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Issue Brief

Russian Intervention in European and US Elections: An Act of War?

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It has been noticed that Russia has, for quite some time, been accused of meddling with US and European elections. In a classified calculation made on January 6, 2017¹ the US intelligence community made a verdict that Putin ordered an influence campaign in 2016 which was directed towards the US presidential election. This according to American authorities was aimed at Hillary Clinton to destroy her electability and potential to be the president.

Also it was said that Hillary Clinton's email was hacked. And for that, Hillary blamed the Russians and FBI director James Comey who has been fired recently.² Apart from this, Hillary said that President of Russia ordered hacks of the Democratic Committee emails because he had 'personal beef'³ against her. Russia however has denied these accusations and said that the US claims



that Russia hacked the official emails are baseless and without any solid evidence. Kremlin has further said that such accusations are 'indecent.'⁴

In February and March 2017, Russia was again blamed for hacking Dutch elections.⁵ It was said by the US government that Russia was directing its attention towards The Netherlands.⁶ But it was predicted that this was only a warm up for the German and French elections which were taken as the real article. Tony van der Togt, Russian expert at the Clingendael Institute in The Hague, said that⁷ the Dutch elections may not be the Russians primary target. Still, at that period there was no clarity and proofs about who actually was behind it, but Russia was openly criticized for it.

¹ <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2017/01/russian-hacking-trump/510689/>

² <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/americas/hillary-clinton-blames-russia-vladimir-putin-election-hack-fbi-director-james-comey-a7480126.html>

³ Ibid

⁴ <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-38341569>

⁵ <http://nltimes.nl/2017/03/10/russia-hacking-dutch-election-warm-germany-france-interference-report>

⁶ <http://nltimes.nl/2017/03/10/russia-hacking-dutch-election-warm-germany-france-interference-report>

⁷ Ibid

Later in April 2017, the Head of US intelligence Richard Burr said that Russia is involved in the cyber-attacks on Emmanuel Macron's campaign.⁸ A few days later, it was confirmed by Macron's campaign manager as well and his campaign team banned the Russian news agencies. It was considered a "massive" computer hack few days before the final round of French elections. It was also revealed that Russia was financing Marine La Pen for the elections who was the rival of Macaron.⁹ But Russia totally denied targeting Macaron and also rejected the notion that Russia sanctioned the funding of any French candidate. Macron's big win in the election eased up the matter of this hacking and funding of elections. But since the hacking attempt, US government has started a thorough investigation.

Furthermore, now Germany is under high alert because of the upcoming elections. Earlier this month, a German spy warned the government that Russia might influence the coming elections.¹⁰ Hans-Georg Maassen a German official and the head of Bfv agency have warned that a 'disinformation'¹¹ campaign has started to spread fake news stories about the upcoming elections. Mr. Maassen also said that the agency has identified some phishing email attacks directed at Angela Merkel.¹² Garry Kasparov, a Russian chess grandmaster along with European and US media has said that Vladimir Putin wants to 'destroy' Angela Merkel and crush European Union by hacking German elections.¹³ It has also been said by Kasparov that hacking of computer can be one of the ways to terminate Merkel's election campaign.

It is to be noted that Kasparov organized protests against Russian strongman and also ran for presidency and later withdrew his candidacy because of some complications with police. Vladimir Putin once again denied any kind of interventions in the German elections. He said such kinds of allegations are only rumors.¹⁴ Also, Merkel in a meeting with Putin on May 2, 2017 said that¹⁵ European Union will lift sanctions against Russia when the Minsk Accords are implemented. So there does not really seem a proper reason for Russia to hack Merkel. Putin in the meeting with Merkel said that for many years we

⁸ <http://edition.cnn.com/2017/04/28/europe/french-election-russia>

⁹ <http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2017/03/24/russia-s-putin-picks-le-pen-to-rule-france.html>

¹⁰ <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/germany-spy-chief-russian-cyber-attacks-russia-elections-influence-angela-merkel-putin-hans-georg-a7718006.html>

¹¹ Ibid

¹² <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2017/jan/13/europe-germany-russian-hackers-bundestag-angela-merkel-election>

¹³ <http://www.express.co.uk/news/world/802908/Vladimir-Putin-Angela-Merkel-hacking-European-Union-German-election-Russia>

¹⁴ <http://www.cnbc.com/2017/05/02/merkel-germany-russia-putin-ukraine-elections.html>

¹⁵ <http://www.politico.eu/article/merkel-eu-will-lift-russia-sanctions-when-minsk-accords-implemented/>

have seen attempts to influence events in Russia via the so-called NGOs and even directly. Realizing the futility of such efforts, it has never occurred to us to interfere in other countries core affairs.¹⁶

Afterwards Merkel said that cyber criminality is a big crime and we are well aware that Russian military doctrine condemns it.¹⁷ Also, she said that we will have no problems in the political campaign in Germany even if there are disagreements. This to quite an extent reflects that Russia does not seem to be interested in hacking German elections.

By and large most of the fingers are pointing towards Russia for hacking the American and European elections. US intelligence agencies have concluded that Russian government has composed the hacks and also divulged democratic emails during the US elections 2016. And this was done in order to support Trump and discredit Hillary.¹⁸ Russia has repeatedly denied this.

On May 11, 2017 Trump sacked the FBI director James Comey. One of the reasons' brought forward for firing of James Comey is that Comey re-opened an investigation of Trump's suspected links with Russia¹⁹ during elections 2016. In answer to this President Trump said Russia is a ruse and I have nothing to do with Russia.²⁰ All such findings create more confusion about Russia's role in backing, as well as hacking US and European elections. This revelation of Russia backing Trump has created more skepticism about how Trump won the elections. Aggression has been shown by Democrats, and it has been suggested that a proper investigation regarding this should be carried on.

All things considered, apparently it seems that Russia has meddled with French and US elections and some solid statements have been put forward as well. But the clear-cut Russian denial of being part of this hacking activity is creating a lot of confusion, and supporting or backing candidates in US, French and Dutch elections are the cause of even greater slip-up. However, Russia is on the top list for cyber-hacking activity. Also, it is creating external and internal tensions in US and Europe. And time and again fingers pointing towards Russia have referred to it as an 'act of war.' Still many things remain unexplained and for now it is like a riddle wrapped inside an enigma!

¹⁶ <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2017/05/02/vladimir-putin-angela-merkel-tackle-problematic-differences/>

¹⁷ Ibid

¹⁸ <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-cyber-nsa-idUSKBN1872K1>

¹⁹ <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2017/may/10/trump-fires-fbi-director-james-comey-key-questions-answered>

²⁰ Ibid.