The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

VKontakte Ex-Spokesman Admits Cooperating With Kremlin

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April 06, 2013



A former spokesman for Russia's largest online social network, VKontakte, admitted on Friday that he had cooperated with the Kremlin to "defend his employer against unnecessary incursions."

The statement was posted on Vladislav Tsyplukhin's personal VKontakte profile amid mushrooming reports that the Russian government is increasing its grip on the Internet.

Another sign of this came on Friday, when Wikipedia's Russian edition announced that it had received a notice from the Federal Consumer Protection Service that the online encyclopedia had been included on the list of banned websites due to some of its articles containing instructions on drug use and suicide.

The agency said it would not block Wikipedia's main website if the banned content were removed. Stanislav Koslovsky, executive director of the Russian Wikipedia, told Itar-Tass that

the decision would be made by Wikipedia's community of authors, and that it was likely that the content would be edited but not removed.

In July last year, the Russian Wikipedia closed its website for a day in protest of the then-newly adopted legislation that introduced a blacklist of websites containing child pornography and instructions on drug use and committing suicide.

Wikipedia said at the time that the new law was an effort to create a system similar to the "Great Firewall of China."

Tsyplukhin, who served as VKontakte's press secretary during the streak of opposition rallies that followed the disputed 2011 State Duma elections, cited his own pro-Kremlin views as one of the reasons for his decision to cooperate with the government. He did not specify what the cooperation specifically consisted of.

On Friday, oppositional newspaper Novaya Gazeta published a report in which it included letters allegedly sent by Tsyplukhin to presidential administration officials with reports on how VKontakte encouraged users to promote pro-government trends on the Twitter microblogging service and post comments on oppositional blogs.

The report dubbed these groups of users as "Internet militia."

Earlier in March, Novaya Gazeta reported that the network, which currently has more than 200 million registered users, manipulated web content to counter opposition influence on the web.

In other letters, Tsyplukhin demonstrates how TJournal.ru, a website designed to analyze current trends on Twitter, could be used to monitor and influence what is being discussed.

The letters are addressed to the former head of the presidential administration's internal politics department, Konstantin Kostin, and other top Kremlin officials.

In the Novaya Gazeta article, Tsyplukhin denied any involvement with TJournal and claimed he had never corresponded with any officials from the presidential administration.

Nevertheless, in his VKontakte statement, he confessed that he "lied in his comments to Novaya Gazeta" because he wanted to "preserve the project [TJournal] and its staff."

Dmitry Oreshkin, a prominent political analyst and founder of Mercator Analytical Group, said at a March 28 conference devoted to Internet censorship in Russia that the only way the government could control the web now was by evoking fear among its users.

"What the government is mostly afraid of is that the Internet will act as a bank of collective memory, where anyone can go and see what Putin was saying five years ago and compare it with what has happened since," he said.

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Original url:
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