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Russian Media Outlet Links Treason Case Against Top Cyber-Crime Fighters to American Election Hacking

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A wanted poster for Dmitry Dokuchaev sits on display during news conference at the Department of Justice in Washington / Andrew Harrer / Bloomberg

Russian interference in the U.S. presidential elections is at the heart of a secretive treason case against a former FSB official and three of his alleged accomplices arrested last year, a Russian news startup reports.

Sergei Mikhailov, the FSB's former head of cyber investigations, was detained on Dec. 5, 2016, together with three alleged accomplices — his colleague Dmitry Dokuchayev, former Kaspersky Lab employee Ruslan Stoyanov, and internet entrepreneur Georgy Fomchenkov.

The four men have been held in Moscow's high-security Lefortovo Prison on charges of committing treason. The mysterious case has been hidden from public view after being labeled a "state secret."

“The four men have been hidden away from everyone, to make sure they don’t give away any sensitive information,” the Bell outlet cited Ivan Pavlov, a lawyer for one of the defendants, as saying.

In an extensive investigation published on the one-year anniversary of the group's arrest, the Bell outlet cited two unidentified sources who said the move to arrest the men was ordered by the Russian military intelligence, the General Staff of the Armed Forces (GRU), in an internal power struggle over state funding.

An earlier report by Crowdstrike, a cybersecurity firm hired by the Democratic National Committee (DNC) to look into alleged Russian election meddling, said Hillary Clinton’s campaign and the DNC had been targeted by Russian hackers on two separate occasions.

The first attack, allegedly carried out by the FSB, went unnoticed until a second was carried out by the GRU — with the two agencies seemingly working independently of each other.

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The United States in December introduced sanctions against both the FSB and GRU for interference in the U.S. elections. But personal sanctions were only leveled against GRU head Igor Korobov and three of his deputies.

It was Mikhailov and his team who provided U.S. intelligence officials with information about the GRU’s attack, the Bell’s sources said.

The New York Times in January had already connected the arrest of Mikhailov and his team to the DNC hack, citing unidentified sources, but this is the first time Russian sources have linked the former FSB official with leaking information about the hack.

According to the Bell’s sources, the men are not officially being tried on charges of leaking information on the GRU’s alleged DNC hack. Russia has consistently denied all accusations of election meddling, so trying the men for passing on information on election meddling— even behind closed doors — would be a tacit admission of guilt, says the Bell.

Instead, the Bell’s sources say, they are being prosecuted for leaking information to the United States on the Russian founder of the Chronopay payment system, Pavel Vrublevsky, in a case that goes back to 2011.

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