

Jessikka Aro, **Putin's Trolls: On the Frontlines of Russia's Information War Against the World**. New York: Ig Publishing, 2022. 375 pages. ISBN 978-1632461292

Russian information warfare is being critically examined more and more in both journalistic and academic circles after Russia's aggression against Ukraine in 2014. Now the focal point is moving to the very heart of the issue. Western intelligence services regularly report that Russia is actively seeking to manipulate the public opinion abroad using a variety of state resources, including Kremlin-financed media outlets like *RT* and *Sputnik*. The Kremlin directly hires social media professionals to produce hoaxes and spread disinformation that favors the Russian government. Therefore, many investigative journalists are attempting to reveal and describe the structures of Russia's disinformation machine, which are capable of affecting major political events and people's lives within hours. The latest publication covering this topic is *Putin's Trolls*, a book written by Finnish investigative journalist Jessikka Aro.

The nerve center of Russia's disinformation machine is the Internet Research Agency, a company located in St. Petersburg. The Agency hires professional internet trolls to fight online for Russia's interests. In 2013, two journalists from the independent Russian newspaper *Novaya Gazeta* and the St. Petersburg local paper *Moi Raion* succeeded in uncovering the practices of this "troll factory" and describing how it functions. Since then, many journalists have attempted to penetrate the Agency to reveal one of the Kremlin's strongest tools in its subversion against the West.

In 2014, Jessikka Aro, an investigative journalist working for Yleisradio, Finland's public service broadcaster, followed this path. She was determined to investigate the Russian disinformation that was increasingly being disseminated in Finland. Aro was one of the first investigative journalists to systematically describe the "troll factories" that produce pro-Kremlin media content abroad. She began to work on an article that focused on the Kremlin's propaganda tools in Finland. Its publication led to a major reversal in Aro's life. She has become the number one target of the pro-Kremlin troll army in Finland. Aro says that the massive smear campaign conducted against her is perceived as "extraordinary" by many security experts. The campaign aimed to force Aro to the point of mental exhaustion in order to make sure that she would never investigate the topic again. Aro eventually left Finland in 2017. Despite the pressure she was under from the pro-Kremlin internet trolls and their conspirators, her depiction of St. Petersburg troll factory has received acclaim. In 2016, Aro won the Bonnier Grand Journalist Prize. Subsequently, in 2019, she was nominated for the U.S. State Department's prestigious Women of Courage Award, which she did not receive, allegedly because of her criticism of former U.S. President Trump.

Aro's book *Putin's Trolls*, however, is not limited only to describing the networks of pro-Kremlin internet trolls and the phenomenon of the troll factory as such. In her book, Aro examines the functioning of the Kremlin disinformation machine in depth, touching upon its impact on her life. She does so based on her experience in the years following the publication of her article in 2014. She has constantly been exposed to psychological

pressure, violation of her private space, messages wishing her injury or rape, and death threats. Aro completes the picture of how lives can be affected by the coordinated action of internet trolls by presenting the cases of other individuals who became victims of such behavior.

The book is divided into seventeen chapters that give various examples that demonstrate the complexity of Kremlin's information warfare. *Putin's Trolls* is not an academic text, although it balances on the edge of being one. Aro does not pose a clear question for research, nor does she include a traditional introduction and conclusion as do most academic papers. Instead, she blends her introduction and conclusion into her story, using a personal tone. In any event, her goal remains clear to the reader: to precisely depict the complexity of the Kremlin's coordinated disinformation campaigns. She presents multiple examples of such campaigns and their sources, so that the reliability of the information she presents cannot be questioned.

The connecting feature of all the chapters of the book is Aro's desire to present the full variety of spheres in which the Kremlin's disinformation campaigns interfere. Here Aro focuses particularly on business, the work of journalists and researchers, and people's personal lives. She investigates the global impact of the Kremlin's malign influence and does not limit her book to Finland only.

As an example interference in business, Aro recounts the case of investor Bill Browder, who contacted Aro after being introduced to her work. The chapter on Browder elaborates how he, the founder of a successful company, Hermitage Capital Management, became the target of Russia's disinformation campaign. Browder's company operating in Russia was involved in uncovering the frauds and embezzlement practices in Russia of the early 2000s. Despite getting on well with Putin's regime at first, Browder was detained in 2005 while crossing the border into Russia. He was declared a threat to Russia's national security and his company in Russia was subjected to police raids. Browder hired a lawyer, Sergei Magnitsky, to start an investigation of the harassment. Magnitsky was eventually arrested, imprisoned, and tortured to death. In various interviews with Browder, Aro provides valuable insight into the Magnitsky case. Browder says his biggest goal is now to bring those responsible for Magnitsky's death to justice. The chapter also shows how the more Browder uncovers of the Kremlin's unlawful practices, the more he becomes the target of systematic information attacks.

Another theme of Aro's book is the story of the various journalists and researchers who became Kremlin targets because of their work. She presents the experience of her Norwegian colleague Thomas Nilsen, former editor-in-chief of the highly regarded *Independent Barents Observer*. This news website concentrates on the coastline of the Arctic Ocean, an area strategically important to Russia. Many of its readers are based in Russia. According to Aro and Nilsen this is the reason why the Russian Federal Security Service (FSB) took measures against the website and its editors. Starting with an FSB agent spying on the editors while they were interviewing their Russian sources, the Russian government attempted to end the activities of the website by accusing Norway itself of producing anti-Russian rhetoric. Another example is Swedish researcher Martin Kragh, who

became the target of pro-Kremlin media in Sweden for publishing an academic article analyzing the tools the Russian secret services use in Sweden. Since publishing the article, Kragh has been subjected to an organized campaign of defamation begun by a leading Swedish website, *Aftonbladet*, which is often accused of spreading disinformation. He has been the target of several cyberattacks. The massive campaign against Kragh became a political tool of the Swedish far right. Conspiracy theories about him were spread across the internet by pro-Kremlin websites. As a third example, Aro presents the experience of Serbian analyst Jelena Milić, the head of the Center for Euro-Atlantic Studies think tank in Beograd and a proponent of Serbia joining NATO. Like the others mentioned, Milić became a target of the pro-Kremlin media in Serbia and pro-Kremlin trolls inside and outside the country, whose campaign of slander almost destroyed her reputation. The disinformation campaign against her grew personal. Milić, as a woman, was cyberbullied for her style of clothing, accused of having breast surgery, and received messages wishing for her to be raped. Her sexual life was brought into the discussion as well.

The theme that connects all the chapters of the book is the destructive impact these information attacks have on people's lives. This is well shown by the example of a former Lithuanian diplomat, Renatas Juška, whose telephone calls were illegally wiretapped, edited, removed from their original context, and then published on YouTube by an unknown culprit. This affected not only Juška's professional career, but also his personal relationships with people who knew him. The threat posed by the Kremlin's disinformation machine to its targets' personal lives is also made clear in a chapter focusing on a Ukrainian citizen, Roman Burko, who has devoted his career to uncovering the tools and strategies of Russian hybrid warfare in Ukraine. To protect his family and those close to him, he must use an alias and never reveals his true identity.

Coming from a background of professional journalism, Aro provides the reader not only with her own story but those of others. Every chapter proves her point. By presenting her personal story very genuinely, she is not asking for sympathy. In the relatively large number of chapters in the book the author creates a mosaic of detailed examples of actions by the pro-Kremlin troll army and their consequences, which penetrate every aspect of their victims' public and personal life. Moreover, the non-technical language used in the book allows a wide range of readers to understand the information she presents. The systematic ordering of the book's chapters is intentional as well. The introduction in which the author presents herself sets the pattern for the whole book: after the author's personal experience, the testimony of other individuals who have experienced similar attacks by pro-Kremlin internet trolls follows.

Aro's presentation of her own story illustrates the destructive potential of a coordinated disinformation campaign. She has been continuously subjected to psychological pressure on social media platforms, receiving insults, abuse, stalking, and threats. The author also claims that at one point the Kremlin's campaign targeted some of her family members. Aro speaks frankly throughout the whole book, without being afraid to expose highly intimate topics. She is not afraid to share with the reader her desire to become a mother or her urge to cry in tense situations. In so doing, she proves just how cynical

and unscrupulous the actions of Russian state-sponsored internet trolls are. The conflict between the cynical trolls and Aro's personal life that is constantly under their attack provides the book with tangible drama.

As she presents the testimony of people who share her pain, Aro remains strictly factual, but still conveys the emotionality of the story. A good example is the chapter dedicated to former Lithuanian diplomat Juška. Such testimony is the key to the book's value. Each chapter not only examines a particular case, but also reveals the depth to which the Kremlin's malign activities abroad have sunk. In Browder's case, Aro reveals the close ties between the corrupt Russian elite and the systematic disinformation campaigns that culminated in Sergei Magnitsky's death. In the case of Serbian analyst Milić, Aro demonstrates the pattern followed by disinformation narratives. For exposing that pattern, both Milić and Aro have been denounced as "NATO agents" by pro-Kremlin trolls. Aro precisely depicts the tactics of the Kremlin's disinformation machine and its skillful use of legal loopholes to avoid criminal prosecution. The trolls' strategy is to balance their behavior on the brink of what would trigger prosecution (which even so is usually difficult to initiate). As the author proves, prosecutors are powerless to stop the trolls' slanderous campaigns. Aro also exposes the powerlessness, or perhaps the unwillingness, of big internet companies such as Facebook and Google, which run social media platforms and transmit online content, to effectively combat state-sponsored disinformation in cyberspace. The author claims that it is the tech giants that allow the internet trolls to operate by prioritizing profit and failing to regulate their social media platforms.

In her book, Aro has succeeded in providing a detailed examination not only of the Kremlin's disinformation machine but also a precise description of its impact on the lives of its targets. Furthermore, the book contains significant evidence that reveals the flaws in the national and international legal orders that should protect people. The data Aro presents will be valuable for further research. *Putin's Trolls* is highly relevant today and deserves the praise it has received from both the academic community and the community of security experts.

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