

Russia-linked hackers accused of targeting COVID-19 vaccine developers

Enlarge / Test doses of another potential SARS-CoV-2 vaccine.
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Hackers backed by the Russian state are targeting pharmaceutical companies and academic institutions in the UK, US, and Canada that are working on potential COVID-19 vaccines, British intelligence officials have warned.

The UK's National Cyber Security Centre, working with Canada's Communications Security Establishment, attributed the attacks to hacking group APT29, also known as "Cozy Bear," which it alleged was "almost certainly" working for Russian intelligence services. The findings have been endorsed by the US National Security Agency.

Dominic Raab, UK foreign secretary, said it is "completely unacceptable that the Russian intelligence services are targeting those working to combat the coronavirus pandemic."

"While others pursue their selfish interests with reckless behavior, the UK and its allies are getting on with the hard work of finding a vaccine and protecting global health," he said. "The UK will continue to counter those conducting such cyber attacks and work with our allies to hold perpetrators to

account.”

APT29 has been linked to the hacking and theft of emails from the Democratic National Committee ahead of the 2016 US election.

Intelligence officials said the group used a variety of tools and techniques. However, they would not confirm whether any attempts to steal intellectual property from vaccine researchers had been successful.

Dmitry Peskov, president Vladimir Putin’s spokesman, told the FT: “We do not have information on who could have hacked pharmaceutical companies and research centers in the UK.

“We can say one thing: Russia has nothing to do with these attempts. We do not accept such accusations.”

The allegations about Russian hacking come ahead of the publication on Monday of the first clinical trial results from Oxford University’s much anticipated COVID-19 vaccine.

The results, which will appear in The Lancet journal, include what one senior Oxford scientist called “terrific preliminary data” on the way the inoculation stimulates immunity.

The scientist said the vaccine gave a double boost to the immune system in the 1,000 UK volunteers who took part in its phase one trial without significant side-effects.

Earlier this week, the first clinical trial results from another vaccine developed by Moderna, a US biotech company, showed encouraging levels of antibody production.

Russia has claimed that a COVID-19 vaccine developed in Moscow—one of scores being worked on worldwide to battle the pandemic—will begin phase three human trials next month.

The early clinical trials of the vaccine have not been peer-reviewed, and no detailed information on the results have been

published. But Kirill Dmitriev, head of the Russian Direct Investment Fund, on Thursday suggested that Moscow planned to produce more than 200 million doses of the vaccine by the end of this year and seek to inoculate the Russian population by early 2021.

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