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Ex-Manager of Russia's 'Troll Factory' Sentenced to 10 Years in Prison

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Ilya Gorbunov. **@sotavisionmedia**

A Russian media manager who used to run the late mercenary leader Yevgeny Prigozhin's media group, including the infamous "troll factory," was sentenced on Friday to 10 years in prison on extortion and drug charges.

Ilya Gorbunov, who oversaw the Patriot Media Group from 2019 until mid-2023, was arrested last June on suspicion of demanding money from a former colleague.

Patriot Media Group was shuttered following Prigozhin's failed mutiny against Russia's military leadership in June 2023. Prigozhin and several top aides were killed in a plane crash in August of that year, while Gorbunov briefly vanished from public view.

Prigozhin's "troll factory," officially known as the Internet Research Agency (IRA), gained international notoriety after being accused by U.S. intelligence agencies of interfering in the 2016 presidential election.

The IRA was said to have orchestrated a vast online campaign to sow division and influence voters through fake accounts and disinformation on major social media platforms. Prigozhin, once dubbed "Putin's chef," later admitted to funding the operation after years of denials.

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St. Petersburg investigators said Gorbunov had demanded between 10 million and 20 million rubles ($127,000–$254,000) from another media manager linked to Prigozhin in exchange for favorable coverage during an election campaign for local office.

Gorbunov denied wrongdoing, claiming he was framed by law enforcement after offering to assist ex-colleague Alexander Malkevich with his election campaign.

St. Petersburg's Petrogradsky District Court on Friday found Gorbunov guilty of extortion and drug trafficking. The drug charges stem from cannabis remnants that police said they found during a search of his apartment.

Gorbunov was sentenced to 10 years in a maximum-security prison and fined 500,000 rubles ($6,300).

"Be careful, colleagues, this can happen to anyone," he told reporters at the hearing.

Gorbunov previously said prison authorities had blocked his attempts to enlist in the Russian military and fight in Ukraine instead of standing trial.

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