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EUROPE

# Russia's Hacks Followed Years of Paranoia Toward Hillary Clinton

The Interpreter

By MAX FISHER    DEC. 16, 2016

Russia's unprecedented intervention in the United States election came amid more than United States-Russia tension and Donald J. Trump's praise of Vladimir V. Putin, the Russian president. It also coincided with a growing belief, in Moscow, that Russia faced an imminent threat in Hillary Clinton's candidacy.

Mrs. Clinton is viewed in Moscow as innately hostile to Russia. Widely held conspiracy theories portray her as seeking to foment unrest that will return Russia to the chaos and depression of the 1990s. Even many government technocrats view her with suspicion that at times verges on paranoia.

She referred to these views at an event on Thursday, telling donors that Mr. Putin's "personal beef" with her had driven Russia's intervention in the American election.

Mark Galeotti, a Russia expert at the Institute of International Relations, based in Prague, said the Kremlin was consumed by something more urgent than petty revenge: self-preservation.

“It’s not just they didn’t like Clinton, but they actually thought that she represented a threat,” he said, describing Russia’s actions as a matter of “policy, not pique.”

No one factor can fully explain Russia’s decision to hack and pass on Democratic emails, analysts say, and intelligence agencies appear divided on assessing Russian motives. But, in Moscow, fear of Mrs. Clinton has loomed as large or larger than any warmth for Mr. Trump.

Mr. Putin accused Mrs. Clinton of instigating protests against him in late 2011.

“She set the tone for some actors in our country and gave them a signal,” he said, reflecting a widespread view in Moscow that Mrs. Clinton, then secretary of state, had sought to topple Russia’s government.

Mr. Putin returned to the presidency a few months later, appearing to believe that the United States had engineered the Middle East’s descent into chaos and was targeting his country to be next. He put Mrs. Clinton at the center of these plots.

Mrs. Clinton is indeed more hawkish than other Democrats, including toward Russia. In 2008, while a senator, she mocked President George W. Bush’s claim that he had looked into Mr. Putin’s soul.

“I could have told him — he was a K.G.B. agent. By definition, he doesn’t have a soul,” Mrs. Clinton joked. The line is still remembered in Moscow.

But the Kremlin’s views of Mrs. Clinton go beyond defining her as hawkish. They are also layered with a pre-existing Russian belief that American democracy promotion is a ploy to unseat unfriendly governments, that the United States remains bent on Russia’s destabilization or even destruction, and that there is an American hand behind nearly every Russian misfortune.

These suspicions go back decades. But, since Mrs. Clinton’s tenure as secretary of state, popular telling has cast her as the culprit responsible for America’s misdeeds and, therefore, Russia’s setbacks.

In the summer of 2015, when Russian hacking groups first infiltrated Democratic National Committee servers, I happened to be reporting in Moscow. The American name on everyone's lips was not Mr. Trump's, who was already praising Mr. Putin, but rather Mrs. Clinton's.

Fyodor Lukyanov, a prominent Russian foreign policy commentator, told me at the time that there was a widespread view in his country's government that Mrs. Clinton, as president, would take "a very hostile approach" toward Russia.

Consensus in Moscow, Mr. Lukyanov said, was that "Hillary is the worst option of any president, maybe worse than any Republican."

It was conventional wisdom, he added, that Mrs. Clinton considered her husband's efforts to reform Russia in the 1990s an unfinished project, and that she would seek to finish it by encouraging grass-roots efforts that would culminate with regime change.

This summer, when Russian hacking groups began releasing Democratic emails through third parties such as WikiLeaks, many Americans suspected an effort to help Mr. Trump, who had promised to realign the United States with Russia.

But Mr. Galeotti, the Russian expert, said that, in all his time in Moscow, "I didn't speak to anyone who thought a Trump presidency was possible."

Rather, conversation there followed the same polls that dominated the discussion in America, and which all projected a landslide for Mrs. Clinton.

Even as Mr. Putin deemed Mr. Trump "colorful" and suggested they might get along, officials in Moscow "were absolutely working from the assumption that Clinton was going to get it," Mr. Galeotti said.

This belief may have informed Russia's actions during the campaign, which a number of analysts still suspect were aimed at weakening, rather than preventing, Mrs. Clinton's presumed imminent presidency.

But if Moscow does gain an ally in Mr. Trump, it will lose a foil in Mrs. Clinton — something that has been politically useful for Mr. Putin as his country's economy

has sunk and its isolation deepened.

*Follow Max Fisher on Twitter @Max\_Fisher.*

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