NEWS

Russia previously tried to influence US elections, says spy chief

James R. Clapper did not accuse Russia of recently hacking into Democratic Party computers.

By John Ribeiro | Follow

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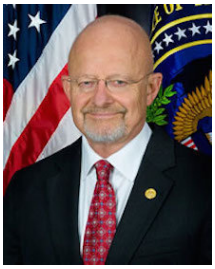
Russia has tried to influence U.S. elections since the 1960s during the Cold War, Director of National Intelligence James R. Clapper said Tuesday.

It's not clear whether the interference, which has a long history, aims to influence the outcome of the election or tries to sow seeds of doubt about the sanctity of the process, Clapper said in an interview with *The Washington Post*.



Director of National Intelligence James R. Clapper.

The remarks are the closest the U.S. spy chief has come to suggesting that Russia could be involved in recent hacks of Democratic Party organizations.

[For more, see Hacking the Election: Myths and Realities]

The Russians have been blamed by security experts and presidential candidate Hillary Clinton for recent hacks of Democratic Party organizations, including the Democratic National Committee, whose stolen emails were released by WikiLeaks. The whistleblowing site has declined to name its source for the emails, which suggested that committee officials had favored Clinton over rival U.S. Sen. Bernie Sanders.

There have also been reports of a hack of the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee and of an FBI investigation into a hack by foreign attackers of state election databases.

On Tuesday, Clapper did not, however, name the Russians as the culprits behind the recent hacks, a stand which he has avoided previously as well. At the Aspen Security Forum in July, Clapper said his agency was not ready to make a public call on the attribution of the hack.

But Clapper told the Post that "there's a tradition in Russia of interfering with elections, their own and others." He added that it shouldn't come as a big shock to people. "I think it's more dramatic maybe because now they have the cyber tools that they can bring to bear in the same effort," he said.

To make sure that hackers don't get to the electoral system, the Department of Homeland Security is working with state election officials, offering all assistance to the states on best practices on security, specially where there is any dependence on the Internet, Clapper said.

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The U.S. has an advantage in that its electoral system is decentralized among states and local officials. It would be "a monumental undertaking" to try to affect the election nationally, he said.

At the G20 summit in China earlier this month, President Barack Obama said the country has had problems of cyber intrusions by Russia and other countries, but he did not want it to mushroom into a “cycle of escalation,” similar to other arms races in the past. The president said he would rather have countries agree on norms of cyber behavior.

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John Ribeiro covers outsourcing and general technology breaking news from India for the IDG News Service.

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