

PUTIN STARTS TALKING ABOUT HACKERS' ART IN ADVANCE OF YEVGENIY NIKULIN EXTRADITION

Yesterday, Vladimir Putin shifted from the public denials he has made about Russia's role in the hack of the DNC. Whereas even just days ago, he had denied any involvement, yesterday he suggested Russian hackers might on their own decide to hack Russia's adversaries out of patriotism.

Asked about suspicions that Russia might try to interfere in the coming elections in Germany, Mr. Putin raised the possibility of attacks on foreign votes by what he portrayed as free-spirited Russian patriots. Hackers, he said, "are like artists" who choose their targets depending how they feel "when they wake up in the morning." Any such attacks, he added, could not alter the result of elections in Europe, America or elsewhere.

Artists, he said, paint if they wake up feeling in good spirits while hackers respond if "they wake up and read that something is going on in interstate relations" that prompts them to take action. "If they are patriotically minded, they start making their contributions – which are right, from their point of view – to the fight against those who say bad things about Russia," Mr. Putin added, apparently referring to Hillary Clinton.

Putin's change, to the extent it is one, may reflect recent events in Prague, where Russian hacker Yevgeniy Nikulin had a hearing on America's extradition request. As the Guardian

describes, the Czechs seem fairly close to approving Nikulin's extradition to the US.

A 17-page affidavit by [FBI Agent Jeffrey] Miller, seen by the Guardian, outlines the evidence against Nikulin to the Czech court. The affidavit lists some of the aliases Nikulin is alleged to have used, including Chinabig01, Eugene, Uarebeenhacked, John Pattison and itBlackHat.

According to Miller's affidavit, the FBI evidence is based on "witness interviews including confidential sources, ISP records, court-authorised electronic interceptions, and other sources". Some of the electronic intercepts were emails from the Gmail account of Alexei Belan, a hacker on the FBI wanted list for allegedly conspiring with Russian FSB agents to perpetrate a huge hack on Yahoo in 2014. Belan is on the FBI's cyber top 10 most wanted list. None of the raw evidence was provided to the court.

The affidavit relates solely to the hacking of LinkedIn, Dropbox and Formspring in 2012, and does not mention any election hacking.

However, Nikulin wrote in a letter from prison that Miller had interrogated him in Prague on 7 February and raised the election hacking. Excerpts of the letter were provided to the Guardian by Nikulin's lawyers, but there is no way of substantiating the claims he made.

Nikulin claimed Miller demanded he admit to hacking the DNC servers as part of what the FBI is said to have claimed was a nefarious plot ultimately ordered by Trump, and promised him good treatment in the US if he cooperated. Nikulin wrote that he rejected the offer.

While the focus on the Russian hack has always centered on an alleged phish, in fact the mailboxes sent to Wikileaks better match up with credentials made available via the theft Nikulin is alleged to have carried out; the passwords of most of the people would have been available in barely encrypted format. And the mention of Alexey Belen might tie the Yahoo hack to the DNC hack as well.

Nikulin has been telegraphing his claim the US offered him a cooperation agreement for some time. It doesn't sound legit – after all, the FBI would be as interested in implicating Russia as Trump. But it may be the best way for him to communicate with the Russian government, including Putin, about what kind of story he might proffer to the FBI.

If so, Putin appears to have gotten the message.