

Putin saw the Panama Papers as a personal attack and may have wanted revenge, Russian authors say

By **Adam Taylor** August 28

Russian journalists Andrei Soldatov and Irina Borogan first published “The Red Web: The Struggle Between Russia's Digital Dictators and the New Online Revolutionaries” in 2015. In that book, the pair used investigative reporting and sharp analysis to show how the Kremlin was using the Internet to its advantage.

Two years later, Russia's alleged use of covert online operations became a topic of discussion all around world. And so Soldatov and Borogan began investigating again.

Now they have released a new version of their book that includes an additional chapter on the alleged Russian interference in the 2016 U.S. presidential election. The new chapter provides important context about Russian President's Vladimir Putin's possible motivations — as well as evidence of apparent links between WikiLeaks and the Kremlin, and details of the ongoing fallout in Russia.

WorldViews conducted an interview about this new chapter with Soldatov and Borogan over email. The new edition of the book came out last week in the United States.

Q: When you published the first edition of your book, could you have envisaged having to add a chapter on Russia allegedly trying influence the U.S. election?

A: No, our assumption was that the Kremlin was losing the battle for control of the Internet, sticking to old, conventional methods of control. But it proved correct for the situation inside of Russia. Outside, the Kremlin used a completely different toolkit dealing with things online.

Q: What do you think is the strongest public evidence that Russian President Vladimir Putin was involved in attempts to disrupt the U.S. election himself?

A: The Kremlin has been for years using outsourcing and contractors as the tactics to lower the costs for sensitive operations abroad; that's why it was so tricky to prove Putin himself was involved. The most telling part for us, as the people who saw the crisis unfolded from inside of Russia, is what happened in the fall and winter 2016.

While publicly Putin has always denied Russian government involvement, all the top-level Russian gatekeepers between the Russian cyber agencies and the West were either sent to jail or quietly dismissed, for the obvious reason to prevent them from leaking.

We also believe that the meeting of the Russian Security Council on April 8, when Putin urgently gathered only the most trusted officials — most of them with secret services background — could be the meeting when a very sensitive matter was discussed, such as the need for a retaliatory response to the Panama Papers exposés.

Q: Your book suggests that Russia’s alleged interference in the U.S. might be a response to the Panama Papers, the enormous 2016 leak of documents from an offshore banking network. Why do you think that leak of financial data angered the Kremlin so much?

A: It was seen as an attack on personal friends of Putin, his immediate circle. It's a line you cannot cross with Putin, and the Russian media learned that in a hard way. When a small Moscow publication reported in 2008 that Putin divorced and was going to marry a famous gymnast, the publication was immediately shut. When the RBC media holding published stories about Putin's daughter in 2015, the media holding's owner corporation was raided by police, and the media holding soon changed hands.

Worse, Putin believed the Panama Papers attack was sponsored by Hillary Clinton's people — this, in a way, provided him with a “justification” for a retaliatory operation.

Q: Could you describe some of what you uncovered about WikiLeaks’ alleged links to the Russian government?

A: It is a very sad story for us personally, as we believed back in 2010 in the mission of WikiLeaks — we've been writing about the Russian secret services since 2000, and we run our website Agentura.ru as a security services watchdog, thus transparency and holding power in check are important words for us. We also have friends who are investigative journalists who cooperated with WikiLeaks in the past.

The most horrible thing we found out that in the spring and summer of 2016 WikiLeaks suddenly compromised the very principles [founder Julian] Assange proclaimed, and didn't stop from attacking the very journalists the group had been working with. And he knew full well the danger these journalists faced exposing the offshore schemes of Putin's personal friends. For us, it's a story of betrayal, both principles and people.

Q: What has the fallout over the alleged U.S. election interference been in Russia’s cybersecurity world?

A: Since December, the Kremlin and the FSB [Russia's Federal Security Service, the successor to the Soviet-era KGB] have been trying to shut all doors to the West for the Russian cybersecurity professionals, strongly discouraging them from communicating with their colleagues in other countries.

It's a sad story in itself, as the world of cyber investigations is global by definition, and the Russian experts have been always widely respected and proud, quite rightly, of their international reputation. And look, you just cannot hunt down Russian hackers only in Russia— it's not how this works — they tend to live and operate in many countries!

Q: Do you think that the Russian government would be likely to try something like this again?

A: The problem is that the U.S. response may have been fine for the United States, but it won't help other countries to resist. As Russians, we obviously know nothing about the secret part of the sanctions, but one thing is clear — the open part of the response could hardly set an example the other countries could follow. You cannot expect the Baltic countries, say, to expel dozens of Russian diplomats. That could provoke the adventurous people in the Kremlin to try their hand elsewhere, as the costs seem to be not very high.

Worse still, it's not only about Russia — lots of cyber experts told us that even a country with very basic level of technology needs only five years to come to the level sufficient for launching a cyberattack.

Q: Have you faced any repercussions for your reporting on this book?

A: It was very hard to get people talking, especially after the December arrests of FSB people. We also got some death threats by email, which is, unfortunately, a very common thing for journalists in Russia.

But the important thing to say is that there are many of our colleagues, especially in the regions, who keep reporting bravely, sometimes for very small publications, which makes things very dangerous to them. And these are people we admire.

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