

The Kremlin's Trolls Go West

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Russian authorities first set their sights on the Internet in the mid-2000s, but the selective approach to controlling it was not effective. The street protests in late 2011 and throughout 2012 were organized with the help of social networks and other online media resources.

Coming to power at the peak of the protest fervor, though, the team under Vyacheslav Volodin, the Kremlin's first deputy chief of staff, took a radically different approach to the Russian blogosphere and employed new media tools to manipulate public opinion.

According to sources close to the presidential administration, these tools were so effective at home that Volodin's team decided to apply them to U.S. and European audiences as well. Although the Western campaign is only beginning, results are already evident. Two weeks ago, the moderators for the website of The Guardian warned their readers that they were dealing with an "organized pro-Kremlin campaign" to place pro-Russian comments on the newspaper's website, using a practice called "trolling."

According to my near-Kremlin sources, many of the pro-Putin messages have been posted by Russian expats in Germany, India and Thailand. Hackers from Anonymous, a vigilante

activist network, hacked the e-mail account of one "trolling" group that is charged with running the campaign in the U.S. and gave me some of the information they discovered.

The organizers of this campaign likely studied the demographic structure of the main social networks in the U.S., the online behavior of its citizens, relevant hashtags on Twitter and groups supporting U.S. President Barack Obama.

Russia's "Internet trolling squad" made detailed studies of the such sites as The Blaze, The Huffington Post and Fox News, including their audiences, owners, official and actual editorial policies as well as their attitudes toward Russia and Obama. Screenshots show comments posted in English with serious grammatical errors.

A great number of false accounts will be created for the strategically important Huffington Post website. Hacked letters showed that "up to 100 accounts will be registered and promoted" to achieve the optimum result from the site's complex system that gives "top billing" to comments posted by users with the highest number of subscribers.

Separate sections of the information I received speak about the range of opportunities for working with Twitter, Facebook and various discussion forums. The plan is to "create accounts gradually and purposefully so that they are not all registered in one day."

But the team running the trolling program concluded that the task they face will not be easy because of suspicions from U.S. users. "It is obvious that the U.S. audience has a negative attitude toward these [pro-Russian] comments," they wrote. "In addition, Internet users suspect that these comments were written either for ideological reasons or for pay."

Now that's a bit of bad luck, isn't it?

Ilya Klishin is the editor-in-chief of the Dozhd television website. This comment appeared in Vedomosti.

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