

Putin's campaign of personal revenge against the United States



By **David Ignatius** Opinion writer June 6 at 7:44 PM

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At a cafe a few blocks from the old KGB headquarters at Lubyanka Square, investigative journalist Andrei Soldatov tries to explain the murky world of Russian intelligence that's now the focus of a U.S. criminal investigation into the hacking of the 2016 campaign.

Big events in today's Russia often aren't the product of broad strategy, argues Soldatov, but rather are "tactical moves" that reflect the personal interests of Vladimir Putin and his all-powerful "presidential administration."

Soldatov thinks the Putin factor is crucial in understanding issues in the hacking investigation. Putin has a personal dislike of Hillary Clinton, and Russian intelligence had been gathering information about her since late summer 2015. But what may have pushed the Russian operation into a higher gear was the April 2016 publication of the so-called Panama Papers, which revealed secret bank accounts of some of Putin's close friends and associates.

"It was a personal attack," says Soldatov. "You cannot write about Putin's family or personal friends." He speculates that the Russian leader "wanted to do something about it, to teach a lesson."

Putin denounced the Panama Papers as a deliberate effort by America to embarrass him. "Officials and state agencies in the United States are behind all this," he charged in April 2016. "They are used to holding a monopoly on the international stage and do not want to have to make way for anyone else. . . . Attempts are made to weaken us from within, make us more acquiescent and make us toe their line."

State Department spokesman Mark Toner denied at the time that the United States was "in any way involved in the actual leak of these documents." But he confirmed that the U.S. Agency for International Development had supported the Organized

Crime and Corruption Reporting Project, one of the media organizations involved in researching the Panama files. To the Russians, that was proof enough.

For Putin, the ex-KGB officer, nothing in the information arena is accidental. In a combative session last Friday at the St. Petersburg International Economic Forum, he rebuffed NBC's Megyn Kelly: "As for independent sources, there is nothing independent in this world." When she pressed about Russian "digital fingerprints" in the hacking of the Democratic National Committee, he exploded: "What fingerprints? Hoof prints? Horn prints?"

The day before, Putin had said that "patriotically minded" Russian private hackers might have been involved in the operation. But by Friday, he was in full denial mode, suggesting that the CIA could have manufactured the whole thing: "IP addresses can be simply made up. . . . There are such IT specialists in the world today, and they can arrange anything and then blame it on whoever."

Soldatov argues that Russian intelligence taps a network of private hackers, much as the CIA and National Security Agency use private contractors to develop offensive cyberweapons and "zero-day exploits" for malware. "Although the [Russian] security and intelligence services have cyberwar capabilities, most of the actual strikes come through other channels," he wrote in a post last year on his website, Agentura.ru. He cited the example of a Russian technology company that allegedly was asked to help organize "sensitive" denial-of-service attacks.

The truth of what happened in the 2016 campaign will take many months to unravel, and there's a cloud of misinformation, fueled by Putin, President Trump and insatiable media coverage. Soldatov notes, for instance, that the famous dossier compiled by former British spy Christopher Steele included "unverifiable" details and some "confusion" about facts. But Soldatov wrote in January for the Guardian that it's also "a good reflection of how things are run in the Kremlin — the mess at the level of decision-making and increasingly the outsourcing of operations."

To Russian eyes, all information is potential disinformation, and secrets are hidden from the public. As Putin scolded Kelly last Friday: "A non-classified version means no version." The Russians regard American media claims of independence as bogus, and they see their own propaganda outlets competing on equal terms with global media companies.

"Sputnik," for example, had its own booth at the St. Petersburg forum. The director of national intelligence described Sputnik in a Jan. 6 report as part of "Russia's state-run propaganda machine," but its brochures describe a media group publishing 2,000 news items a day in Russian, Arabic, Chinese, Spanish and English.

As the investigation of Russian hacking rolls forward, we shouldn't lose perspective: Russia isn't a demonic, all-powerful presence. It's a sophisticated, increasingly modern country. But it's also the rare nation run by a former intelligence officer, who sees the world through a very particular lens.

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