speech was overwhelmingly protected, and then condemned. But when a government steps in with a "legal" order, its actions in other countries suggests Facebook complies as quietly and quickly as possible, taking the small loss in traffic from activists to avoid being kicked out of an entire country.

But if VK continues to be instructive, Facebook and Twitter might want to know that Durov has no regrets over cutting ties. "I am very happy that my life/career in Russia is over," Durov told Motherboard.

Though he sold off his last financial grip on the company under political duress and had to say goodbye to a massive company he founded, the timing turned out to be right: "the Russian internet market crashed dramatically after that. In a way, I am grateful for shareholders and/or political forces that caused me to sell my stake," he said. "I feel happier… running a service for a global audience." A global audience that, per the Kremlin's interests, may soon exclude Russia.

Lead image: Pavel Durov, in the apartment that was later visited by Russian authorities. Courtesy Pavel Durov