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The Kremlin Sees Signs of Foreign Interference All Around

One lawmaker pointed to the dual citizenship of a rapper who performed at a Moscow vote protest as evidence of meddling.

By Evan Gershkovich

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Spaso House, the U.S. ambassador's residence in Moscow. **Vyacheslav Prokofyev / TASS**

During a recent session of the Federation Council, Russia's upper house of parliament, officials whipped themselves into a frenzy over a worrisome development: foreign powers trying to meddle in the country's elections.

The elections in question were for the Moscow City Duma, a toothless body with little or no ability to influence affairs in Russia's capital city, let alone the country at large. Nevertheless, one speaker warned, Russia is "undergoing an intervention."

"The interference in Russia's internal affairs is unfortunately not a one-off," agreed Andrei

Klimov, the council's deputy for foreign affairs, citing his committee's May findings that the United States was planning to meddle in the Sept. 8 vote. "An anti-Russian campaign has been launched in the West."

The session took place last Thursday against a backdrop of protests that have roiled Moscow over the past month, drawing some 50,000 people to the street on Saturday. At the heart of the discontent is the authorities' removal of opposition candidates from the ballot, even for a meaningless election.

As the protests have ballooned over the past few weeks, the authorities have put the blame for the dissatisfaction at the feet of foreign agents. Those citing interference include officials in the upper reaches of the Russian government, said political scientist Tatiana Stanovaya.

"The authorities have no doubts about this version of events," she said. "Putin believes this."

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On Tuesday afternoon, in the Kremlin's first comments on the protests that began on July 14, Vladimir Putin's spokesman Dmitry Peskov said the president does not see them rising to a level that would concern him, nor as anything out of the ordinary.

Concerns over foreign interference are nothing new for Putin. Following regime changes in neighboring Georgia and Ukraine in 2003 and 2004, his administration has been preoccupied with preventing a so-called color revolution at home.

And after protesters turned out in Moscow en masse against his rule in 2011-2012, the Kremlin cracked down hard on organizations that it deemed to be instruments of Western governments with the infamous "foreign agents" law. The bill, which required NGOs that receive financing from abroad to disclose the source, helped cripple civil society in the following years.

During this recent wave of protests, the authorities have once again targeted foreign organizations.

At the end of July, Russia's prosecutor general said the country would ban the Atlantic Council, a think-tank formerly run by the U.S. ambassador to Moscow, calling the organization a "security threat" without offering further details.

In recent days, the authorities have also accused YouTube, a U.S.-based company, of sending users push notifications to live streams of the protests.

They have also accused the U.S. Embassy in Moscow — which issued a security alert warning Americans not to walk near protest areas that it illustrated with a map on its website — of spreading information on unapproved rallies.

And they have accused Deutsche Welle of supporting the demonstrations on social media.

The German outlet has denied the claim, while a representative of Google, YouTube's parent

company, said the company is not commenting on the topic. Andrea Kalan, the U.S. Embassy spokesperson, said the embassy's security alert was aimed at "advising U.S. citizens to avoid the protest route."

Officials have also gone after opposition leader Alexei Navalny's Anti-Corruption Foundation, opening a criminal investigation into alleged money laundering, a move the politician's supporters say is politically motivated.

During the Aug. 8 Federation Council session, a former general of the Federal Security Services (FSB) and current member of the Foreign and Defense Policy Council, a body close to the presidential administration, said to expect "sensational findings," noting: "We all know where their money comes from."

He also tied the recent resignation of U.S. ambassador to Russia Jon Huntsman to that investigation, as well as the authorities' "successful" crackdown on the protests.

The speculation in the United States over Huntsman's resignation is that he plans to run for governor in his home state of Utah.

"If in years past officials talked about foreign interference mostly in the context of an information campaign or propaganda, now it's become real politics," said Stanovaya. "And it has also steadily moved from the margins into the mainstream."

"The battle against foreign interference can turn into a big, multi-faceted campaign with many different players who will fight against meddling because they have received signals from the top that this is what they should be doing," she added.

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Already, the authorities have summoned the deputy head of the U.S. Embassy and a senior German diplomat to discuss meddling. And on Monday, the State Duma, Russia's lower house of parliament, will gather for an extraordinary session to discuss forming a special committee on the question.

"Up until recently [Special Counsel Robert] Mueller was looking for a trace of Russian interference in the U.S. election," said senior lawmaker Sergei Mironov in calling for the session, "and everyone thought that was fine."

So far, however, officials have offered little in the way of hard evidence that a foreign power has actually interfered, despite appearing to be turning over every pebble in an effort to find it. Klimov, the Federation Council's deputy for foreign affairs, even pinpointed a performance at the latest rally by Russian rapper Oxxxymiron, who holds dual citizenship, as an example.

On Tuesday, the authorities were given additional ammunition from their counterparts across the Atlantic.

"I call on the Russian authorities to release political prisoners, cease arresting peaceful protestors, and allow opposition candidates to run for office without harassment," Steny

Hoyer, the majority leader of the U.S. House of Representatives, said in a statement. “Congress stands with those in Russia seeking democracy and a government free from rampant corruption.”

Within hours Russian lawmakers had jumped on the remarks.

Pointing to the statement as evidence, State Duma Deputy Leonid Slutsky said: “The United States continues to unceremoniously interfere in the internal affairs of our nation.”

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