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## POLITICS

# Russian Trolls Tried to Torpedo Mitt Romney's Shot at Secretary of State

Online campaign targeted the ex-GOP nominee as Donald Trump considered him in late 2016



Donald Trump, then the president-elect, with Mitt Romney after their meeting at Trump International Golf Club in New Jersey in November 2016. PHOTO: DREW ANGERER/AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE/GETTY IMAGES

By *Rob Barry and Shelby Holliday*

March 8, 2018 5:30 a.m. ET

Weeks after Donald Trump was elected president, Russia-backed online “trolls” flooded social media to try to block Mitt Romney from securing a top job in the incoming administration, a Wall Street Journal analysis shows.

The operatives called the 2012 GOP presidential nominee, then a contender for secretary of state, a “two headed snake” and a “globalist puppet,” promoted a rally outside Trump Tower and spread a petition to block Mr. Romney’s appointment to the top diplomatic job, according to a review of now-deleted social-media posts.

The revelation comes alongside a new report, in the New Yorker, that alleges the Kremlin pressured then-President Elect Trump to consider a candidate more favorable to Russian interests. Mr. Trump ultimately appointed former Exxon Mobil Corp. chief Rex Tillerson, who has said he has a “very close relationship with” Russian President Vladimir Putin, to lead the department.

Mr. Romney is a Russia hawk, saying during the 2012 campaign that the country was the U.S.’s “No. 1 geopolitical foe.”

“It’s not surprising that the Russian troll operation tried to do whatever it could to prevent [Mr. Romney] from being secretary of state,” said Ryan Williams, a political strategist and former Romney spokesman.

The White House didn’t respond to requests for comment. The administration has denied any political coordination with Russia during the 2016 campaign, which is a focus of the special counsel investigation that has ensnared a number of Trump associates. Russia has denied having interfered in the election.

The Journal analysis, which included a review of now-deleted tweets as well as posts on Facebook and Instagram from accounts linked to a pro-Kremlin propaganda agency, showed the trolls' disdain for Mr. Romney was clear. Several of the most popular accounts slammed the former Massachusetts governor in late November and early December 2016, encouraging their tens of thousands of followers to take action.

The push came just as reports swirled that Mr. Romney could get the job, despite his frequent, harsh criticism of Mr. Trump during the 2016 campaign.

"No Romney for Secretary of State! #NeverRomney," wrote the Twitter account USA\_Gunslinger on Nov. 25 to its then more than 26,000 followers. Around that time, Trump senior adviser Kellyanne Conway said Mr. Romney had been "nothing but awful" to Mr. Trump during the campaign, and tweeted that she was getting a "deluge" of negative comments about him from Trump loyalists.

The Russian front accounts tried to do more than just spread messages on social media.

One group, "Being Patriotic," which earlier purchased pro-Trump advertisements on Facebook, encouraged people to gather outside Trump Tower in New York City and protest Mr. Romney's possible nomination, according to an event listing linked to the group.

"We did NOT fight this hard to get backstabbing Romney as Secretary of State! He will run it like the Clinton Foundation!" the event post said.

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The Being Patriotic account, which was booted from Facebook and other social-media platforms last fall, also used Instagram to bash Mr. Romney

and promote Rudy Giuliani for secretary of state, according to reposts of the images.

Facebook, which also owns Instagram, didn't respond to requests for comment. Twitter also didn't respond to requests for comment.

Several of the most prominent Russian-linked Twitter accounts urged people to sign a petition on the website change.org. "Romney is everything we voted against when we voted Trump to #DrainTheSwamp! Sign the petition & RT #NeverRomney," wrote TEN\_GOP, an account masquerading as the Tennessee GOP, to more than 50,000 followers on Nov. 30, 2016.

The allegations of Kremlin opposition to Mr. Romney surfaced in a New Yorker article about Christopher Steele, the former British spy who compiled a dossier of allegations the Trump campaign coordinated with Russian intelligence agencies to win the election.

According to the report, Mr. Steele created another, previously unreleased memo in late November 2016, which said the Kremlin "intervened to block" Mr. Trump's choice of Mr. Romney for secretary of state. The memo is attributed to a single source described as "a senior Russian official."

Mr. Steele didn't respond to requests for comment. When asked about the report that Moscow weighed in on Mr. Romney's appointment at a briefing Monday, White House press secretary Sarah Huckabee Sanders said: "I'm not aware of anything regarding that, and don't know that to be factual in any capacity at all."

Mr. Romney, who is now running for a Utah Senate seat, said he doesn't know why Mr. Trump didn't pick him.

"I don't know...why he chose to ask me to come in, or decided not to have me as his secretary of state," Mr. Romney said in a statement. "I do believe it's pretty clear that I'm not a fan of Vladimir Putin's and I wouldn't be surprised if he's not a fan of mine either."

Intelligence experts cautioned that the trolls' messages aren't proof of the Kremlin's preference.

"In many cases the underlying objective is to create confusion and conflict," said Sean Kanuck, the former head of cyber issues for the U.S. National Intelligence Council now with the International Institute for Strategic Studies. "I would expect the trolls to create uncertainty around whomever is the front runner."

By mid-December, Mr. Trump had changed course, naming Mr. Tillerson as his choice to lead the department. The oil executive rose to the top of Exxon Mobil partly by negotiating a project with the Russian president.

Most of the posts about Mr. Tillerson in the Journal's analysis were repetitions of news reports, though a scattering of Russian accounts voiced a positive opinion about the formerly "dark horse" candidate. "Trump to name Exxon Mobil CEO Rex Tillerson as Secretary of State! Good! #NeverRomney," wrote the Twitter account ELEVEN\_GOP on Dec. 10.

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