The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Former Russian Troll Describes Night Shift as 'Bacchanalia'

October 27, 2017



Alan Baskayev / Screenshot Dozhd TV

The first employee of Russia's infamous troll factory to reveal his identity has emerged to describe how the agency riled social media users in the U.S. in the lead up to last year's presidential elections.

The St. Petersburg-based Internet Research Agency is thought to have launched a massive social media campaign to stoke racial and ideological tensions during the 2016 U.S. campaign.

In an interview with opposition-leaning television channel Dozhd TV Thursday, former troll Alan Baskayev lifted the curtain on everyday life at the agency.

"Like everyone, I needed the money," he says, adding that his monthly salary was 50,000 rubles ($860), well above the city's average.

"I decided it was an excellent bargain, considering that the conscience played no part in it at all."

Baskayev said he worked at the agency's "foreign department" between November 2014 and April 2015, a month after business outlet RBC's massive investigation said the troll farm's campaign began.

Oligarch restaurateur Yevgeny Prigozhin who reportedly owns the troll factory was "our guy who gives us money," Baskayev says, unable to pinpoint what his official position at the troll farm was.

Baskayev said his task was to enegage online forums that in one way or another involved politics. "You type 'politics' in the Google forum, the entire first page and possibly the second page is all yours. You could also type 'politics forum U.S.' and the first two pages are yours."

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He also described an Azerbaijani-born 27-year-old who RBC named as the head of the factory's American department as a "great guy" who was lenient toward him for minor workplace misconduct.

Dozhd TV cites three former troll farm staffers corroborating RBC's investigation that named the manager as Dzheykhun Aslanov, nicknamed "Jay Z."

"Jay was a really not bad manager: not the most competent in this field, well, frankly speaking, generally incompetent, but he had assistants," Baskayev told Dozhd TV.

Having since relocated to Thailand and speaking with Dozhd TV from there, Baskayev recounted the personas he took on during work hours.

"First you had to be a redneck from Kentucky, then you had to be some white guy from Minnesota who worked all his life, paid taxes and now lives in poverty; and in 15 minutes you have to write something in the slang of [African-]Americans from New York."

Even though the troll factory used proxy servers to hide its employees' location, Baskayev said his accounts were "blocked regularly." He said he maintained 20 user accounts from 20 cities on one forum because all but two of them would be banned.

The former troll dismissed fears of reprisals from the large-scale secret operation, at one point describing a night shift at the factory as a "Bacchanalia."

"We were engaged in the ugliest things that only 20-year-old very cheerful lads — who perfectly understand what amusing place they found themselves in — could do."

"It was real postmodernism. Postmodernism, Dadaism and Sur[realism]."

Original url:
https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2017/10/27/former-russian-troll-describes-night-shift-as-bacchanalia-a59398