

## EUROPE

# Maybe Private Russian Hackers Meddled in Election, Putin Says

By ANDREW HIGGINS JUNE 1, 2017

MOSCOW — Shifting from his previous blanket denials, President Vladimir V. Putin of Russia suggested on Thursday that “patriotically minded” private Russian hackers could have been involved in cyberattacks last year that meddled in the United States presidential election.

While Mr. Putin continued to deny any state role in the hacking, his comments, made to reporters in St. Petersburg, Russia, departed from the Kremlin’s previous position: that Russia had played no role whatsoever in the hacking of the Democratic National Committee and that, after Donald J. Trump’s victory, the United States had become the victim of anti-Russia hysteria among crestfallen Democrats.

Asked about suspicions that Russia might try to interfere in the coming elections in Germany, Mr. Putin raised the possibility of attacks on foreign votes by what he portrayed as free-spirited Russian patriots. Hackers, he said, “are like artists” who choose their targets depending how they feel “when they wake up in the morning.” Any such attacks, he added, could not alter the result of elections in Europe, America or elsewhere.

Artists, he said, paint if they wake up feeling in good spirits while hackers respond if “they wake up and read that something is going on in interstate relations” that prompts them to take action. “If they are patriotically minded, they start making their contributions — which are right, from their point of view — to the fight against

those who say bad things about Russia,” Mr. Putin added, apparently referring to Hillary Clinton.

The Kremlin took a dim view of Mrs. Clinton, considering her far less friendly toward Russia than a President Trump would be because of her blunt criticism of Mr. Putin and his policies in Syria and elsewhere.

Mr. Putin’s remarks stopped far short of accepting the conclusions of American intelligence agencies that the Kremlin was behind the election campaign cyberattacks. But they opened room for verbal maneuvering by Moscow — and also by Mr. Trump — amid multiple investigations in the United States into Russian meddling, including one by the F.B.I. about the firing of its director, James B. Comey.

Perhaps worried that, as the investigations make headway, evidence will come to light that the Russian state or at least Russians were clearly involved in the hacking, Mr. Putin appeared to be setting up a pre-emptive line of defense, as the Kremlin did when it became difficult to simply deny initially secret Russian deployments to Ukraine in 2014, and to Syria in late 2015.

Swamped by evidence of Russian military involvement in Ukraine and then Syria, the Kremlin retreated from categorical denials to claims that Russians fighting in eastern Ukraine were Russian “vacationers” and that burly Russians who appeared in Syria were humanitarian aid workers. It later acknowledged that the supposed aid workers were Russian soldiers.

The questions of Russian hacking, and interaction between Russian officials and members of Mr. Trump’s inner circle, including his son-in-law, Jared Kushner, have been a huge thorn in the side of the new administration. The furor has led to the dismissal of Michael T. Flynn as Mr. Trump’s national security adviser, forced his attorney general, Jeff Sessions, to recuse himself from any Russia-tied election investigation and hampered the administration in fulfilling Mr. Trump’s agenda to “make America great again.”

Mr. Putin’s comments on Thursday about Russian hacking echoed those of Mr. Trump, who has dismissed accusations of Russian meddling in the election and said

the person responsible for the attack on the Democratic National Committee “could be somebody sitting on their bed that weighs 400 pounds.”

Mr. Putin stuck firmly to earlier denials that Russian state bodies or employees had been involved, an accusation leveled by United States intelligence agencies. They concluded in January that Mr. Putin himself had directed a Russian “influence campaign” involving cyberattacks and disinformation intended to tilt the November election in Mr. Trump’s favor.

“We’re not doing this on the state level,” Mr. Putin said on Thursday.

The boundary between state and private action, however, is often blurry in Russia, particularly in matters relating to the projection of Russian influence abroad. This provides a measure of plausible deniability for actions that the Kremlin does not want to be linked to publicly.

Nominally private Russian citizens have fought alongside Russian-speaking rebels in eastern Ukraine and taken part in various campaigns to advance Moscow’s agenda in Eastern and Central Europe.

While much about Russia’s cyberwarfare program is shrouded in secrecy, there is growing evidence that it, too, has drawn on the skills and enthusiasm of nominally private individuals, including college students, who face mandatory military service, and even criminals.

In 2013, Sergei K. Shoigu, the Russian defense minister, told university rectors at a meeting in Moscow that he was on a “head hunt in the positive meaning of the word” for coders.

The Obama administration signaled it was worried about Russia’s intermingling of state and private hacking when it struck back at Moscow over interference in the 2016 election. In December, it expelled 35 suspected Russian intelligence operatives from the United States and included among sanctioned Russian companies a private firm set up by a young Russian woman who called herself “mishacker.”

American intelligence agencies say a team of Russian hackers affiliated with Russia’s military intelligence agency, the G.R.U., stole emails and other data from

the Democratic National Committee and then leaked the cache through WikiLeaks.

An expert at muddying the waters and creating confusion, Mr. Putin advanced a number of alternative theories that could help Moscow address any firm evidence that might emerge as a trail leading to Russia.

Stating that modern technology can easily be manipulated to create a false trail, he said, “I can imagine that someone is doing this purposefully — building the chain of attacks so that the territory of the Russian Federation appears to be the source of that attack.” He added, “Modern technologies allow to do that kind of thing; it’s rather easy to do.”

Mr. Putin appeared to be repeating an argument he first made earlier in the week in an interview with the French newspaper *Le Figaro*.

“I think that he was totally right when he said it could have been someone sitting on their bed or somebody intentionally inserted a flash drive with the name of a Russian national, or something like that,” Mr. Putin told the French newspaper, referring to Mr. Trump. “Anything is possible in this virtual world. Russia never engages in activities of this kind, and we do not need it. It makes no sense for us to do such things. What for?”

The evolution of Russia’s position on possible meddling in the American election is similar to the way Mr. Putin repeatedly shifted his account of Russia’s role in the 2014 annexation of Crimea and in armed rebellions in eastern Ukraine. He began by denying that Russian troops had taken part before acknowledging, months later, that the Russian military was “of course” involved.

Moscow has been disappointed by Mr. Trump’s failure so far to deliver on his election promises to “get along” with Russia.

But Mr. Putin told *Le Figaro* this week that he was “cautiously optimistic” that Mr. Trump would be able to break free of people he described as intent on blocking his path toward better relations with Moscow.

Oleg Matsnev contributed reporting.

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