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Russia's tactics roil Europe

by Michael Birnbaum



Russian President Vladimir Putin attends a meeting with U.S. Secretary of State John F. Kerry at the Kremlin in Moscow in July. (© Sputnik Photo Agency / Reuter/REUTERS)

BRUSSELS — The hacking of Democratic Party computer systems, widely thought by U.S. intelligence officials to be the work of the Russian government, may be giving Washington a new taste of unconventional Kremlin tactics that have long been employed to influence politics in neighboring European countries.

Russia has tried hard in recent years to tug Europe to its side, bankrolling the continent's extremist political parties, working to fuel a backlash against migrants and using its vast energy resources as a cudgel against its neighbors. Two-and-a-half years into the Ukraine crisis, Obama administration officials say that the Kremlin may now be engaging in similar trickery in the U.S. presidential campaign in an effort to boost Russia-friendly Republican nominee Donald Trump.

The [alleged effort](#) would be an unusually blunt challenge to the U.S. political system, but one familiar to Europe, where officials and analysts see Russian fingerprints on a wide spectrum of initiatives designed to split Western unity and encourage acceptance of Kremlin policies. European leaders say Russia has been involved in such actions as an April referendum in the Netherlands that rejected a European Union trade deal with Ukraine and the strengthening of cross-border bonds among Euroskeptic parties.

With many U.S. and European voters feeling left adrift by the tides of globalization and threatened by migration, the Russian efforts have played on existing Western weaknesses and found a receptive audience.

“The Russians have been trying for years to destabilize Europe,” said Alexander Pechtold, a Dutch lawmaker who was a leader of the losing effort to persuade voters to support the Ukraine deal. The referendum was triggered by anti-E.U. activists who said they want to stop the expansion of the bloc and improve relations with Russia.

“Over a long period of time, Russia has been stoking unrest in Europe, an unrest that already exists because we find ourselves in a vulnerable period,” Pechtold said. “It uses that weakness to deteriorate the situation to its advantage.”

In Europe, Russia has been pressing hard to roll back sanctions imposed after it annexed Crimea in 2014, a task that could succeed with the support of just one of the 28 E.U. nations, which need unanimity to prolong the measures. Even before that conflict, Russian President Vladimir Putin was working to build support for his vision of the world, which seeks to preserve his domestic power by favoring authoritarian leaders over democratically elected ones and by gaining for his country the deference once accorded to the Soviet Union.

Of course, Russia did not create the British Euroskepticism that led voters to opt to pull out of the E.U. Nor did it set in motion the conflagration in Syria, whose refugees have taxed European unity in a way that little else has. But at each turn, the Kremlin has sought to exploit and exacerbate the vulnerabilities of the E.U. and the NATO military alliance, leaders and analysts say.

“They try to benefit the most out of these messes, but I wouldn’t say they are creating them,” said Peter Kreko, director of the Political Capital Institute, a Budapest-based think tank that has studied links between European political parties and the Kremlin. He said he had found deepening ties not just to parties on the extreme left and right, but also to mainstream groups such as the center-right Republicans in France, where both houses of Parliament voted this spring in favor of rolling back sanctions against Russia.

Ultimately, many of the Russian efforts have been unsuccessful. E.U. nations extended sanctions in June, for example. But the multi-pronged strategy has nevertheless given Russia an outsize global role at a time when its economy is stagnant and its long-term prospects look weak.

“It’s a tool for Russia to maintain its influence when it’s much more difficult to do it via ordinary economic tools,” Kreko said.

The efforts to pull Europe toward Russia go far beyond courting individual political parties, officials and analysts say, although those tools remain important. In Eastern Europe, leaders suspect the Kremlin of funding environmental groups that oppose measures that would make their countries less dependent on Russian energy. Across Europe, Kremlin-backed media outlets Russia Today and Sputnik News have made aggressive expansions into local-language European media markets in the past two years, pushing an aggressively pro-Russian line that sometimes has only a loose relationship to the truth.

In January, for example, Russia’s state-run First Channel reported that a 13-year-old Russian-German girl had been gang-raped by migrants in Berlin. [German police found that the allegations were false](#), but the story — amplified by the German-language arm of Kremlin-run Sputnik News — sparked large protests by Germany’s Russian community, and Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov accused Germany of a coverup.

“The strength of Russia’s push, of its political engagement, its approach to the E.U., is that it doesn’t rely too heavily on a single instrument or a single tool to achieve its goals. Instead what it does is use different approaches at different times in different countries,” said Andrew Foxall, the director of the Russia Studies Center at the Henry Jackson Society, a London-based think tank.

That propensity to cause mischief in other nations’ political systems may be behind the hacking of the Democratic National Committee’s computer systems, officials say. The hack caused an embarrassment for the party when leaked emails showed the party’s chairwoman, Rep. Debbie Wasserman Schultz (Fla.), and others favoring Hillary Clinton over Bernie Sanders in the primaries. Wasserman Schultz [stepped down](#) after the leak last month. Officials say it remains unclear whether the hacking was performed as part of routine foreign espionage or whether the DNC was specifically targeted to sway the election.

Trump, who told CNBC on Thursday that “during his administration, Trump will be friendly with Putin,” also invited the Kremlin to employ its tactics against Clinton.

“Russia, if you’re listening, I hope you’re able to find the 30,000 emails that are missing,” Trump [said last month](#). He later said he was being sarcastic.

In Europe, the Kremlin has at times taken a far more direct approach to domestic politics. Its tightest ties have been to far-right parties that share Russia’s skepticism of the E.U. and NATO. In France, the anti-E.U. [National Front party](#) was able to draw on Russian financial resources at a time when it was being refused by French banks. National Front chief Marine Le Pen traveled to Moscow just weeks after the March 2014 annexation, at a time when Russia was being shunned by mainstream leaders across Europe. Later that year, the party took a \$10.4 million loan from the Moscow-based First Czech-Russian Bank. Leaders say they may seek an additional \$30 million ahead of the presidential election next year, in which polls suggest leader Le Pen is likely to make a strong showing.

“I see quite a clear case, and perhaps quite credible one, that France could recognize Crimea, and that is my being the president of the republic,” Le Pen told the Kremlin-controlled Russia Today broadcaster earlier this year. She and other National Front leaders say they are open to partnerships with any politician who shares their positions, but they deny that the Kremlin has any say in their platform.

Elsewhere in Europe, the Kremlin has struck alliances with extremist parties that are surging because of the many failures of the E.U. to ensure prosperity and stability for its citizens in recent years. In Greece, which has been struggling under years of crushing austerity measures following the 2008 global financial crisis, the neo-Nazi [Golden Dawn party](#) has won seats in Parliament — and taken part in a host of Kremlin-funded conferences for similar lawmakers from around Europe. In Germany, where the anti-migrant Alternative for Germany party has surged in the year since a torrent of refugees arrived, the youth wing of the party has allied itself with Russia’s ruling United Russia party. The European Parliament lifted the immunity of a Hungarian lawmaker from the far-right Jobbik party, Bela Kovacs, so that he could be investigated for allegations that he was spying for Russia.

But mainstream politicians could be far more useful to the Kremlin than extremists, analysts say, since they still control most of the levers that could lead to an easing of sanctions, and Russia has courted politicians from Germany to Hungary to Slovakia to France.

Still, some see sharp limits to Kremlin influence. The interference in the false German rape case helped spark a backlash among an electorate that remained sympathetic to Russia. The E.U. sanctions have repeatedly been renewed. And in the United States, Donald Trump is trailing badly in the polls — with more anti-Russia Republicans peeling away from him every time he praises Putin.

The public efforts to sway politicians may themselves be an intimidation tactic to cover for a broader loss of influence, some analysts say.

“Most of the cases that we have examined since the Ukraine crisis were showing that Russia is losing its control over the member states” of Europe, said Kreko, of the Hungarian think tank. “They want to show strength. It leads to an overestimation of the real power of the Russian regime.”

Annabell Van den Berghe contributed to this report.

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