



PISM | POLSKI INSTYTUT SPRAW MIĘDZYNARODOWYCH
THE POLISH INSTITUTE OF INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS

BULLETIN

No. 8 (948), 24 January 2017 © PISM

Editors: Sławomir Dębski (PISM Director) ● Katarzyna Staniewska (Managing Editor)
Karolina Borońska-Hryniewiecka ● Anna Maria Dyer ● Patryk Kugiel ● Sebastian Płóciennik
Patrycja Sasnal ● Rafał Tarnogórski ● Marcin Terlikowski ● Tomasz Żornaczuk

Intelligence Reports on Russian Interference in the U.S. Presidential Election

Marcin Andrzej Piotrowski

Reports published by American intelligence confirm Russian special services' interference in the 2016 presidential campaign. Russia used cyberoperations, media and other material to discredit Hillary Clinton to decrease her chances of success in the election and improve Donald Trump's prospects. Russia's ambitious operation will have profound consequences for the new U.S. administration and its foreign policy, and for American intelligence agencies. Appointments in the Trump administration are coinciding with ongoing investigations into some of the new president's advisors' ties to Russia, and with two U.S. Senate panel inquiries on American intelligence failures and mistakes in cyberdefence.

After the U.S. presidential election, media reports offered differing assessments of Russian intentions based on leaks from the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) and Central Intelligence Agency (CIA). Cyberattacks by Russian intelligence services were first mentioned in a joint statement by the Office of the Director of National Intelligence (ODNI) and the Department of Homeland Security (DHS). This became the foundation of President Barack Obama's decision to prepare and publish intelligence assessments of Russian activities during the election campaign. Obama ordered the ODNI to prepare a report summarising knowledge and conclusions about Russia's influence on the election. At the end of 2016, he signed sanctions against Russian intelligence officers and companies delivering software and hardware to them. Obama also expelled 35 Russian diplomats from the United States.

U.S. Intelligence during the Campaign. James Clapper, former director of National Intelligence, has in recent years warned many times about Russia's growing cybercapabilities. At the beginning of the Hillary Clinton and Trump campaigns, the FBI and DHS published unclassified memos about cyberthreats to presidential and congressional elections. Russian operations became public knowledge when servers of the Democratic National Committee and the Clinton Foundation were hacked. Material compromising Clinton were published by DCLeaks and WikiLeaks, becoming one of the factors in a drop in the Democratic candidate's public support. However, it should be stressed that the operations noted by the FBI had no apparent influence on electoral registration or vote counting. Such a scenario had been mooted by many non-governmental experts, and until November 2016 many of Trump's supporters believed it was possible that election results may be manipulated in Clinton's favour.

The joint statement by the ODNI and DHS in October 2016 indicated the Russian government's responsibility for a series of cyberattacks on the Democratic National Committee and many other American institutions. Further joint analysis by the DHS and FBI presented more technical details these attacks. Their report summarised previous investigations and disclosed two distinct Russian operations against the Democrats. According to the report, these two operations were conducted by Russian Military Intelligence (GRU) and Federal Security Service (FSB) hackers. The FSB attacks, carried out in 2015, aimed to gather intelligence while the intention of the hacking by GRU operation in 2016 was to compromise Clinton. The report by the DHS and FBI also confirmed previous assessments by private companies, which also investigated attacks on the servers of Clinton staff. The joint report by both agencies also included recommendations for the U.S. private sector and citizens, about how to defend against similar cyberattacks.

The ODNI Report. U.S. intelligence chiefs gave testimony to Congress on 5 and 6 January 2017, and presented their assessment to President-elect Trump, while at the same time publishing an unclassified intelligence report. Alongside this report, the U.S. intelligence community also prepared a secret version for select members of Congress, and a top-secret report for Obama and Trump. This report was prepared by officers from the National Intelligence Council (NIC,

part of the ODNI), responsible for analysis based on all available sources and materials from all 16 U.S. intelligence and counter-intelligence agencies. In this case, instead of a *National Intelligence Estimate*, which is usually a very detailed and time-consuming task, the NIC prepared a report called *Intelligence Community Assessment*. However, the shorter and even sanitised assessment do not detract from the fact that the document presents the joint conclusions of U.S. agencies dealing with Russian issues. It is likely that the assessment was based on information from the CIA, FBI and NSA, and it cannot be excluded that there was input from allied agencies (media are speculating about the British GCHQ and services from one Baltic State).

The “key judgment” portion of the NIC report expresses the high confidence of all the agencies that Russian President Vladimir Putin ordered “active measures” during the U.S. presidential campaign (such activities are defined by Russia as “disinformation,” using their own intelligence officers and agents of influence). Russia’s initial intention was to undermine the confidence of Americans in their electoral process, and to limit Clinton’s chances of success. This approach evolved over the course of campaign, as Trump (Putin’s preferred candidate) saw his own prospects improve. The unclassified version of the report also explains WikiLeaks’ role in the GRU operation, and highlights the support that Russian intelligence received via propaganda (*RT* and *Sputnik*) and a “trolling” campaign directed by the Internet Research Agency. According to the NIC, Russian “troll farms” were by the end of 2015 giving priority to the U.S. election, above even Ukrainian issues. The NIC report also indicates an increase in Russian cyberattacks targeting the U.S. administration, think tanks and citizens since November 2016. Russian hackers are believed to be gathering information on the Trump Administration’s plans, and anything that may prove useful for future “active measures.” The full classified report includes several appendices, while the unclassified version contains appendix analysis of RT’s presence on the American media market. The unclassified report lacks clear references to alleged contacts between advisors of Putin and Trump, although it seems that such contacts might be taken into account because this version mentions business and political ties between the Kremlin, former Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi and former German Chancellor Gerhard Schröder.

Congressional Inquiries. Following Trump’s election victory, some influential members of Congress appealed to leaders of both parties to order a full investigation into Russian activities and possible ties between Moscow and advisors to the president-elect. The idea of a bi-partisan investigative panel, modelled on the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States (better known as 9/11 Commission), was also suggested. This commission would review all intelligence documents, assess the effectiveness of the Obama Administration’s counter-measures to Russian activities, and prepare public and classified reports. This approach is not supported by the Republican majority in Congress, and currently seems unlikely to happen. However, Congress is able to initiate other inquiries aimed at uncovering more details than those contained in the unclassified and secret *Intelligence Community Assessment*. Moreover, members of Congress and the public have expressed interest in investigations allegedly conducted by the FBI into ties between Trump’s confidantes and Russians. It is realistic to expect this type of analysis to be carried out by the Senate Armed Services Committee (SASC), which wants an inquiry on the state of U.S. cybersecurity. An SASC will review the activities of the Obama Administration, and propose new recommendations for cyberdefence and cyberdeterrence. A parallel inquiry will be organised by the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence (SSCI), which might investigate intelligence omissions and failures (it is worth noting that the inquiry into whether Iraq had weapons of mass destruction lasted from 2003 to 2008). Mandate of this inquiry by SSCI also will include testimony from officials of the Obama and Trump administrations.

That the alleged ties between Trump’s advisors and Russia are of importance for senators was highlighted when American media published a controversial dossier prepared by private British company Orbis Business Intelligence, which operates in Russia and among Russian-speaking diasporas in the West. A synopsis of the dossier’s most sensational content, relating to the possibility that the FSB could blackmail the new U.S. president, was also presented to Trump on 6 January. This synopsis was not an integral part of the NIC assessment, but copies of dossier were by that time already circulating among members of Congress and media. This dossier has not been used by the FBI, CIA or NSA for investigation or analysis. This is because the American intelligence community is in general highly critical of information from intermediaries, lobbyists and émigré or defector informants, bearing in mind how such sources contributed to an inaccurate *National Intelligence Estimate* on Iraqi weapons of mass destruction in 2002.

Conclusion. Published reports by the U.S. intelligence community confirms the influence of the “active measures” undertaken by Russian intelligence on the recent presidential campaign. These activities represented significant interference in the political process in the United States, but it is hard to obtain an objective measure of their direct impact on the electoral preferences of American voters. Nevertheless, even the incomplete information and general estimates currently available suggest one of the most sophisticated and ambitious operations carried out by Russian intelligence. For security reasons, the majority of the analysis by the CIA and NSA, and details of some investigations by the FBI, remain classified. The fallout from the GRU operation has become harmful to Trump in the short term, and may bring about a long-term conflict between the White House and the whole U.S. intelligence community. The lack of clarity surrounding many aspects of the situation could also have a negative impact on the appointment of new, high-ranking principals in intelligence agencies, who need Senate confirmation and votes. The two inquiries initiated by the Senate might last many months, which would complicate Trump’s plans for a swift improvement in U.S. relations with Russia. While neither inquiry might prove intelligence failure (the focus in this respect is likely to be on the FBI), they may settle some media speculation and offer a better understanding of the alleged ties between some of Trump’s advisors and Russia. In the long term, both Senate inquiries might be factor in a much wider conflict between Congress and the Trump administration regarding the strategic interests of the United States.