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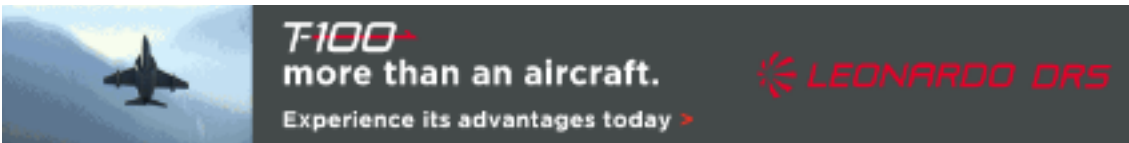


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Russia's Digital War on the West Is Just Getting Started



- By Uri Friedman [The Atlantic Read bio](#) ▶

April 26, 2017

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Russian President Vladimir Putin attends the Easter service in Christ the Savior Cathedral in Moscow, Russia, early Sunday, April 16, 2017.

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Democracies across the West are vulnerable to foreign influence—and some are under attack.

Mike Conaway, the Republican who replaced Devin Nunes as head of the House Intelligence Committee's investigation into Russian meddling in the U.S. election, [has described](#) his mission simply: "I just want to find out what happened," he's said. The more urgent question elsewhere in the world, however, isn't confined to the past. It concerns what *is happening*—not just in the United States but in European democracies as well.

In the Netherlands, Dutch authorities [counted](#) paper ballots in a recent election by hand to prevent foreign governments—and Russia in particular—from manipulating the results through cyberattacks. In Denmark, the defense minister [has accused](#) the Russian government of carrying out a two-year campaign to infiltrate email accounts at his ministry. In the United Kingdom, a parliamentary committee [reports](#) that it cannot "rule out" the possibility that "foreign interference" caused a voter-registration site to crash ahead of Britain's referendum on EU membership. And in France, a cybersecurity firm [has just discovered](#) that suspected Russian hackers are targeting the leading presidential candidate. "We are increasingly concerned about cyber-enabled interference in democratic political processes," representatives from the Group of Seven—Canada,

France, Germany, Italy, Japan, the U.K., and the U.S.—[declared](#) after meeting in Italy earlier this month. Russia, a member of the group until it was kicked out for annexing Crimea, wasn't mentioned in the statement. It didn't need to be. The subtext was clear.

The Russian government has denied hacking these democracies, and in some cases the evidence for state-sponsored interference is very flimsy. There is [no proof](#), for example, that the Brexit vote was marred by foreign cyberattacks. The voter-registration site was most likely downed by something much more mundane: a surge in visits from people hoping to ... register to vote. If Russia really has been trying to shape the outcome of the French election, the impact so far appears minimal.

This story, moreover, is just as old as it is new. Foreign actors have sought to undermine democracies since Sparta's King Cleomenes started meddling in the internal affairs of ancient Athens. (The king's interventions were harder to deny, since they [involved](#) invading soldiers.) The United States has its [own thorny history](#) of messing with elections abroad.

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What's novel today is that 1) the Russian government does seem to have revived its Cold War-era "[active measures](#)" against the political systems of rival countries; 2) the digital era has afforded the Kremlin and other state and non-state actors new tools in such efforts, from phishing attacks against campaign staffers to fake news distributed through social media; 3) the targeted countries are especially vulnerable to this type of sabotage at the moment; and 4) targeted countries aren't sure how to respond to this modern form of political warfare.

As the Russia expert Fiona Hill [once told me](#), Vladimir Putin, in apparently ordering a campaign to hack and leak Democratic Party emails, didn't create toxic partisanship or deep distrust of government in the United States. Instead, he exploited this political dysfunction by turning the strengths of an open, technologically advanced country into weaknesses. Barack Obama's [belated retaliation](#) against Russia at the end of his presidency, and the [beleaguered congressional investigations](#) into Russia's involvement in the 2016 election, speak to the U.S. government's profound struggles to process Putin's challenge to the soft underbelly of contemporary democracy.

The latest front in this struggle is France, where the centrist internationalist Emmanuel Macron is facing the far-right nationalist Marine Le Pen in the second round of a presidential election. Le Pen, much like Donald Trump during the 2016 race, is a candidate with policies seemingly manufactured in a Kremlin laboratory. She [has called for](#) lifting sanctions against Russia, visited Putin in Moscow during the campaign, and taken out a loan from a Russian bank. Whereas Macron supports the European Union and NATO, which Russia views as threats to its power in the region, Le Pen opposes both blocs.

In February, Macron's campaign [reported](#) thousands of attempted hacks of its computer servers and accused Russian state media outlets of spreading slanders about Macron, including an article in *Sputnik*—headlined "Ex-French Economy Minister Macron Could Be 'US Agent' Lobbying Banks Interests" and based on an interview with a pro-Russia French lawmaker—that aired rumors about Macron's sexual orientation and personal life. (The Russian government makes its interests known in France not just through media outlets, but also through [longstanding organizations](#) like the Franco-Russian Dialogue that tap into pro-Russian/anti-American sentiment among segments of the French electorate, especially [on the far right](#).)

This week brought fresh evidence of Russian mischief. On Tuesday, the security company Trend Micro [reported](#) that Macron's campaign had been hit by cyberattacks in March and April. The hackers' techniques resembled those employed against the Democratic National Committee in the United States and Chancellor Angela Merkel's Christian Democratic Union in Germany, which holds elections this fall. The phishing attacks, which seem to have failed, were aimed at gaining access to the email accounts of Macron's staffers. "We cannot say for sure whether this was directed by the Russian government, but the group behind the attacks certainly appears to pursue Russian interests," [said](#) Rik Ferguson of Trend Micro. (The Kremlin has [once again denied](#) the allegations.)

Still, it's important to keep in mind that even if the Russian government directed the attacks—something that remains very much in doubt—the phishing expeditions and other forms of interference aren't only alarming because of who might be behind them. They're also alarming because of the setting in which they're taking place: a country where political loyalty [is fragmenting](#), once-dominant parties [are unraveling](#), and trust in government [is withering](#). As one Russia scholar in France [told](#) *The Washington Post*, "There is a crisis of confidence in France. The Kremlin networks try to accentuate the doubts and divisions and to propose the 'Russian model' as a solution. And these efforts will not end with the elections." Nor are they likely to end with the Dutch election or the German election. Or, for that matter, with the U.S. election. ■

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