

Spying on Uncle Sam: Russia Accused of Orchestrating DNC Hack

Experts have “high confidence” that Russia was involved in hacking the U.S. Democratic Party’s National Committee

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Russia meddling in the U.S. presidential elections?

Computer hacking, international espionage and damaging leaks — what sounds like a Soviet-era fable might, in fact, have some truth to it.

On July 22, on the eve of the U.S. Democratic Party Convention, WikiLeaks released some 20,000 internal party e-mail from the Democratic National Committee (DNC). The most damaging ones revealed the committee had championed a rear-guard action against the challenger candidate Bernie Sanders in favor of eventual nominee Hillary Clinton.

Fallout was swift. DNC Chairwoman Debbie Wasserman Schultz resigned. The Clinton campaign then accused the Kremlin of being behind the leaks, echoing cybersecurity experts' claims that Russian hackers breached the DNC and Clinton Foundation systems in June. Her campaign manager said the leak was meant to play into her Republican opponent Donald Trump's hands.

The U.S. media has long connected Trump's campaign to the Kremlin, pointing to his pro-Putin advisers and Russian business ties. Could it be that Russia has decided to actively meddle in the U.S. presidential elections?

State-Level Capabilities

The evidence mounts. U.S. intelligence agencies told the White House that they have "high confidence" that the Russian government was involved in the hack, the New York Times reported July 26. President Barack Obama called it "possible," citing experts, but stopped short of a full-blown accusation.

As a country that has been suspected of similar behavior in the past, Russia's involvement is possible and even plausible, international affairs analyst Vladimir Frolov told The Moscow Times. After the initial hack was reported in June, three cybersecurity firms have concluded that a Russian trace is present in the leaked files.

The firm handling DNC's breach, Crowdstrike, reportedly has experience with the "Russian espionage groups" in question. The groups had "advanced methods consistent with state-level capabilities," and one of the two groups responsible had access to DNC servers for a year.

After Schultz's resignation, Julian Assange, the WikiLeaks founder and vocal critic of Clinton, told reporters that he had timed the leak to coincide with the convention. Assange, who has been living in self-imposed exile in the Ecuadorian Embassy in London for four years, has well-reported links to Russia — even hosting an interview show in 2012 for Russia Today, a Kremlin-sponsored propaganda outlet.

The DNC wasn't the only organization targeted. Around the same time, Russia was accused of hacking into the Clinton Foundation, the Clinton campaign and e-mail accounts of U.S. lobbyists, policy groups, law firms and consultants.

The Kremlin has denied the accusations, calling them "absurd." When initial reports came out, Putin's recently appointed Internet adviser, German Klimenko, suggested that someone "simply forgot the password."

Intelligence officials from various countries have previously accused Russia of breaching their systems, including a three-week string of cyber attacks in Estonia in 2007 and a 2015 hack into Germany's parliament. Both attacks disabled the countries' government websites and systems for days.

What's Russia Got to Gain?

If they are indeed behind the leaks, Russia might be following one of several possible objectives. One prominent explanation is an attempt to discredit Clinton for what is seen as a smear campaign against Putin. The Kremlin does not actually believe they can influence the U.S. election, analysts say, but they do see an opportunity for retaliation.

"The DNC is a secondary target," Frolov says. "Even if Russia didn't find anything to directly harm Clinton's chances, they found a good information war weapon, and they released it at the opportune moment."

A scandal is exactly what the Kremlin wants, says Dmitry Oreshkin. The political analyst sees the Soviet logic at play, describing a zero-sum game "where a point lost for the West is a point gained for Russia." Rather than calculatedly aiming at a particular election result, the leaks were meant to "conjure up feelings of chaos" in the United States, Oreshkin argued.

The Kremlin favors Trump over the more Russia-skeptic Clinton. A Trump presidency is seen as a "window of opportunity" because he has already spoken of restoring relations, Frolov said. The Russian media have painted him as a non-systemic candidate who will keep the United States out of others' affairs and pull back from NATO.

However, experts disagree on Russia's feelings toward Trump's erratic behavior. According to Frolov, Russian officials harbor feelings of apprehension about his inexperience and volatility. Oreshkin, meanwhile, sees Trump's unpredictability as a plus for Russia, a chance to increase feelings of chaos.

One of Trump's advisers told Bloomberg "he wouldn't be surprised" if the Russians were behind the WikiLeaks scandal, but his campaign chairman described the claims as "pure obfuscation."

The Trump-Russia Connection

It is not the first time that the media have focused on Trump's links to Russia.

Several of Trump's advisers are very sympathetic to the Kremlin, publications claim, and his campaign chairman Paul Manafort served as an adviser to Russian-backed former Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovich. Putin himself has been forthright in his praise of the Republican candidate.

Yet the connections are possibly overblown.

"Manafort advised Yanukovich on media, not policy," says Frolov. "Moscow exerted pressure on Yanukovich to get rid of him because he was seen as an undue U.S. influence."

According to the analyst, Trump's advisers are "freaks who spread freaky opinions."

"U.S. expats like [Trump's foreign policy adviser] Carter Page love Putin, but they don't do it for money, they enjoy it," he said.

Political analyst Maria Lipman also questioned claims of unsavory ties, saying that opponents were simply alarmed at his newfound popularity and looking for ways to discredit him. “It looks like desperation, frustration and weakness,” she says. “They are a mirror reflection of the Russian tactic of blaming outside sources for problems.”

The U.S. media is easily manipulated, says Vasily Gatov, a media analyst and senior fellow at USC Annenberg’s communication center. “As Russians blame Obama for everything, American media decided it should blame Putin for all sins, including the rise of Trump,” he said. “Putin may want to screw Hillary but he’s certainly not betting on Trump.”

A more pertinent threat to U.S. interests comes from Trump’s isolationist foreign policy. His populist voter base is pushing for a non-interventionist United States, which could undo alliances cultivated over decades.

Then it will be Trump who’s playing into the hands of Russia, and not the other way around.

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