

The notorious Kremlin-linked ‘troll farm’ and the Russians trying to take it down

By **David Filipov** October 8

SHUSHARY, Russia — She rode into a pitch-black truck stop on a scooter, stepped out of the pouring rain into a gas station cafe on the outskirts of St. Petersburg and recounted her quest to bring down Russia’s infamous “troll farm.”

Lyudmila Savchuk is one of a disparate handful of Russian journalists, activists and legal experts who have tried to shed light on the shadowy operation that has become a focal point of U.S. investigations into Kremlin meddling in the 2016 presidential election.

And like most people who challenge the established order in today’s Russia, Savchuk and the others are jousting against a nebulous entity with apparent Kremlin ties and evident protection from government and law-enforcement agencies. For them, this is a task that entails significant risks and little chance of success.

How much the trolls affected the outcome of the U.S. election is unclear. But their omnipresence is evident on Twitter and in the comments sections of publications like The Washington Post, where trolls can be found criticizing news stories, lambasting other posters and accusing one another of being trolls.

While the troll farm’s operations have stirred concerns about the reach of Kremlin propaganda across Europe and the United States, Savchuk and her cohorts are worried about their own country.

“Every online forum, every comment section on every local site, everywhere I look, most of the commenters are trolls,” Savchuk said in an interview. “It’s like half the country is trolls.”

Savchuk, a 36-year-old single mother of two and a former employee of the Internet Research Agency, [won a lawsuit](#) against the troll farm in 2016. Since then, she has detailed the operations of her former employer in numerous publications

and videos, served as a witness in another ex-troll's lawsuit, and sought to get other trolls to tell their stories. She calls it "bringing them into the light."

Savchuk has also been accused of being a shill for foreign interests, the usual counterattack the state-run media mounts against whistleblowers. She has become withdrawn; she switches off her phone when reporters call. She agreed to meet at the remote roadside cafe only after weeks of phone tag.

"I wanted to take down this factory of lies, and I still do," said Savchuk, who describes her two months at the agency as an undercover investigation. "But it takes a toll, and it isn't easy."

The lawyer who won her case agrees. Ivan Pavlov heads Team 29, a group that specializes in freedom of information cases.

"Social media was invented to promote free expression of ideas, and the trolls abuse it," he said. "We want to stop this abuse."

There is no law in Russia against anonymous posters flooding websites with misleading information or berating other posters. So, Pavlov said, he went after the troll farm "the way they got Al Capone," the Prohibition-era gangster in Chicago who was sent to prison for tax evasion.

When Savchuk was fired, he had his opening.

"We realized they pay people in cash. They don't pay taxes. When they fire someone, they don't pay severance," Pavlov said in an interview. "We wanted to drag them into an open court case. We were able to ask questions. They had to acknowledge what they do."

The court awarded Savchuk one ruble, less than 2 cents, in damages.

It was a symbolic victory, and a partial one. Savchuk had wanted prosecutors to check the company's books, its adherence to safety regulations, and whether employees use licensed software. But Pavlov said Team 29 never heard back from investigators.

"That was a sign of protection by the authorities," he said.

A clearer sign came with the lawsuit filed by Olga Maltseva, another former employee of the troll farm. A St. Petersburg district court ruled against her, although the defense never bothered to show up in court, Pavlov said. The city court last month upheld the lower court's verdict — although, once again, the troll farm did not send a lawyer.

Pavlov said he is not giving up.

"We're trying to remove the mask of anonymity, so that people know who is responsible for this activity, for the Internet attacks, for trolling," he said. "The system is created to protect them, but sometimes the system makes a mistake, and that's

where we have to be ready.”

Russian media reports have linked the organization to the name of Yevgeny Prigozhin, a St. Petersburg restaurateur known as Russian President Vladimir Putin’s caterer and favorite chef. In 2015, the New York Times Magazine reported that social media accounts linked to the Internet Research Agency had launched campaigns in the United States.

Meanwhile, the company has changed its name to Teka, Pavlov said. It also has moved its legal headquarters, although the trolling operation remains in a large gray building north of the St. Petersburg city center, near the head of the Gulf of Finland. There, young people work 12-hour shifts and make between \$800 and \$1,000 a month, “an attractive wage for former students and young people,” Pavlov said. It is impossible to get inside the building, and there are multiple entrances, making it hard to tell who is a troll and who is not.

Residents who live nearby say they have no idea that the troll farm exists, although protesters have tried to expose it. Last week, a few dozen protesters rallied at the entrance, throwing coins at the building while chanting, “Trolls, come out!” and “Shame on you, trolls!”

Police warned the protesters, but made no arrests. In the war on trolls, this was a victory.

“The goal of this action is to show to the Kremlin bots that they won’t be able to escape unpunished,” one of the activists, Diana Retinskaya, wrote on Facebook. “They still have time to stop and not to disgrace this country.”

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