

Putin on U.S. election interference: 'I couldn't care less'



Megyn Kelly interviews Vladimir Putin on March 1, 2018. NBC News

Russian President Vladimir Putin has told NBC News that he “couldn’t care less” if Russian citizens tried to interfere in the 2016 American presidential election because, he claims, they were not connected to the Kremlin.

In an exclusive and at-times combative interview with NBC’s Megyn Kelly, Putin again denied the charge by U.S. intelligence services that he ordered meddling in the November 2016 vote that put Donald Trump in the White House.

“Why have you decided the Russian authorities, myself included, gave anybody permission to do this?” asked Putin, who will probably be returned as president in the March 18 elections.

Putin was unmoved by an indictment filed by special counsel Robert Mueller last month that accused 13 Russian nationals and three Russian companies of interfering in the election — including supporting Trump’s campaign and “disparaging” Hillary Clinton’s.

Mueller is investigating whether the Trump campaign colluded with the Kremlin.

“So what if they’re Russians?” Putin said of the people named in last month’s indictment. “There are 146 million Russians. So what? ... I don’t care. I couldn’t

care less. ... They do not represent the interests of the Russian state.”

Putin even suggested that Jews or other ethnic groups had been involved in the meddling.

“Maybe they’re not even Russians,” he said. “Maybe they’re Ukrainians, Tatars, Jews, just with Russian citizenship. Even that needs to be checked. Maybe they have dual citizenship. Or maybe a green card. Maybe it was the Americans who paid them for this work. How do you know? I don’t know.”

Asked whether he was concerned about Russian citizens attacking U.S. democracy, Putin replied that he had yet to see any evidence that the alleged interference had broken Russian law.

“We in Russia cannot prosecute anyone as long as they have not violated Russian law,” he said. “At least send us a piece of paper. ... Give us a document. Give us an official request. And we’ll take a look at it.”

U.S. intelligence agencies and many Western analysts have said that Russian interference came at the orders of the Kremlin. Putin, Russia’s longest-serving leader since Stalin, dismissed this.

“Could anyone really believe that Russia, thousands of miles away ... influenced the outcome of the election? Doesn’t that sound ridiculous even to you?” he said. “It’s not our goal to interfere. We do not see what goal we would accomplish by interfering. There’s no goal.”

Experts like John Brennan, a former CIA director and now an NBC News analyst, say Moscow’s goal was clear.

“To weaken the United States government,” Brennan said in a separate interview, summarizing his opinion of the Kremlin’s aims. This, he added, was so “the U.S. government is not going to be able to deal with international issues and confronting Russian aggression as assertively as it needs to.”

Trump has called Putin “a strong leader” who has “done a very brilliant job in terms of what he represents and who he’s representing.”

Trump has also hinted that he gives Putin the benefit of the doubt when he denies that Moscow interfered.

"[Putin] said he absolutely did not meddle in our election. He did not do what they are saying he did," Trump told reporters aboard Air Force One en route to Hanoi following a meeting with Putin on the sidelines of the APEC summit in Danang in November.

In the interview with Kelly, Putin called the U.S. president "a businessman with vast experience" and "a quick study" despite being new to politics.

"He understands that if it is necessary to establish a cooperative relationship with someone, then you have to treat your current or potential partner with respect," Putin said. "Engaging in mutual accusations and insults, this is a road to nowhere."

Putin said he doesn't read Trump's tweets and doesn't tweet himself.

Asked why not, he said: "I have other ways of expressing my point of view or implementing a decision. Donald is a more modern individual."

Putin is facing little opposition in the presidential election whose first round is on March 18.

"Well, we will see. It's up to the Russian voters," he said.

In terms of the future of Russia-U.S. relations, he cast Russia as the victim.

"We are not the ones who labeled you our enemies. You made a decision, at the level of parliament, at the level of Congress and put Russia on your list of enemies," he said. "Why did you do that? Are we the ones who imposed sanctions on the United States? The U.S. imposed sanctions on us."

Putin claimed he would be willing to repair relations with Washington.

"Listen, let's sit down calmly, talk and figure things out," he said. "I believe that the current president wants to do that, but there are forces that won't let him do it."

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