

Russia failed to mount major election interference operations in 2020, analysts say

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By Ellen Nakashima

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Russia failed to mount any major hacking or disinformation operations to interfere in the presidential election, and the Kremlin's hackers did not even attempt to target elections systems in the way they did in 2016, according to U.S. officials.

Officials and analysts said it's too early to know why, but they point to a variety of possible reasons. Those include cyber and other operations that helped keep the Russians at bay, harder targets at the state and local level, and a political climate in which Americans themselves were the largest purveyors of disinformation, dwarfing Moscow's efforts to influence the campaign through social media and its propaganda channels.

This year, U.S. Cyber Command pursued a new approach to countering Russian hackers who might want to disrupt the election. In a series of operations, the military attacked their systems and fell back at random intervals to keep them off balance. Cybercom also attempted to sabotage Russian hacking tools.

The National Security Agency and FBI also exposed a potent class of malware built by Russian military spies who might have used it against the election. Its disclosure meant system operators everywhere could defend against it.

Gen. Paul Nakasone, who leads the NSA and the Pentagon's Cyber Command, said in an Election Day interview that he was "very confident" that actions the NSA and Cybercom have taken over the previous several weeks and months against foreign adversaries had ensured "they're not going to interfere in our elections." He did not speak about any particular operation.

But some analysts say other factors probably played a bigger role, such as the Kremlin's political calculations and the toxic political environment in the United States.

Moscow may have been unwilling to risk further sanctions after its 2016 intervention. The Kremlin also got much of what it wanted four years ago — diminished international confidence in American democracy — and could have decided it did not need to mount the same effort a second time.

Moreover, the United States was already awash in false information aimed at delegitimizing the vote, with President Trump most prominently airing baseless claims about widespread ballot fraud, in essence doing the Kremlin's work for it.

"I am convinced that if Moscow had the strong intent to interfere in this year's elections to the same level they did in 2016, no amount of cyber counterattacks would have stopped them," said Dmitri Alperovitch, a cybersecurity expert and co-founder of the Silverado Policy Accelerator think tank. "When there is a will, there is always a way. The fact that they didn't go that far this year is very significant."

Experts who have studied Russia's long history of interference in foreign affairs say that Moscow acts when the opportunity presents itself.

"The risk-benefit calculus is something that fluctuates widely," said Keir Giles, a senior consulting fellow with the Russia and Eurasia program at Chatham House, a British think tank.

For Russia, the conditions present four years ago were lacking this year. In 2016, Americans and the federal government were unprepared for the broad Russian campaign that swept across porous Democratic computer networks, unsuspecting social media companies and exposed election systems.

This year, Americans were aware of the threat of Russian interference. Twitter and Facebook removed Russian accounts before they could gain large followings. State and local elections officers strengthened network security.

In 2016, the Democratic nominee, Hillary Clinton, was a far more divisive figure within the party and the country than this year's candidate, Joe Biden. WikiLeaks was a willing and effective partner in the Russian campaign to dump damaging material into the open to undermine Clinton, and this year its founder is in jail fighting extradition to the United States to face unrelated charges of espionage.

The political landscape today is also different. Russian President Vladimir Putin, analysts say, does not harbor as deep a resentment of Biden as he did of Clinton, whom he blamed for protests in Moscow in 2011 and 2012 that he perceived as a political threat. And Russia is grappling with a series of domestic challenges, including an economy burdened by sanctions and the coronavirus pandemic.

Some experts say Russia did not have to do anything extraordinary this year, because the tremendous attention its 2016 interference campaign garnered has created the specter of an all-powerful adversary that stoked fears in 2020. Merely by prompting such levels of anxiety, it achieved a measure of success, they say.

Others say the 2016 interference provoked a backlash that Moscow had not anticipated, uniting a divided Congress to pass sanctions legislation and leading to a special-counsel investigation that resulted in the indictments of Russian hackers and oligarchs. That fallout may have curbed its desire to attempt a repeat this year, they say.

That is not to say that Moscow has done nothing. The U.S. intelligence community publicly assessed in August that Russia was “using a range of measures to primarily denigrate former vice president Biden and what it sees as an anti-Russia ‘establishment.’” Some Kremlin-linked actors were also seeking to boost Trump's candidacy on social media and Russian television, according to the statement from William Evanina, the intelligence community's top counterintelligence official.

One attempt was so blatant that Evanina called it out: pro-Russian Ukrainian parliamentarian Andriy Derkach spreading unfounded corruption claims about Biden. The CIA assessed that Putin probably directed the effort. And the Treasury Department imposed sanctions on Derkach earlier this year, calling him an “active Russian agent.” Despite being promoted by Trump's personal attorney Rudolph W. Giuliani and GOP allies in Congress, the smear campaign gained little traction.

In his interview this month, Nakasone said “I just don't see the levels” of Russian targeting of election systems or against social media platforms “that we had seen at this point in time for 2018.” And the levels of Russian activity during the midterms were below those of 2016.

Russia experts in Moscow say that despite the Kremlin's preference for Trump, his presidency did not yield as many benefits for Putin as the Russian leader might have hoped. Sanctions were expanded, and there was no big U.S.-Russia summit.

“Perhaps political authorities simply decided that Trump would be of no use to Russia and that the intervention would be meaningless,” said Andrei Kolesnikov, a senior fellow at the Carnegie Moscow Center.

Others say that four years of Trump have brought more pluses than minuses: a weakened transatlantic alliance, a more divided American society and a shrinking U.S. role globally.

“Basically, it’s a zero-sum game,” Giles said. “Russia thinks if they damage the West, then Moscow by comparison is stronger.”

There is some debate within the U.S. intelligence community about whether the emergence this fall of a laptop said to belong to Biden’s son Hunter, allegedly containing emails purportedly damaging to Biden, had Russian links. No hard proof has emerged, and even if it does, the effort mostly fell flat.

“The email content really wasn’t about Joe Biden himself,” said Michael Van Landingham, a former CIA political analyst who worked on the 2017 intelligence-community assessment on Russian interference. “It was a stretch to make a connection between the candidate and the leaked information.”

In the end, Putin is adept at seizing opportunities, Giles said, and those still abound. Trump has not conceded the election. His campaign has brought legal challenges in several states.

“It may be too soon,” he said, “to tell if Russian interference in the 2020 election was the dog that didn’t bark.”

Natasha Abbakumova in Moscow contributed to this report.