

Cyberattack on UK parliament stokes anti-Russia campaign

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3 July 2017

The propaganda campaign against Russia in the UK has escalated following an apparent cyberattack on parliament last month.

According to officials, the parliamentary network was subjected to a “brute force attack”—a crude hacking operation that targeted poorly protected email accounts. A parliamentary spokesman was quick to reassure reporters that “significantly fewer than 1% of the 9,000 accounts on the parliamentary network” had been “compromised” and that this was because of “the use of weak passwords that did not conform to guidance issued by the Parliamentary Digital Service.”

Coincidentally, just hours before the attack the *Times* reported that emails and passwords belonging to tens of thousands of government officials, including ministers, MPs and staff working for parliament, the police and Foreign Office had been sold on Russian-speaking hacking sites. Most had originated from the 2012 hacking of the LinkedIn social networking service. According to the *Times*, the three most common passwords police staff used for their hacked email addresses were “police,” “password” and “police1”!

Following the LinkedIn attack, and again in 2106 when it was discovered criminal gangs were selling them, users were advised to change their passwords. But it appears some MPs and parliamentary staff did not heed the advice.

Security industry experts cautioned against allocating blame for the latest cyberattack before a proper investigation. High-Tech Bridge CEO, Iliia Kolochenko, told the specialist ITProPortal website, “At this early stage of investigation, it would be inappropriate to speculate about the identity of the attackers. Such an attack is very simple and cheap to organise, and virtually any teenager could be behind it. However, for this particular incident, I would abstain from blaming any state-sponsored hacking groups. Because with such an

unacceptably-low level of security they have likely already been reading all emails for many years without leaving a trace.”

Despite such appeals for caution, politicians and the media rushed to condemn Russia. Leading the pack were Ewen MacAskill and Rajeev Syal in their *Guardian* piece, “Cyberattack on UK parliament: Russia is suspected culprit.”

The journalists brush aside qualms that “the investigation is at an early stage and the identity of those responsible may prove impossible to establish with absolute certainty” to declare, “Moscow is deemed the most likely culprit.”

They based their conclusion on the unfounded suspicions of MPs and the regurgitation of unsubstantiated allegations about past claims of Russian hacking, which have now taken on the status of unquestionable fact for the liberal imperialist pro-war lobby. These included the assertion that “US intelligence agencies concluded that Russia hacked and leaked Democratic party communications and disseminated fake news with the aim of getting Donald Trump elected” during the 2016 US presidential campaign. Another was that “[i]n May, Russia was linked to the hacking of France’s computer systems during the presidential campaign, taking data from Emmanuel Macron’s campaign and leaking it to the public.”

In fact, the opposite is true. In January, US intelligence agencies concluded that the claims of Russian government hacking and leaking of Democratic Party emails had no foundation in fact. They were unable to substantiate the allegations made by the CIA and the director of national intelligence, James Clapper, in October that Russia illegally obtained documents from the Democratic National Committee and Hillary Clinton’s campaign chairman, John Podesta.

And following the hack of Macron’s campaign,

Guillaume Poupard, the head of France's cybersecurity agency, declared that there was "no trace" of Russian interference and that it "was so generic and simple that it could have been practically anyone."

The continuing media offensive is aimed at whipping up public support for a more confrontational attitude toward Russia. The *Guardian* plays a particular role aimed at bolstering a constituency for war among privileged layers of the middle class.

The drive to confront Russia has taken on an added urgency since the humiliating defeat suffered by the US in December when Syrian government forces, backed by Russian air power and Iranian troops, recaptured the country's largest city, Aleppo. The Syrian Army has now captured virtually all of Aleppo province and is just a few miles from neighbouring Raqqa province, where US-backed Syrian Democratic Forces are still struggling to regain control of the Islamic State's "capital" there.

The continued survival of the Assad regime has been an acute embarrassment for the CIA, which has undertaken a six-year-long campaign for regime change in Syria, Russia's only Arab ally in the Middle East. The election of Hillary Clinton, who had repeatedly called for the imposition of a "no fly" zone and other aggressive measures against Syria, was supposed to bolster these objectives.

However, they were upset by the surprise election of Trump, who though no less committed to militarism and war, generally speaks for a faction within the US ruling class that sees China, rather than Russia, as the more immediate enemy.

It is to put pressure on the Trump administration to shift its foreign policy objectives toward Syrian regime change and confronting Russia that the unrelenting campaign of anti-Russian hysteria has been conducted.

For its part, the anti-Russia campaign in the UK points to the existential crisis facing British imperialism in the aftermath of the June 2016 referendum vote to leave the European Union (EU), which has forced the ruling elite to restate its claim to continuing relevance for the US as it seeks to maintain its military hegemony.

Such considerations, in addition to hopes of strengthening her government's hand in Brexit negotiations with the EU, were the prime factor in Conservative Prime Minister Theresa May's decision to call a snap general election on June 8. A major aspect of her election campaign, backed up by outbursts by retired military figures, was to portray Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn as a feeble pro-Russian stooge.

In recent weeks Defence Secretary Michael Fallon has boasted of the centrality of Britain's armed forces to the ongoing NATO encirclement of Russia and its unprecedented build-up on Russia's western border.

Last week Fallon committed the UK to backing future military action in Syria after ominous claims by White House spokesman Sean Spicer that the US had "identified potential preparations for another chemical weapons attack by the Assad regime that would likely result in the mass murder of civilians, including innocent children." An alleged April 4 chemical attack that killed dozens of civilians was the cue for Trump to order a cruise missile strike on Syria's Shayrat air base.

Fallon also attended the launch of Britain's largest-ever warship, the aircraft carrier HMS Queen Elizabeth. He was at pains to contrast it with what he called the "dilapidated" Russian carrier Admiral Kuznetsov, which sailed through the English Channel last year to join the Russian air campaign in Aleppo amid warnings that the Royal Navy had "ways and means" of protecting the warship from Russian intelligence gathering.

On Thursday, the Russian Defence Ministry responded that Britain's new carrier would be a "large, convenient naval target" in the event of war. Moscow warned, "It is in the interests of the British Royal Navy not to show off the 'beauty' of its aircraft carrier on the high seas any closer than a few hundred miles from its Russian 'distant relative'"

The ratcheting up of the anti-Russia rhetoric also serves the purpose of justifying further anti-democratic measures against the working class.

It was only last November that Parliament passed the Investigatory Powers Act, which US whistleblower Edward Snowden described as "the most extreme surveillance in the history of western democracy." At the same time, the National Cyber Security Centre was created as the "public face" of the surveillance agency, GCHQ.

The May government has now signalled its intention to impose huge restrictions on what people can post, share and publish online and boasts of its plans to make Britain "the global leader in the regulation of the use of personal data and the internet."



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