

Obama's Sanctions Against Russia Must Lead to a Broader Strategy to Thwart Putin's Efforts to Destabilize U.S.

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These new sanctions the Obama administration announced Thursday in response to Moscow's hacking efforts to influence the U.S. presidential election are hardly the first against Russia -- and neither is the expulsion of 35 diplomats suspected as spies.

They nonetheless send a strong message and show the U.S. is taking Russia's hacking seriously, and sending a message to Russian President Vladimir Putin that it will no longer tolerate efforts to destabilize America.

Putin aims to undermine the very values and institutions on which our democratic system is built. It is hard to overemphasize what's at stake. That the Obama administration finally responded to Russian hacking, after months of reports of Russia's involvement in efforts to undermine the U.S. election, is a step in the right direction, even if a belated one.

The sanctions arise from Obama's 2015 executive order on malicious cyber-activities and target Russia's two main intelligence services -- the GRU and the FSB, as well as four GRU officers and three companies that supported GRU activities.

These sanctions will be difficult for President-elect Trump to repeal when he assumes office Jan. 20 because doing so would mean going against U.S. intelligence agencies' own findings.

The ejection of Russian operatives stands in contrast to Obama's earlier reticence to unveil classified evidence that he said would show Russia's links to the hacks. The expulsion of these individuals suggests the U.S. will treat at least some aspects of cybersecurity in full public view.

However, these steps alone are not enough. First, we still do not know the full extent of Russia's involvement. An independent, nonpartisan commission will be needed in Washington to investigate Moscow's cyber activities.

It's furthermore unclear what practical effect Obama's actions will have. The individuals named in the sanctions do not have assets or bank accounts in the West.

Sanctions are often a useful tool and have been very effective against Russia's defense sector in particular. Still, sanctions against Russia so far have been fairly limited and there is room for expanding them further in response

not only to Russia's hacking, but also its aggression in Ukraine and support for Bashar Assad's murderous regime in Syria.

But sanctions also should not be an end in themselves. They have so far not ended Putin's interference in Ukraine, even as they inflicted visible pain on Russia.

Rather, sanctions should be part of a broader strategy toward Russia that recognizes Putin's commitment to destabilizing and undermining the West, and that Putin's Russia is not going away anytime soon. We have yet to see such a strategy emerge.

Anna Borshchevskaya is the Ira Weiner Fellow at The Washington Institute. ❖

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