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Germany Blames Russia for Cyberattack on Air Safety, Election Interference

By Jastinder Khera for AFP

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Passenger planes are parked at Frankfurt Airport. **dpa / TASS**

Germany on Friday accused Russia of a cyberattack targeting its air traffic control and spreading disinformation ahead of February's general election, charges dismissed by Russia as "absurd" and "baseless."

A German Foreign Ministry spokesman said security services had proof that hacker groups run by Russia's military intelligence service GRU were responsible for the attack and influence operations.

"Based on comprehensive analysis by the German intelligence services, we have been able to clearly identify the handwriting behind it and prove Moscow's responsibility," said the spokesman.

"We can now clearly attribute the cyberattack against German Air Safety in August 2024 to the

hacker collective APT28, also known as Fancy Bear," he told a regular press briefing.

"Our intelligence findings prove that the Russian military intelligence service GRU bears responsibility for this attack," added the spokesman.

He also said Russia had sought to influence February's parliamentary election, which was won by the conservatives of Chancellor Friedrich Merz, with the far-right AfD scoring its best-ever result in second place.

"Second, we can now state definitively that Russia, through the Storm 1516 campaign, sought to influence and destabilize the most recent federal election," he added at a press conference.

The spokesman said a GRU-supported Moscow think tank and other groups had spread artificially generated or deepfake images and other content, and that the goal was to divide society and "undermine trust in democratic institutions."

The Russian Embassy in Berlin said in a statement sent to AFP that it "categorically rejected" that Russia was behind any of the activity.

"The accusations of Russian state structures' involvement in these incidents and in the activities of hacker groups in general are baseless, unfounded and absurd," the statement said.

According to security sources, much of the material spread by the Storm 1516 campaign involved spurious claims about Merz and other prominent politicians such as former Foreign Ministry Annalena Baerbock and former Vice Chancellor Robert Habeck, both prominent Greens party members.

AFP's German Fact Check service debunked two of the other claims in the campaign aimed at subverting trust in elections; namely that the AfD had been left off ballots in the city of Leipzig and that votes for the party in Hamburg were destroyed before they could be counted.

'Pay a price'

The Foreign Ministry spokesman said Germany had "absolutely solid proof" that Russia was behind the operations but added that he could not go into detail because this would involve discussing the work of German intelligence services.

The head of the BfV domestic intelligence agency Sinan Selen said in a statement that "the 'Storm-1516' campaign shows in a very concrete way how our democratic order is being attacked."

"This disinformation ecosystem includes pro-Russian influencers with a wide reach, conspiracy theories and right-wing extremist circles," Selen said.

The German Foreign Ministry spokesman warned that Berlin would take "a series of countermeasures to make Russia pay a price for its hybrid actions, in close coordination with our European partners."

Germany would support "new individual sanctions against hybrid actors on a European

level," he said, without saying who they were.

He added that from January, EU countries would "monitor cross-border travel by Russian diplomats within the Schengen Area. The aim is to facilitate better information exchange and minimise intelligence risks."

Governments across Europe are on high alert over alleged Russian espionage, drone surveillance and sabotage activities, as well as cyberattacks and disinformation campaigns.

Germany has been Ukraine's second-biggest supplier of aid since Russia launched its 2022 full-scale invasion and has accused Moscow of being behind drone flights near several European airports in recent months.

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