

'Russian Zuckerberg' rules out return without reforms

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File picture taken in Russia's second city of 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 said Monday that he would not return to the country until a series of sweeping reforms is enacted.

Pavel Durov, the 29-year-old founder of VKontakte, fled the country last

week after a bitter dispute with a shareholder culminated in his departure from the company.

Durov—who is often compared to Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg—has claimed that the social network has effectively been taken over by Kremlin allies, and linked his loss of control to his refusal to reveal to Russia's security service the identities of those using the site to coordinate protests in Ukraine.

In a "farewell message", Durov said he was now working on a new mobile social network platform with a team in central Europe.

In the note, posted on his VKontakte page on Monday, he listed seven corruption-busting conditions he would need to see in place before returning to Russia, including elected judges and fully open courts.

He also called for simplified legislation, an end to "feudal throwbacks" such as Russians having separate internal passports, and reforms to what he called the country's overly standardised school system.

Durov's departure from the company has been drawn-out and complicated, but started when he posted a message—which many had taken for an April Fool's joke—announcing his resignation a few weeks ago.

Although he later insisted he had withdrawn his resignation, he was ousted as chief executive after the company—citing a technicality—said he had not done so within the official one-month notice period.

Durov said he learnt he had been ousted in the media.

He had previously sold his majority stake in VKontakte to Mail.ru group, which now controls 52 percent of the company.

The remaining 48 percent is owned by investment group United Capital Partners (UCP), which Durov has accused of being tied to the security services and the chief of Rosneft, oil giant Igor Sechin.

UCP has rubbished the suggestion and denied having any links to Sechin and the Kremlin.

Vkontakte (VK or In Touch), says it has around 100 million active users in the former Soviet Union, and the site far outstrips Facebook in terms of popularity and influence in Russia.

According to a survey in January by TNS Web-Index, Russia has 52.7 million VK users compared to 25.4 million Facebook users.

The Izvestia daily reported Monday that Durov had received citizenship from the Caribbean nation of Saint Kitts and Nevis by donating \$250,000 to its sugar industry foundation, citing a source close to VK shareholders.

Izvestia also cited a source close to VK as saying Durov had a resident visa for the United Arab Emirates and had stayed at a Dubai hotel last week.

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