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Britain Accuses Russia's GRU Military Intelligence of Global Cyber Attacks

By Reuters

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Tom Westbrook / Reuters

Britain accused Russian military intelligence on Thursday of directing a host of cyberattacks aimed at undermining Western democracies by sowing confusion in everything from sport to transport and the 2016 U.S. presidential election.

In a British assessment based on work by its National Cyber Security Center (NCSC), Russian military intelligence (GRU) was cast as a pernicious cyber aggressor which used a network of hackers to spread discord across the world.

GRU, Britain said, was almost certainly behind the BadRabbit and World Anti-Doping Agency attacks of 2017, the hack of the Democratic National Committee (DNC) in 2016 and the theft of emails from a U.K.-based TV station in 2015.

"The GRU's actions are reckless and indiscriminate: They try to undermine and interfere in

elections in other countries," said British Foreign Secretary Jeremy Hunt.

"Our message is clear — together with our allies, we will expose and respond to the GRU's attempts to undermine international stability," Hunt said. Britain believes the Russian government is responsible for the attacks.

Though less well known than the Soviet Union's once mighty KGB, Russia's military intelligence service played a major role in some of the biggest events of the past century, from the Cuban missile crisis to the annexation of Crimea.

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Though commonly known by the acronym GRU, which stands for the Main Intelligence Directorate, its name was formally changed in 2010 to the Main Directorate of the General Staff (or just GU). Its old acronym — GRU — is still more widely used.

It has agents across the globe and answers directly to the chief of the general staff and the Russian defense minister. The GRU does not comment publicly on its actions. Its structure, staff numbers and financing are Russian state secrets.

The GRU traces its history back to the times of Ivan the Terrible, though it was founded as the Registration Directorate in 1918 after the Bolshevik Revolution. Vladimir Lenin insisted on its independence from other secret services.

British Prime Minister Theresa May has said GRU officers used a nerve agent to try to kill former double agent Sergei Skripal, who was found unconscious in the English city of Salisbury in March. Russia has repeatedly denied the charges.

After the Skripal poisoning, the West agreed with Britain's assessment that Russian military intelligence was to blame and launched the biggest expulsion of Russian spies working under diplomatic cover since the height of the Cold War.

Russian President Vladimir Putin, himself a former KGB spy, said on Wednesday that Skripal, a GRU officer who betrayed dozens of agents to Britain's MI6 foreign spy service, was a "scumbag" who had betrayed Russia.

Britain said the GRU was associated with a host of hackers including APT 28, Fancy Bear, Sofacy, Pawnstorm, Sednit, CyberCaliphate, Cyber Berkut, Voodoo Bear and BlackEnergy Actors.

"This pattern of behavior demonstrates their desire to operate without regard to international law or established norms and to do so with a feeling of impunity and without consequences," Foreign Secretary Hunt said.

The United States sanctioned GRU officers including its chief, Igor Korobov, in 2016 and 2018 for attempted interference in the 2016 U.S. election and cyber attacks.

"Main Intelligence Directorate (GRU), a Russian military intelligence organization, knowingly engages in significant activities that undermine cybersecurity on behalf of the Russian government," the U.S. Treasury said in March.

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