

Russians out to stir anger ahead of U.S. midterms



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WASHINGTON - A concerted Russian hacking and online disinformation campaign in 2016 sought to tip the U.S. presidential election toward Donald Trump. Two weeks ahead of midterm congressional elections, Moscow’s operatives are at it again.

The shutdown of thousands of Russian-controlled accounts by Twitter and Facebook — plus the indictments of 14 people from Russia’s notorious troll farm the Internet Research Agency — have blunted but by no means halted their efforts to influence U.S. politics.

#MAGA — Trump’s rallying call to “Make America Great Again” — remains the top hashtag among 18,000 tweets pumped out daily by hundreds of Russia-backed and allied Twitter accounts monitored by Hamilton 68, a tracking operation of the Alliance for Securing Democracy in Washington.

The leading linked website this week? A Republican voter registration page.

“After the election in 2016, there was a lot of talk about whether the Russians will be back in 2018,” said Suzanne Spaulding, senior adviser on the Homeland Security Program of the Center for Strategic and International Studies. “We now know: they never left.”

On Friday, the U.S. Justice Department announced criminal conspiracy charges against the Internet Research Agency clerk who manages the tens of millions of dollars the outfit spends on information operations in the United States and Europe.

The charges documented typical social media postings on IRA accounts that

purported to be American and were mainly aimed at fanning the flames of political anger.

“Just a friendly reminder to get involved in the 2018 Midterms,” said a tweet posted earlier this year by @johncopper16, which prosecutors say was an identity created by the IRA.

“They hate you. They hate your morals.... They hate the Police. They hate the Military. They hate YOUR President.”

Such divisive messages could influence the November 6 vote. While the presidency is not up for grabs, control of Congress is, making voter turnout in specific individual races important.

That is not what has U.S. experts worried the most, however.

“The biggest concern is really about undermining public confidence in the credibility of the outcome of the election,” said Spaulding. “It is really a broader campaign to undermine democracy.”

In 2016, according to U.S. intelligence, Russian President Vladimir Putin oversaw a concerted effort to disrupt the election and turn voters away from Hillary Clinton in order to help Trump’s campaign.

This included hackers of the GRU military intelligence body breaking into the computers and communications of Clinton’s campaign to steal documents that were later leaked to embarrass her.

Separately, the IRA ran a huge, innovative disinformation campaign on social media that stoked anger, confusion and divisions, and was also aimed at boosting Trump.

On Instagram, Twitter, Facebook and elsewhere, they created online identities and groups, gathered followings, endorsing, cross-posting and sharing fake news stories and angry messages, to great effect.

That continued after the election, until a year ago when Twitter shut down hundreds of accounts that it identified as part of Russia’s political meddling.

New accounts sprung up, many of them automated bots. Rather than creating

content, they amplified the huge amount of divisive material already out there, said Bret Schafer, who oversees the Hamilton 68 website.

“Now the people sitting at the IRA in St. Petersburg, they don’t even have to create this stuff. It’s created for them.”

One example, said Ben Nimmo, who runs the Atlantic Council’s Digital Forensic Research Lab, was the intense, two-week online battle over Trump’s Supreme Court nominee Brett Kavanaugh in September.

The massive amount of false reports and virulent personal attacks across social media came largely from American accounts, he said.

The Russians needed only stir the pot by retweeting and reposting them, which can be done with bots.

“There is a huge amount of angry Americans on both sides. They are more than capable of generating massive traffic on their own,” he said.

After Twitter launched a second sweep of fake accounts several weeks ago, the volume of Russian activity has fallen sharply, noted Nimmo.

The platform closed thousands of accounts that were Russian-run and had been responsible for some 9 million tweets, including those mentioned in Friday’s criminal complaint.

Since then, Nimmo said, “they have definitely been trying harder to hide their tracks.”

It’s not clear, however, whether they are making a concerted “third wave” effort at the moment.

Two weeks before the election, the Hamilton 68 site shows Moscow has not given up, even if the intensity of its activity has waned.

This week, the top 10 themes and linked articles in the accounts it monitors were strongly pro-Trump, pro-Republican: They highlighted Trump’s most recent rally, the alleged threat of a migrant caravan in Mexico and a hashtag newly favored by Trump, #jobsnotmobs.

James Lewis, a Russia and cyber expert at CSIS, thinks the Russians are honing

their skills for the next presidential race, rather than attempting to impact the current election cycle.

“They may be saving their best tricks for 2020,” he said.

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