

Alleged Russian political meddling documented in 27 countries since 2004

Russia has meddled in the affairs of at least 27 European and North American countries since 2004 with interference that ranges from cyberattacks to disinformation campaigns, according to an analysis by a surveillance organization.

The findings, provided to USA TODAY, show the meddling started in former Soviet republics allied with the West and spread to Western Europe. More recently affected are Canada and the United States, where Congress and an independent prosecutor are investigating possible Russian involvement in the 2016 presidential election.

The alleged Russian interference abroad was compiled by the Alliance for Securing Democracy of the German Marshall Fund, a nonprofit organization that fosters closer bonds between the United States and Europe. In August, the group began tracking Russian efforts to influence U.S. public opinion through a network of Twitter accounts that disseminates messages considered helpful to the Kremlin.

On Wednesday, Facebook said an internal investigation uncovered \$100,000 in advertising spending by hundreds of fake accounts and pages, likely operated out of Russia, which sought to sow political division during the U.S. presidential election. The ads were traced to a Russian “troll farm,” a Facebook official said. The giant social network said it has shared the findings with U.S. investigators.

The pattern of Russian government-linked behavior in the United States is similar to that seen in other countries, said Laura Rosenberger, director of the alliance.

“These are all the tools they use to undermine democratic institutions in different places,” Rosenberger said. “For a lot of Americans, the question of Russian interference in U.S. elections came out of nowhere. It sounds crazy to most people that this has been part of the Russian playbook for more than a decade.”

Countries the alliance said have been targeted are: Belarus, Bulgaria, Canada, Cyprus, Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Georgia, Germany, Hungary, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Macedonia, Moldova, Montenegro, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Spain, Sweden, Turkey, United Kingdom, Ukraine and the United States.

Current targets include German Chancellor Angela Merkel, who faces re-election this month.

Here are a few examples cited by the alliance of alleged Russian interference:

April 5, 2004: Prime Minister Rolandas Paksas of Lithuania, a former Soviet republic, was impeached for granting citizenship to alleged Russian crime figure Yuri Borisov and leaking him classified information that he was under investigation. Borisov contributed \$400,000 to Paksas' 2003 election campaign, presumably with the Kremlin's blessing.

April 27, 2007: Estonia, another former Soviet republic, accused hackers using Russian IP addresses of a wide-scale denial of service attack that shut down the Internet in Estonia, one of NATO's newest members. The attack on the government, newspaper and banking websites appeared to be a response to Estonian authorities' decision to move a Soviet World War II memorial known as the Bronze Soldier from a central square in Tallinn, the Baltic nation's capital. Russia denied the accusation.

Aug. 7, 2008: Cyberattacks conducted from Russia brought Internet traffic to a halt in the former Soviet republic of Georgia, while Russian troops invaded Georgian territory.

January 2013: Spain's Civil Guard unraveled a Russian mafia network accused of laundering large sums of money through Banco Madrid.

Sept. 17, 2014: Russian "election observers" from the Russian Public Institute of Electoral Law cast doubt on the validity of the Scottish referendum on independence from the United Kingdom a day before the vote.

July 22, 2016: WikiLeaks published about 20,000 emails from the Democratic National Committee that U.S. intelligence and independent cybersecurity firms said were stolen by Russian government hackers a month earlier.

March 9, 2017: Canada's foreign minister was targeted in a Russian media campaign focusing on alleged Nazi links.

Spring 2017: French presidential candidate Emmanuel Macron was targeted by rumors about his sexual orientation and alleged corruption that were spread by far-right websites and relayed by Russian media. Macron was elected by a wide margin.

The Kremlin repeatedly has dismissed the allegations as anti-Russian propaganda.

James Carden, executive editor of the American Committee for East-West Accord, which promotes better relations between the U.S. and Russia, said Moscow's actions are no different from what the U.S. government does to promote its interests abroad, and they are "being blown up beyond any proportion."

"We do it, they do it, the Chinese, Israelis, everyone is doing it," Carden said.

Clint Watts, a former FBI agent and counterterrorism specialist who has focused on the Russian use of the Internet to spread propaganda and disinformation, said the idea that the U.S. engages in such activities is preposterous.

"When did we hack 4,000 people of a foreign country and dump all their information on the Internet?" Watts said, referring to multiple intrusions of U.S. government and military computers that have been attributed to Kremlin-directed hackers.

The goal of Russia's efforts in the U.S. and Europe "is to make the institution of democracy look not credible," said Watts, who is now a fellow at the Foreign Policy Research Institute. "Either the institutions are corrupt or you can't trust the vote."

The type of activity that Rosenberger's staff compiled goes back much further than 2004, according to Dov Levin, a researcher at Carnegie Mellon University who documented 36 known attempts by the Russian or Soviet government to influence elections around the world and 81 American attempts from 1946 to 2000.

The most common American methods involved secret campaign funding right before an election, Levin said. He said that during the 1990 Nicaraguan election, U.S. agents leaked damaging information about alleged corruption by Nicaragua's

leftist Sandinista Party officials and their Swiss bank accounts to German newspapers. Those reports were then picked up by the Nicaraguan opposition.

Sandinista leader Daniel Ortega lost that election, “and the American intervention played probably an important role in that regard,” Levin said.

The U.S. also intervened in the 1996 Russian presidential election on behalf of Boris Yeltsin, but it did not do so since Vladimir Putin became president in 2000, Levin said.

The most common Soviet and Russian tactics are “dirty tricks — attempts to harm in some way the side they don’t want to win,” Levin said.

According to a report in the British newspaper The Guardian, KGB agents in 1984 planted an allegation that the new AIDS epidemic was caused by a secret American military biological weapons program. Russian officials later admitted it was false. Moscow’s goal was to stop the re-election of anti-Soviet President Ronald Reagan, who won in a landslide.

In 2011, Putin declared that then-Secretary of State Hillary Clinton was behind massive protests against his election, calling it an attack on Russian sovereignty. He also has railed against U.S. democracy promotion campaigns abroad that he blames for helping spark pro-Western political revolutions in the former Soviet republics of Georgia, Ukraine and Kyrgyzstan.

Putin also blames the United States for last year’s release of the Panama Papers, documents on secret financial transactions that exposed many in Putin’s inner circle, according to a new book by Russian journalists Andrei Soldatov and Irina Borogan. They say that is another reason Putin ordered a campaign to help Donald Trump defeat Clinton in last year’s presidential election, as the U.S. intelligence community alleges.

Ben Nimmo, an analyst at the Atlantic Council’s DFR Labs, which tracks Russian propaganda, said Russian tactics mirror those used by the Soviet Union against its own people.

The Soviets used “massacres, the gulag prison system and the KGB intelligence service to intimidate and eliminate potential opponents inside the Soviet Union and outside its borders,” he said. “That is the system Putin came out of.”

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