

Trump Invited the Russians to Hack Clinton. Were They Listening?

By Michael S. Schmidt

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WASHINGTON — It was one of the more outlandish statements in a campaign replete with them: In a news conference in July 2016, Donald J. Trump made a direct appeal to Russia to hack Hillary Clinton’s emails and make them public.

“Russia, if you’re listening, I hope you’re able to find the 30,000 emails that are missing,” Mr. Trump said, referring to emails Mrs. Clinton had deleted from the private account she had used when she was secretary of state. “I think you will probably be rewarded mightily by our press.”

As it turns out, that same day, the Russians — whether they had tuned in or not — made their first effort to break into the servers used by Mrs. Clinton’s personal office, according to a sweeping 29-page indictment unsealed Friday by the special counsel’s office that charged 12 Russians with election hacking.

The indictment did not address the question of whether the Russians’ actions were actually in response to Mr. Trump. It said nothing at all about Mr. Trump’s request for help from Russia — a remark that had unnerved American intelligence and law enforcement officials who were closely monitoring Russia’s efforts to influence the election.

[Read the indictment here.]

But the indictment did offer some clues about what happened, implying that the hacking had occurred later on the day Mr. Trump issued his invitation. He made the statement around 10:30 a.m. July 27 at his golf course in Doral, Fla. It was late afternoon in Russia.

“For example, on or about July 27, 2016, the conspirators attempted after-hours to spearfish for the first time email accounts at a domain hosted by a third-party provider and used by Clinton’s personal office,” according to the indictment, referring to spearfishing, a common tactic used to target email accounts.

The indictment said that on the same day, Russians began an effort to target 76 Clinton campaign email accounts.

Rod J. Rosenstein, the deputy attorney general and the Justice Department official overseeing the investigation by the special counsel, Robert S. Mueller III, said the authorities were not alleging in the indictment that Americans had knowingly been in contact with the Russians about the hacking.

“The conspirators corresponded with several Americans during the course of the conspiracy through the internet,” Mr. Rosenstein said. “There’s no allegation in this indictment that the Americans knew they were corresponding with Russian intelligence officers.”

Investigators for Mr. Mueller would like to ask Mr. Trump what he knew about the hackings. The president has refused for several months to sit for an interview.

At the 2016 news conference, Mr. Trump made a series of statements on Russia and raised questions about whether the Kremlin had actually been behind the earlier hacking of emails from the Democratic National Committee. Emails from the committee had been made public days before, on the eve of the Democratic National Convention, creating a significant distraction as the party formally nominated Mrs. Clinton.

“Nobody even knows this, it’s probably China, or it could be somebody sitting in his bed,” Mr. Trump said about possible perpetrators of the hackings. “But it shows how weak we are, it shows how disrespected we are. Total — assuming it’s Russia or China or one of the major countries and competitors, it’s a total sign of disrespect for our country. Putin and the leaders throughout the world have no respect for our country anymore, and they certainly have no respect for our leader.”

Mr. Trump also signaled then that he would be open to recognizing Russia’s annexation of Crimea from Ukraine. The Obama administration and the European Union had considered the seizure illegal and imposed sanctions.

“We’ll be looking at that,” Mr. Trump said when asked if he would recognize Crimea as Russian land and lift sanctions that had been imposed after the annexation. “Yeah, we’ll be looking.”

He still is, if his recent statements are any indication, as he prepares to meet one-on-one with President Vladimir V. Putin of Russia early next week in Finland.