Report Warns that Russian Hacking in Catalonia Could Intensify

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A new report says that Russian **hacking** operations to support Catalonian independence continue and could intensify.

The Spanish Defense Ministry's Center for Strategic and Defense Studies published the report this week. It says Russia is **destabilizing** Spain as tensions grow in the northeastern **region**.

Spanish Prime Minister Mariano Rajoy hoped to ease tensions by holding local elections last month. Instead, the voting returned the pro-independence majority to the regional parliament.

In another protest of the Spanish government, the party then nominated exiled leader Carles Puigdemont as president.

Social media interference

Spanish defense minister Maria Dolores Cospedal, as well as EU and NATO officials, have expressed suspicion about Russian interference in Catalonia.

Cospedal has resisted blaming Russia directly. However, in November she said that the government was examining how thousands of **robot accounts** supporting Catalonia's independence operated from Russia.

Russian foreign minister Sergei Lavrov has accused Spain of trying to "blame Russia for its **internal** weaknesses."

Spain has recorded a 2,000 percent increase in social media traffic since Catalans voted for and then declared independence late last year. The Spanish government enforced direct rule over the region after the declaration. It also ordered the arrest of Puigdemont.

Spain's defense ministry says it agrees with the report.

University of Barcelona political scientist, Josep Basques, wrote the report. He said Russia is using Spain's conflict to weaken NATO. He also said similar efforts could be repeated in other European countries with pro-independence movements.

Operations from a "troll farm"

A majority of the pro-independence social media traffic has been linked to a Russian "troll farm" in a building near St. Petersburg. A company called Internet Research, or IR, is based in the building owned by Evgeny Prigozhin. Prigozhin is closely linked in business to Russian president Vladimir Putin.

Former employees have told Western media that IR employs hackers, bloggers and writers to spread false news reports supportive of the Russian government.

Manuel Huerta is a Spanish computer system security expert. He said IR employees can create any kind of news, commentary and opinion extremely quickly.

Katrin Palanska is a Ukrainian computer networks expert. She says IR also targets Ukraine and Baltic states where Russia supports separatist movements. Russian computer attacks are increasingly common, she says, and have included attempts to enter Ukraine's electrical system and government records.

Anti-independence reporters in Catalonia say hackers in Russia have attacked press websites and email accounts.

Eric Encinas, publisher of a digital magazine, told VOA that in the past month he has received notices of unusual activity in his email accounts. The activity was linked to Ekaterinburg, Russia, home to the IR troll farm.

Venezuela's role

Spanish defense officials say over 30 percent of robot accounts supporting Catalonian independence are based in Venezuela. That country's president, Nicolas Maduro, a Russian ally, has attacked Rajoy for supporting opposition to Venezuela's government.

Accounts such as #VenezuelaSalutesCatalunya have posted messages calling Rajoy a "dictator" and telling Catalans to "resist."

I'm Phil Dierking.

Martin Arostegui originally wrote this story for the Associated Press. Phil Dierking adapted this story for VOA Learning English. Caty Weaver was the editor.

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Words in This Story

hack - n. to secretly get access to the files on a computer or network in order to get information, cause damage, etc.

destabilize - v. to cause (something, such as a government) to be unable to continue existing or working in the usual or desired way

region - n. a part of a country, of the world, etc., that is different or separate from other parts in some way

robot - n. a real or imaginary machine that is controlled by a computer and is often made to look like a human or animal

account - n. a company's record of the products or services used by a customer and of the money that the customer owes or has paid to the company

internal - adj. existing or located on the inside of something

blogger - n. someone who writes about personal opinions, activities, and experiences online

cyberattacks - n. an attempt by hackers to damage or destroy a computer network or system.

cybersecurity - n. the state of being protected against the criminal or unauthorized use of electronic data, or the measures taken to achieve this.

profile - n. a brief written description that provides information about someone or something

troll farm - n. An organization whose employees or members attempt to create conflict and disruption in an online community by posting deliberately inflammatory or provocative comments.