



Theft of Trump files raises eyebrows

BY KATIE BO WILLIAMS - 06/14/16 06:07 PM EDT

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A hacking group affiliated with the Russian government has infiltrated the Democratic National Committee (DNC), stealing two files of opposition research on presumptive presidential nominee Donald Trump.

The hackers were highly skilled and able to bypass normal security protections. They lurked on the DNC's network for over a year in some cases, according to the security firm CrowdStrike, which is investigating the breach.

"Their tradecraft is superb, operational security second to none," said the firm's co-founder and chief technology officer, Dmitri Alperovitch. For security experts — and some lawmakers — the breach is merely one example of the kind of digital espionage Russian spies carry out every day.

"It should come as no surprise to anyone that political parties are high-profile targets for foreign intelligence gathering," Rep. Jim Langevin (D-R.I.) said in a statement.

But the theft of information on a presidential nominee — and in Trump, one who has directed praise at Russian President Vladimir Putin — is raising eyebrows.

Trump famously said it was a “great honor” to be complimented by Putin and has called him a “strong leader,” remarks critics have seized on to make the case that the New York tycoon is cozy with the Kremlin.

Some have speculated whether the Russian government could theoretically use its new insider knowledge of the DNC’s anti-Trump research to tip the Republican standard-bearer off to the party’s plan of attack.

“I can’t opine with any great thoughts, other than it sort of takes us back to Watergate,” Sen. Dianne Feinstein (D-Calif.) told reporters on Tuesday, referring to the scandal that began with a break-in of DNC headquarters by allies of then-President Nixon. She did not elaborate.

But security researchers largely think there’s nothing special about a Russian hack of the DNC’s Trump file. Alperovitch referred to the suggestion that the hack might be a pro-Trump effort as “conspiracy theories.”

Both political parties gather what’s called opposition research to help craft campaigns against a particular opponent, in some cases storing huge databases of potentially damning biographical information dating back decades.

That information can be enormously valuable to foreign intelligence services that want to understand how the political landscape in the U.S. might shift during an election season or under a new administration.

“It’s understandable that foreign intelligence services would be interested in that information,” DNC Chairwoman Debbie Wasserman Schultz said on MSNBC’s “Meet The Press Daily” Tuesday afternoon.

The hacking group, which CrowdStrike believes works for Russia’s military intelligence service, went straight for the DNC’s opposition files on Trump, Alperovitch told The Hill.

They were likely looking for one of two things, he said: insight into how U.S. foreign policy in relation to Russia might change under a President Trump or, more worryingly, information that Russia might be able to use as leverage against Trump should he be elected.

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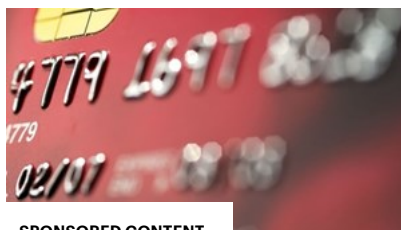
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Other researchers echo the assessment that the hack is workaday intelligence gathering.

“They’re looking for any kind of insight into how our positioning toward Russia is changing or will change as a result of the election. The biggest driver for intelligence collection is change — and nothing changes America’s posture like an election,” said John Hultquist, head of cyber espionage at the security firm FireEye.

In fact, the breach of the Trump files was one of two separate hacks on the DNC. Another group, backed by a different arm of the Russian government, also gained access to the DNC's networks and was able to read employee emails and internal chats.

CrowdStrike does not yet know how the hackers gained access to the DNC system but suspects that they used a spear-phishing campaign — fake emails sent to committee employees to trick them into downloading software that opens the door to hackers.

The DNC, which discovered the breach in April, has booted the intruders out of its systems. The committee "treated this like the serious incident it is," according a statement from Wasserman Schultz.

She insisted Tuesday that no donor or state party information was accessed in the breach.

But for some, the loss of the opposition files still represents a serious national security concern. Langevin said Tuesday that the theft of the information "could implicate our national security."

"I think you might say it could be expected, but still it's certainly not appreciated," Feinstein said.

Julian Hattem contributed.

This story was updated at 7:40 p.m.

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