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Russia Accused of Meddling in New Zealand Bird of the Year Vote

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The hoiho won New Zealand's bird of the year competition. **PxHere / Pixabay / MT**

Russian interference knows no bounds.

New Zealand is the latest in a series of countries to accuse Russia of tampering with a vote ... this time for bird of the year.

The hoiho, an endangered, antisocial yellow-eyed penguin, snatched the 2019 title Monday with an overwhelming victory over its other feathered competitors. Organizers observed "decent numbers of votes from Russia," leading to interference claims on social media that they were quick to shoot down.

"There could be a reasonable explanation for why we're getting those votes; it could be bird lovers from Russia getting in on the game," said Megan Hubscher, a spokesperson for the Forest and Bird conservation group that runs the vote.

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Following past cases of vote-rigging, Forest and Bird stepped up security measures, requiring users to verify their ballots by email.

"We've had a look at the IP address and done a data scan on all of the votes, and it looks pretty clean from our point of view," Hubscher told Radio New Zealand (RNZ).

Users from 92 countries cast online ballots, with Russians in fourth place among foreign voters, after Australians, Britons and Americans, according to The Guardian.

Hubscher told RNZ that only 193 out of 335 Russian votes ended up being counted in the final tally.

The New Zealand poll is not the only bird of the year vote to raise suspicion of fraud this week.

Guardian Australia said it detected and removed 4,000 automated votes for three species of bird. Russia was not directly implicated, but Twitter users suspected the country was responsible.

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