

'Russian Facebook' founder flees country after being pushed out (Update)

April 22 2014, by Anna Malpas, Anna Smolchenko



A picture taken in St. Petersburg on November 1, 2013, shows a view of a building where the social network VKontakte (In Touch) rents an office space

The maverick founder of Russia's top social network, Pavel Durov, said Tuesday he had fled the country after selling his share in the company under pressure from the security services.

Durov told US technology news website TechCrunch he was no longer in

Russia and had "no plans to go back" after social network VKontakte (In Touch) announced Monday that he had left the company.

On Monday the 29-year-old said the social network had effectively been taken over by Kremlin allies, including Igor Sechin, one of President Vladimir Putin's closest confidants.

Durov, who has been compared to Facebook's founder Mark Zuckerberg, claimed he was squeezed out of VKontakte after refusing to reveal the identities of users involved in organising pro-EU protests in Ukraine to security services.

"I'm out of Russia and have no plans to go back," he told TechCrunch.

"Unfortunately, the country is incompatible with the Internet business at the moment," he said, adding that he plans to create a new mobile social network.

VKontakte spokesman Georgy Lobushkin did not immediately respond to a request for comment.

With more than 100 million users concentrated in the ex-Soviet Union, VKontakte is Russia's most popular social network, far outstripping Facebook's presence in the country.

Durov, who founded the company after leaving university, wrote on his VKontakte page on Monday evening that he heard he was leaving the company from news reports.

"The shareholders weren't brave enough to say it directly and I find out about my mysterious dismissal from media," he wrote.

Durov had initially announced his resignation in a message on April 1

that many took for an April Fool's joke. He later posted a message on VKontakte saying he had not been serious.

But VKontakte said Monday that he had been formally dismissed after not officially retracting his March 21 resignation.

'A betrayal of trust'

Durov on Monday claimed the company was now being controlled by two close allies of Putin: Sechin, the chief executive of Russia's largest oil firm Rosneft, and billionaire Alisher Usmanov, who partly controls the VKontakte's majority shareholder Mail.ru group.

Durov had previously sold his majority stake in the company to Mail.ru, which now controls 52 percent.

The remaining 48 percent is owned by investment group United Capital Partners, which Durov has accused of being tied to the security services and gaining its share through a hostile takeover.

Durov's exit comes after he accused Russia's Federal Security Service this month of trying to force him to give up the identities of people running group pages of Ukrainian pro-EU protest last year.

He said he had refused to release the information as it would be a "betrayal of millions of residents of Ukraine who trusted us".

"Since December 2013, I have had no property, but I have something more important which is left: a clear conscience and my ideals, which I am ready to defend," he has said.

In March, the reclusive eccentric released a list of seven reasons to stay in Russia, including talented people, beautiful women, cultural riches

and low taxes.

Durov's departure comes after prominent economist Sergei Guriev last year fled Russia for Paris after claiming he too came under pressure from law enforcement agencies.

He said he could lose his freedom in a case linked to former Yukos chief Mikhail Khodorkovsky, who now lives in self-exile in Switzerland after being released from prison in December.

Durov's announcement came as opposition leader Alexei Navalny was found guilty on Tuesday of slandering a lawmaker in a move his supporters say could see the top Putin critic jailed.

"That's one more step to drive me into a corner," Navalny said outside the court.

The 37-year-old activist is already being held under house arrest while awaiting trial in a separate embezzlement case.

Last year he was given a suspended five-year sentence in another case over timber embezzlement.

Navalny's team says the latest guilty verdict could lead to a ruling turning his suspended sentence into a jail term.

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