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U.S.

U.S. Prosecutors Consider Charging Russian Officials in DNC Hacking Case

At least six Russian government officials are identified as part of ongoing investigation

Thousands of the Democratic National Committee's emails and other data were made public by WikiLeaks during last year's presidential campaign. PHOTO: GARY CAMERON/REUTERS

By Aruna Viswanatha and Del Quentin Wilber
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The Justice Department has identified more than six members of the Russian government involved in hacking the Democratic National Committee's computers and swiping sensitive information that became public during the 2016 presidential election, according to people familiar with the investigation.

Prosecutors and agents have assembled evidence to charge the Russian officials and could bring a case next year, these people said. Discussions about the case are in the early stages, they said.

If filed, the case would provide the clearest picture yet of the actors behind the DNC intrusion. U.S. intelligence agencies have attributed the attack to Russian intelligence services, but haven't provided detailed information about how they concluded those services were responsible, or any details about the individuals allegedly involved.

The high-profile hack of the DNC's computers played a central role in the U.S. intelligence community's assessment in January that "Russian President Vladimir Putin ordered an influence campaign in 2016 aimed at the U.S. presidential election." Mr. Putin and the Russian government have denied meddling in the U.S. election.

Thousands of the DNC's emails and other data, as well as emails from the personal account of John Podesta, who served as campaign chairman to 2016 Democratic presidential nominee Hillary Clinton, were made public by WikiLeaks last year.

The pinpointing of particular Russian military and intelligence hackers highlights the exhaustive nature of the government's probe. It also suggests the eagerness of some federal prosecutors and Federal Bureau of Investigation agents to file charges against those responsible, even if the result is naming the alleged perpetrators publicly and making it difficult for them to travel, rather than incarcerating them. Arresting Russian operatives is highly unlikely, people familiar with the probe said.

People familiar with the investigation drew the parallel to the Justice Department's decision in March to charge two Russian operatives and two others with hacking into Yahoo's computers starting in 2014 and pilfering information about 500 million accounts, one of the largest data breaches in U.S. history. One of the defendants in the Yahoo case, a Canadian national, was arrested and has pleaded not guilty; the other defendants are believed to be in Russia.

Last December, the Democratic administration of then-President Barack Obama imposed sanctions on Russia's military-intelligence agency, which uses the acronym GRU, and Russia's Federal Security Service, Russia's equivalent to the Central Intelligence Agency, in response to the DNC and other hacks. It also named several individuals, including one who was later charged in the Yahoo case.

Federal prosecutors and federal agents working in Washington, Pittsburgh, San Francisco and Philadelphia have been collaborating on the DNC investigation. The inquiry is being conducted separately from Special Counsel Robert Mueller's investigation of alleged Russian meddling in the 2016 election and any possible collusion by President Donald Trump's associates.

Mr. Trump, a Republican, has denied that he or his campaign colluded with Moscow.

Mr. Mueller's investigation resulted this week in money-laundering and tax-related charges against Paul Manafort, former chairman of Mr. Trump's campaign, and Richard Gates, Mr. Manafort's business associate who also worked on the campaign.

George Papadopoulos, who served as a foreign-policy adviser on Mr. Trump's campaign, pleaded guilty last month to lying to FBI agents about his dealings with Russian go-betweens during the campaign. Messrs. Manafort and Gates pleaded not guilty earlier this week.

A Justice Department spokesman and an FBI spokeswoman declined to comment on the identification of the Russian government officials allegedly behind the DNC hack. The Russian Embassy didn't respond to a request for comment.

Mr. Trump has cast doubts on Russia's role in the hack. In a series of tweets this past June, the president called the idea that Russia hacked the DNC a "big Dem HOAX." He added that it was "a big Dem scam and excuse for losing the election!"

High-ranking U.S. intelligence and law-enforcement officials have consistently stood by the intelligence community's January assessment.

In that document, the intelligence community said GRU, "probably began cyber operations aimed at the U.S. election by March 2016." It said the GRU had exfiltrated "large volumes of data" from the DNC by May.

The Justice Department and FBI investigation into the DNC hack had been under way for nearly a year, by prosecutors and agents with cyber expertise, before Mr. Mueller was appointed in May. Rather than take over the relatively technical cyber investigation, Mr. Mueller and the Justice Department agreed that it would be better for the original prosecutors and agents to retain that aspect of the case, the people familiar with the Justice Department-FBI probe said.

It is unclear if prosecutors will hold back filing charges until Mr. Mueller completes his investigation or wait to identify others who may have played a role in the DNC hack. Investigators believe dozens of others may have played a role in the cyberattack, the people said.

While the alleged hackers are unlikely to be arrested and prosecuted in the U.S., the Justice Department has been bringing more cases against alleged hackers acting on behalf of foreign governments as a means of making the allegations public and potentially forcing a change in behavior, people familiar with the strategy said.

In the first such case, in 2014, the Justice Department indicted five Chinese military officers, alleging they had hacked U.S. companies' computers to steal trade secrets.

Officials said they witnessed a drop in such activity following the indictment. The defendants are believed to be in China; the Chinese government denied the allegations.

In a 2016 case, prosecutors charged hackers allegedly linked to the Iranian government. The defendants are believed to be outside the U.S.

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