

Microsoft uncovers more Russian hacking ahead of midterms

August 21 2018, by Matt O'brien



In this Nov. 7, 2017, file photo, a man is silhouetted as he walks in front of Microsoft logo at an event in New Delhi, India. Microsoft says it's uncovered new Russian hacking attempts targeting U.S. political groups ahead of the midterm elections. The company said Tuesday, Aug. 21, 2018, that a hacking group tied to the Russian government created fake internet domains that appeared to spoof two conservative organizations: the Hudson Institute and the International Republican Institute. (AP Photo/Altaf Qadri, File)

Microsoft has uncovered new Russian hacking efforts targeting U.S.

political groups ahead of the midterm elections.

The company said Tuesday that a group tied to the Russian government created fake websites that appeared to spoof two American conservative organizations: the Hudson Institute and the International Republican Institute. Three other fake sites were designed to look as if they belonged to the U.S. Senate.

Microsoft didn't offer any further description of the fake sites, although it has previously outlined in court filings how this hacking group operated a network of fake sites designed to trick victims into installing malicious software.

Russian officials dismissed the company's claims as unfounded. Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov cited the lack of detail on the hack, and said it wasn't clear "who the hackers in question are" and how they could distort the U.S. electoral system.

The revelation of new hacking efforts arrives just weeks after a similar Microsoft discovery led Sen. Claire McCaskill, a Missouri Democrat who is running for re-election, to reveal that Russian hackers tried unsuccessfully to infiltrate her Senate computer network.



In this Dec. 30, 2006, file photo with the Capitol in the background, American flags fly at half-staff at the foot of the Washington Monument in Washington. Microsoft has uncovered new hacking attempts by Russia targeting U.S. political groups ahead of the midterm elections. The company said Tuesday, Aug. 21, 2018, that a group tied to the Russian government created fake websites that appeared to spoof two American conservative organizations: the Hudson Institute and the International Republican Institute. Three other fake sites were designed to look as if they belonged to the U.S. Senate. (AP Photo/Carolyn Kaster, File)

The hacking attempts mirror similar Russian attacks ahead of the 2016 election, which U.S. intelligence officials have said were focused on helping to elect Republican Donald Trump to the presidency by hurting his Democratic opponent, Hillary Clinton.

This time, more than helping one political party over another, "this activity is most fundamentally focused on disrupting democracy," Brad

Smith, Microsoft's president and chief legal officer, said in an interview this week.

Smith said there is no sign the hackers were successful in persuading anyone to click on the fake websites, which could have exposed a target victim to computer infiltration, hidden surveillance and data theft. Both conservative think tanks said they have tried to be vigilant about "spear-phishing" email attacks because their global pro-democracy work has frequently drawn the ire of authoritarian governments.

"We're glad that our work is attracting the attention of bad actors," said Hudson Institute spokesman David Tell. "It means we're having an effect, presumably."



In this April 28, 2015, file photo, a man walks past a Microsoft sign set up for the Microsoft BUILD conference at Moscone Center in San Francisco. Microsoft has uncovered new hacking attempts by Russia targeting U.S. political groups ahead of the midterm elections. The company said Tuesday, Aug. 21, 2018, that a group tied to the Russian government created fake websites that appeared to spoof two American conservative organizations: the Hudson Institute

and the International Republican Institute. Three other fake sites were designed to look as if they belonged to the U.S. Senate. (AP Photo/Jeff Chiu, File)

The International Republican Institute is led by a board that includes six Republican senators, and one prominent Russia critic and Senate hopeful, Mitt Romney, who is running for a Utah seat this fall.

The group's president, Daniel Twining, said in a statement that the apparent hacking is "consistent with the campaign of meddling that the Kremlin has waged against organizations that support democracy and human rights."

"It is clearly designed to sow confusion, conflict and fear among those who criticize (Vladimir) Putin's authoritarian regime," Twining wrote.

Microsoft calls the hacking group Strontium; others call it Fancy Bear or APT28. An indictment from U.S. special counsel Robert Mueller has tied it to Russian's main intelligence agency, known as the GRU, and to the 2016 email hacking of both the Democratic National Committee and the Clinton campaign.



In this July 9, 2018, file photo, the U.S. Capitol dome is seen in Washington. Microsoft has uncovered new hacking attempts by Russia targeting U.S. political groups ahead of the midterm elections. The company said Tuesday, Aug. 21, that a group tied to the Russian government created fake websites that appeared to spoof two American conservative organizations: the Hudson Institute and the International Republican Institute. Three other fake sites were designed to look as if they belonged to the U.S. Senate. (AP Photo/Carolyn Kaster, File)

"We have no doubt in our minds" who is responsible, Smith said.

Microsoft has waged a legal battle with Strontium since suing it in a Virginia federal court in summer 2016. The company obtained court approval last year allowing it to seize certain fake domains created by the group. It has so far used the courts to shut down 84 fake websites created by the group, including the most recent six announced Tuesday.

Microsoft has argued in court that by setting up fake but realistic-looking domains, the hackers were misusing Microsoft trademarks and services to hack into targeted computer networks, install malware and steal sensitive emails and other data.

Smith also announced Tuesday that the company is offering free cybersecurity protection to all U.S. political candidates, campaigns and other political organizations, at least so long as they're already using Microsoft's Office 365 productivity software. Facebook and Google have also promoted similar tools to combat campaign interference.

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Citation: Microsoft uncovers more Russian hacking ahead of midterms (2018, August 21) retrieved 30 May 2023 from <https://phys.org/news/2018-08-microsoft-uncovers-russian-midterms.html>

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