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WASHINGTON AND THE WORLD

Seven Reasons the New Russian Hack Announcement Is a Big Deal

It might turn out to be bigger than the Trump tape. A Moscow-watcher explains what's really going on.

By JULIA IOFFE | October 08, 2016

It's been buried under news of Donald Trump bragging about his ability to grab women by their genitals, but Friday afternoon's news dump included a stunning declaration by the Department of Homeland Security: the first direct accusation from the Obama administration that Russia is trying to interfere with our elections.

"The U.S. Intelligence Community is confident that the Russian Government directed the recent compromises of e-mails from US persons and institutions, including from US political organizations," the statement said, concluding that "these thefts and disclosures are intended to interfere with the US election process." After the Democratic National Committee hack and the scattered hacks of voting machines, and months of talk in the

press and on Capitol Hill, the Obama administration has openly called out the Kremlin for meddling in the election.

This was immediately followed by a new dump of documents from WikiLeaks, this time of Clinton campaign chair John Podesta's emails, and news that the Russian ambassador to the United Nations lodged a formal complaint with the organization when another official criticized Trump. And all of this comes against the backdrop of Trump's constant and effusive praise for Vladimir Putin, as well as a steady stream of revelations about his campaign's shady ties to Russia.

As head-spinning as it might be and as distracted as we might be by #TrumpTapes, this is arguably the more important story. What's really going on? The hacking war is a genuinely new development in the long and often fraught U.S. relationship with Russia, and carries profound implications. Here's what's behind Friday's statement—and why it matters so much.

1. There's probably serious evidence. DHS statement formally accuses the Russian government of hacking emails and passing them to organizations like WikiLeaks, but stops short of blaming the Kremlin for hacking voter machines. The latter, according to this joint statement from the U.S. intelligence community, “in most cases originated from servers operated by a Russian company.” It goes to note: “However, we are not now in a position to attribute this activity to the Russian Government.” That is: There was enough there for the intelligence community to mention the breaches and their connection to Russia, but not quite enough to truly tie it to the Kremlin. That makes the opening of the statement—“that only Russia's senior-most officials could have authorized” the hack and handoffs—that much more glaring. You don't make a declaration like that unless you really have that evidence.



2016

The Mystery of Trump's Man in Moscow

By JULIA IOFFE

2. Russia is on a mission. Why is Russia doing this? Well, yes, it is to “interfere with the U.S. election process,” but there is also a far broader goal. The point, as many Russia watchers have pointed out, is to sow chaos and undermine Americans' trust in their system of governance and its institutions.

The point is also to help Trump win the election. Trump has not only spoken warmly about Putin, he has also spoken extensively about ushering in a new era of isolationism, which

would be right up Putin's alley. It would allow Russia to take up even more room on the world stage, filling up the space left by a reluctant U.S. When the Obama administration hesitated to get more involved in Syria, for example, Russia immediately stepped into the void, not just militarily. It has become the key broker of the conflict, rather than the U.S. or regional powers like Turkey and Iran. Putin's goal has always been to undo the 1990s when Russia was freshly defeated in the Cold War, becoming an ignored and marginal player in world affairs. He has steadily clawed back Russia's geopolitical might and relevance, saying he was "raising Russia up off its knees." So why not support a candidate who says he is ready to cede influence and accord Putin the respect he craves? And why not support a candidate whose very candidacy wreaks havoc on Putin's greatest enemy from within? Why do the work yourself when you can have Trump do it for you?

3. We've seen this pattern developing for years. Back in 2014, Maxim Trudolyubov, a prominent Russian columnist, wrote an op-ed in the *Times* in which he argued that the asymmetrical warfare we were witnessing in Ukraine, and the systematic campaign of disinformation targeting Europe, were simply Putin taking his domestic tactics international. He was absolutely right.

There are no better election-rigging artisans than the Russians. Ever since Putin came to power in 2000, his henchmen have developed all kinds of precise ways to engineer their elections: tampering with voter rolls, fooling around with the analogues of absentee and early ballots, and manipulating the informational space around the election, so that even if the elections weren't rigged, and voters weren't bused around different polling stations to vote several times (the notorious so-called carousel), the election would come out in the Kremlin's favor.

This meant disqualifying opposition candidates on technicalities and simply blacklisting them from national TV—still Russians' main source of news—so that they had no brand recognition whatsoever. It also meant dirtying their reputations by concocting criminal cases against them so they'd be legally barred from running for office, or entrapping them with potentially incriminating information—like using a prostitute to lure them into a bugged apartment for a romp, and then dumping the video in the lead-up to an election. One helpful consequence is that all of this makes the opposition squabble with itself, focusing its energies on blaming one another and distracting them from their real goal of chipping away at Putin's political monopoly.

Sound familiar?

Essentially, Putin's methods were first developed and honed at home, then exported to Europe in 2014, and are finally reaching our shores. Moreover, Russia is engaging in what it feels are similar tactics to those used by the U.S. in, say, supporting democratic movements in former Soviet republics like Ukraine and Georgia. Seen from Moscow, our righteous indignation just looks like hypocrisy. So while it may feel surprising to us, this shouldn't have been unexpected.

4. This marks a new sophistication in Russia's understanding of American politics. The Russians didn't always know what the DNC was—or at least why it was worth hacking. The fact that it now does represents a massive leap forward for Russian intelligence.

Just a few years ago, the Russians wouldn't have known about the intricacies of American domestic politics. Business was conducted between Putin and whoever was the American president, and Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov and whoever was the American secretary of state. They didn't quite understand what Congress was all about, let alone K Street or the respective party committees. For example, when a hot mic caught Obama telling Dmitry Medvedev that some things would have to wait till after his 2012 reelection, the Kremlin saw it as an admission of weakness and inability to discipline subordinate structures, rather than as a statement reflecting the reality of the American political landscape. The reason is that, technically, Russia has many of the same political structures—a parliament, a supreme court, political parties, media—but they are all about form, not function. They are there to give the illusion of a democratic state, without any of the real substance. The parliament is a rubber stamp, the political parties are controlled and bankrolled by the Kremlin (as is television), and the judiciary is completely subservient to the Kremlin. It is a Potemkin political system, and because Russians, like Americans, assume that everyone does everything like they do, they thought that's how our system worked, too.

After the pro-democracy protests of 2011-2012, when Putin thought he might be toppled by what he saw as yet another American-orchestrated regime change, the Kremlin got serious. It figured out how the Internet worked. By contrast, in 2010, state investigators looking into the vicious beating of famous journalist and blogger Oleg Kashin interrogated his friends and colleagues, asking them what a blog was. Six years later, they have expanded their infamous troll factories, and gotten serious about controlling and monitoring their citizens' activities online, passing laws so restrictive that Facebook and Google thought about entirely abandoning the massive Russian market.

THE FRIDAY COVER



How to Hack an Election in 7 Minutes

By BEN WOFFORD

It's also clear that they've been figuring out how Western political systems work. That became obvious in 2014, when, in the wake of Russia's two-pronged invasion of Ukraine, the Kremlin proved masterful at working to exacerbate divisions within Europe, getting friendlier countries, like Italy, to wobble in their support of sanctions; financially supporting far-right French politician Marine Le Pen; inviting the Greek finance minister to Moscow to talk bailout at the height of the Greek Euro crisis; and allegedly bankrolling Bulgarian protests against fracking so that Bulgaria would continue to buy Russian energy. With its entree into Syria in 2015, the Kremlin also began to exploit relations between the U.S. and its Middle East allies. For instance, Putin frequently invited Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to Moscow, fomenting discussion in Israel that, in light of a reluctant and critical Obama, maybe Putin would be a better ally. Representatives of Gulf states, apparently impressed by Putin's show of force in the region, also began paying more official visits to Moscow. The Syrian intervention, in other words, was about much more than the Russian naval base at Tartus.

If before the Kremlin thought the American system worked just like its own, it's certainly done its homework. It has figured out the minutiae of the country's political rifts—for example, between the Bernie Sanders campaign and the DNC—and then subtly jamming wedges into them. According to Michael Isikoff's reporting, Putin now has an adviser, Igor Diveykin, who is a former intelligence officer who now oversees "intelligence collected by Russian agencies about the U.S. election." An NBC report quoted U.S. intelligence personnel as saying that this program is only two years old, and has been working at full speed for only a year. This is, in other words, very new.

5. The efforts are widespread. All of these efforts—in Ukraine, in Syria—are accompanied by a newly sophisticated disinformation campaign, primarily targeted at Europe, in order to undermine European support of anti-Russian sanctions. The main tactic is undermining the very idea that truth and objectivity are attainable—or even exist—sucking viewers and Twitter readers into an epistemological black hole in which nothing was provable, not the fact of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, not the fact that a plane full of Dutch tourists was shot down by a Russian missile over the Donbas, not the fact that the European Union and NATO have been a net benefit for Europeans.

Now, we're seeing a similar water-muddying campaign from the Russians in the U.S., which dovetails smoothly with Trump and Mike Pence's post-truth approach. Nothing is

true, nothing is provable, except for the most outrageous, unlikely, unprovable theories. (Like the time a Kremlin-friendly newspaper ran a story saying that Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko had signed a literal deal with the devil, saying that they had the document and that the signatures were "authentic.") Trump's existence outside the confines of facts and his mastery of propaganda do have something Putinesque about them.

6. It's unclear what Obama's next steps are. There is talk of new sanctions against Russia, but an official who works on Russia sanctions told me there has been no order from the White House to develop them. If Obama decides that he does want to go down that path, the White House would also need to issue a new executive order delineating these authorities in order not to dilute the sanctions levied against Russia for invading Ukraine. It may also not wish to mix them in with any potential sanctions for Russia's activities in Syria, which John Kerry called to be investigated as war crimes. Another reason is the fact that the current authority to sanction Russia has a specific carve-out for espionage—the so-called hypocrisy clause—because we spy on Russia, too, and don't want to be sanctioned for it. Currently, hacking the DNC servers still counts as espionage.

7. The greatest damage might be caused by our reactions. As the DHS statement points out, American voting machines are so diffuse and disparate—and, more important, not connected to the Internet—that it would be impossible for Russians to just flip a switch and throw the election. What they *can* do is hack into machines in, say, contested swing districts and make people question the legitimacy of the results. It is a psychological game, leveraging very little action into an outsize reaction. The catch (and the good news) is that is under your personal control: by not engaging in your end of the psychological calculus, you don't have to give Russians the credit, and ascribe to them powers they don't actually have. You can have faith that, by and large, this thing we call elections works.

Likewise, leaping to the conclusion that Trump is a Kremlin agent is also a kind of self-inflicted wound. Is Moscow exploiting Trump's candidacy? Absolutely. Does that mean Trump is getting direction and money from the Kremlin to act in its interests and against America's? Probably not. One doesn't have to be an agent to actually believe things that play right into Putin's hands. Trump and the people around him have been very consistent in advocating a foreign policy ideology that is as American as apple pie, and which periodically resurfaces in American politics. (See, for example, Charles Lindbergh.) This year, it happens to perfectly align with the Kremlin's interests. That's what, during the Cold War, was called being a "useful idiot." As Mikhail Zygar, a prominent Russian journalist and author of the best-selling "All the Kremlin's Men," pointed out in an essay, this is just how the Kremlin sees Trump, and it's actually the best, most resource-efficient kind of asset

to have: someone who willingly, freely does your work for you without you even having to tell him what to do.

The other reason calling Trump a Kremlin agent is dangerous is that it makes us overlook his very American, very homegrown supporters and could keep us from addressing their gripes, however racist one might consider them. I encountered a similar situation in Moscow in 2012, when Putin called the very real and very authentically Russian supporters of democracy in Russia a “fifth column.” The propaganda machine began peddling the theory that they were all paid by the CIA and the State Department to destroy Russia from within and seize its rich natural resources. By delegitimizing the messengers, Putin was able to completely ignore their very real grievances. We don't have to fall into that trap.

If you're looking for reassurance, there's one bright spot: Putin is notoriously short-sighted, and this is just one more instance. In meddling and throwing in for one candidate so overtly, what happens if Trump loses—as is looking inevitable after Friday's bombshell? Putin is going to deal with a woman he never liked, and now—worse—has overtly tried to defeat. He has, potentially, made the next four years much more difficult for himself.

And lastly, breathe. We're going to be just fine.