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Five Questions About Russia's Election Hacking

As the culpability of Putin's government becomes more clear, a host of other issues remain unresolved.



A billboard in Danilovgrad, Montenegro

Stevo Vasiljevic / Reuters

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The evidence to support the CIA's conclusion that Russia intervened in the 2016 election to help Donald Trump remains mostly secret. But the outline of the case is no mystery. Both Democratic and Republican Party servers were reportedly hacked by foreign agents, yet the Moscow-friendly folks at WikiLeaks somehow only obtained the contents of Democratic servers.

Meanwhile, Donald Trump ran a campaign that sometimes seemed almost designed to please Russian President Vladimir Putin. Trump lavishly praised Putin. He hired a campaign manager who had previously gained a fortune working for a Putin-backed strongman in Ukraine. The campaign then [rewrote](#) the Republican platform to remove pro-Ukrainian language likely to irk Putin. Trump selected as his principal foreign-policy adviser a retired general previously paid by Russia's English-language propaganda network, RT. Trump himself publicly [urged](#) the Russians to do more hacking of his opponent's email.

Trump endorsed Putin's war aims in Syria. He suggested that as president he would not honor NATO commitments against Russian aggression. He departed from the consistent and emphatic policy of every president [since Gerald Ford](#), and urged the departure of the United Kingdom from the European Union. He condoned the invasion and annexation of Crimea.

After the election, Trump publicly mocked the Central Intelligence Agency for its reports on Russian hacking, named his Russian-paid adviser to head the National Security Council, and is now publicly considering for secretary of state one of the most Putin-friendly businessmen in the western world.

Do Americans really need secret information from the CIA to discern the pattern here?

Yet important questions about the Russian manipulation of U.S. politics do remain unsettled. Four U.S. senators, including former Republican presidential nominee John McCain, have now called for an inquiry into Russia's actions to aid Donald Trump. The incoming Trump administration opposes such an inquiry, perhaps for the compelling reason that it knows how embarrassing it might be. The immediate question is whether the Republican majority in the Senate will

proceed over the objection of a Republican president. Let's hope it does. If it does, here are some things to which it would be helpful to learn answers:

Exactly which institutions did the Russians hack?

There is a partial list, including the RNC, the DNC, the DCCC, and the personal email of Center for American Progress chair John Podesta. But a full list would reveal the scale and pattern of Russian intentions. It has suddenly become intensely controversial whether the Russians did indeed hack the Republican National Committee (as asserted by the CIA and by the chairman of the House Homeland Security Committee) or not (as passionately denied by Reince Priebus, the RNC chair who will serve as chief of staff in the Trump White House). A lot turns on that uncertainty. If Russian espionage hacked the RNC—but chose not to leak RNC emails—that would say a lot about Russian intentions. It would also indicate who in American public life might now be vulnerable to future Russian blackmail. If Priebus is correct, and the CIA is wrong, that the Russians did not hack the RNC, that too raises important questions: Was RNC security more robust than DNC security? Or did the Russians not try the RNC? If not, why not?

When did the hacks occur?

In particular, did the pace of Russian hacking accelerate as Donald Trump neared the Republican nomination? This would be important to know both in its own right, but also because it might shed light on the ominous question that follows.

Was there coordination?

Was information shared in any way, or did anyone directly or indirectly connected to the Trump campaign offer any advice to any foreign entity about where and how to hack—beyond the president-elect's own public encouragement? What compromising information might Russia have upon persons connected to the Trump campaign—including of course the president-elect himself?

Are there financial ties?

The Senate inquiry should also subpoena any Trump organization business records that might shed light on any debt or obligation that the Trump family might have in Russia and any significant income flows from Russia. Beyond the obvious political ties Trump has to Putin, do Russian interests have any hold upon him and his family—financial or otherwise?

Where else has Russia intervened?

Beyond the incredible claim of a Russian spy operation to assist the winning candidate in this election, it might be illuminating to place Russia's pro-Trump espionage in a worldwide context. Trump is not the only candidate for whom Putin's Russia has intervened. It's a matter of open record that state-owned Russian banks have lent millions of euros to the French National Front. The president of the Czech Republic received substantial campaign contributions from Russian oil interests. The heads of German and British intelligence have complained of Russian attacks on democratic institutions in those countries. Obviously, Russia's success in the United States represents its greatest coup. But it was not an isolated attempt, and cannot be understood in isolation from other elements of Putin's strategy.

If nothing else, these hearings should educate the American people, and this compromised administration, on what exactly Putin has been trying to do—and how his intervention in America's election fits into those larger plans.



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