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Moscow on the Potomac

Trump's Worrisome Ties to Russia

By CAP National Security and International Policy Team

December 2016

Center for American Progress



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Introduction and summary

On October 16, 2016, the U.S. Director of National Intelligence James Clapper and Secretary of Homeland Security Jeh Johnson issued an extraordinary statement, indicating that the “U.S. Intelligence Community is confident that the Russian Government directed the recent compromises of e-mails from U.S. persons and institutions, including from U.S. political organizations.”¹ The release of this hacked information was all directed at the Democratic presidential campaign and its affiliates, with no hacked information leaked regarding the campaign of the Republican presidential nominee, and now president-elect, Donald Trump.

These senior U.S. intelligence officials pointed out that Russia, under President Vladimir Putin, had used similar tactics across Europe and Eurasia to bolster right-wing nationalist parties and that “[t]hese thefts and disclosures are intended to interfere with the U.S. election process.” Director Michael Rogers, head of the National Security Agency, noted, “There shouldn’t be any doubt in anybody’s minds, this was not something that was done casually, this was not something that was done by chance, this was not a target that was selected purely arbitrarily. This was a conscious effort by a nation-state to attempt to achieve a specific effect.”²

A number of senior members of Congress reacted swiftly. Speaker of the House Paul Ryan (R-WI), who had been briefed by the intelligence community on the Russian cyberattacks, was unusually unequivocal, saying, “Vladimir Putin is an aggressor that does not share our interests.” Ryan went on to say that it certainly appeared Putin was conducting “state-sponsored cyberattacks on what appears to be our political system.”³ Rep. Will Hurd (R-TX), a former employee of the CIA, called for the expulsion of the Russian ambassador in Washington, noting, “This is a serious topic and an example of how the Russians are our adversary.”⁴ Sens. John McCain (R-AZ) and Lindsey Graham (R-SC) had previously spoken out in favor of a crackdown on Russia for its involvement in cyberattacks.⁵ And Graham has a particularly harsh assessment of Putin, stating, “Other than destroying every instrument of democracy in his own country, having opposition people killed, dismembering neighbors through military force and being the benefactor of the butcher of Damascus, he’s a good guy.”⁶

When former Massachusetts Gov. Mitt Romney was the Republican presidential nominee in 2012, he labeled Russia as America's most serious global threat. More recently he described Putin as a "thug" who "kills journalists and opponents."⁷

Yet, less than two weeks after Clapper and Johnson's October announcement—and despite receiving intelligence briefings about the Russian hacking and disinformation campaign—then-presidential candidate Trump sounded a great deal like Putin's defense lawyer. During a televised debate with Clinton, Trump alleged that the United States had no idea if the attacks came from "Russia, China or anybody else."⁸ He had earlier dismissed Russia's role in the criminal espionage, saying that the attacks might have come from "someone sitting on their bed that weighs 400 pounds."⁹ Since the election, President-elect Trump has continued his fantastical efforts to disavow the blatant interference by the Russians, even as President Barack Obama has tasked the intelligence agencies with providing a full review of Russian actions during the campaign.¹⁰

Then this month, *The Washington Post* revealed—and numerous other news sources confirmed—that the CIA concluded in a recent secret assessment that the direct goal of the Russian involvement in the U.S. election was to assist Trump's election campaign.¹¹ "It is the assessment of the intelligence community that Russia's goal here was to favor one candidate over the other, to help Trump get elected," a senior U.S. official told the *Post*. "That's the consensus view." Yet, even among a growing chorus for a major new investigation into the Russian hacking, Trump continued to pretend that the issue simply did not exist, saying it was "impossible to know" who was behind the hacks and denigrating the U.S. intelligence agencies that he will soon be leading.¹²

While historians may find Trump's election notable for many different reasons, it is hard to believe that they will not focus first and foremost on the fact that a U.S. presidential candidate and then president-elect, when presented with clear and compelling evidence that Russia was trying to undermine U.S. democracy, openly embraced such un-American activities and their corrosive effects, going so far as to call upon Russia to release additional information about Clinton.¹³ Tested in the moment, Trump repeatedly put his self-interest ahead of the national interest. Moreover, an examination of the record suggests that this is far from the first time Trump has exhibited a bizarrely pro-Russia and pro-Putin predilection. Most troubling, it appears that his financial obligations and a shady web of Russian links suggest the true motives beyond his unacceptable behavior.

A wall of denial

The Russian hacking episode was far from an isolated incident nor the first time that Trump adopted a line that looked as though it was first crafted in the Kremlin. Indeed, a close examination of his statements makes it clear that Trump often sounds more like a paid lobbyist for Putin than a credible voice for America's security. Many of Trump's outlandish defenses of Putin, outlined below, easily cross the line from extremely naïve to genuinely dangerous.

- After a surface-to-air missile shot down Malaysia Airlines Flight 17 over eastern Ukraine in July 2014, killing 298 men, women, and children—including a U.S. citizen—the Dutch government and U.S. officials conducted extensive and highly detailed investigations that pointed the finger of blame squarely at Russia. The Dutch investigative force determined that the deadly missile that downed the plane had been brought from Russia and fired by a group of Ukrainian separatists directly supported by Moscow.¹⁴ However, Trump, while calling the downing of Malaysia Airlines Flight 17 “a horrible thing that happened,” nonetheless all but denied Russian involvement, saying, “[N]o one really knows who did it.”¹⁵
- Subsequently, during the Republican convention, the only policy plank on which the Trump team actively mobilized was to kill language that would have supported giving Ukraine weapons to help fend off the Russian-backed invasion of the eastern parts of its territory.¹⁶
- In a July 2016 interview with ABC's George Stephanopoulos, Trump said of Putin and Russia: “He's not going into Ukraine, OK, just so you understand. He's not going to go into Ukraine, all right? You can mark it down. You can put it down. You can take it anywhere you want.” Stephanopoulos then had to remind Trump that Russia had already annexed Crimea and was directly supporting anti-government forces in other parts of eastern Ukraine.¹⁷

- When an independent inquiry conducted in the United Kingdom determined that Russian dissident Alexander Litvinenko was poisoned with radioactive tea by the Russian FSB in 2006—most likely under orders from Putin himself—Trump was quick to leap to Putin’s defense. When asked about the inquiry’s findings on the Fox Business Network, in language that now sounds like a familiar refrain, Trump responded, “In all fairness to Putin ... he hasn’t been convicted of anything. Some people say he absolutely didn’t do it. First of all, he says he didn’t do it. But many people say it wasn’t him. So who knows who did it?”¹⁸
- On the same theme of Putin killing opponents, in December 2015, Trump, when confronted by “Morning Joe” co-host Joe Scarborough on the issue, defended Putin, saying, “Well, I think that our country does plenty of killing, too, Joe.” Two days later, Trump expanded on those comments, saying of claims that Putin kills those who disagree with him, “I don’t see any proof.”¹⁹
- Again pressed by Scarborough to consider that Putin may indeed be directing such political killings, Trump demurred, “At least he’s a leader.”²⁰
- A November 2016, *Newsweek* article titled “Why Vladimir Putin’s Russia Is Backing Donald Trump” noted that, in several cases, the Trump campaign shared demonstrably fake news stories produced by Russian propaganda sites within hours after receiving them.²¹
- Trump has a history of lavishing praise on Putin to an embarrassing degree. In 2007, on the “Larry King Live” show, Trump announced that Putin is “doing a great job.”²² King himself went on to host a program on a Russian state-financed television show.²³ In 2016, Putin reciprocated, offering praise for Trump during the Republican primary, and the candidate responded, saying that it was a “great honor to be so nicely complimented by a man so highly respected within his own country and beyond.”²⁴
- When it comes to Putin—a man who has virtually eliminated democracy in Russia, invaded neighboring countries, and reportedly sponsored direct interference into the U.S. election—Trump seemingly just can’t contain himself: “I will tell you that, in terms of leadership, he’s getting an A.”²⁵

- One can't help but wonder what grade Putin gave Trump, who—while on the campaign trail—directly attacked the merits of NATO in terms that the Russian government no doubt applauds, claiming that the organization is obsolete and indicating that he would consider pulling the United States out of the alliance. Moreover, Trump made the case for ending the commitment by all NATO members to defend each other in case of attack.²⁶

Tina Khidasheli, the defense minister of Georgia, an important U.S. ally in Europe, described Trump's statements as the "biggest dream of everyone in the Kremlin." Khidasheli then added, "It's scary, it's dangerous, and it's irresponsible."²⁷

So how to explain Trump's cartoonish defense of all things Russian and Putin? A closer look at the web of people and money that tie Trump to Putin and Russia's often wildly corrupt ruling elite begins to provide an answer.

The web of shady connections

President-elect Trump was not always reflexively pro-Russia, and the roots of his embrace of Moscow are relatively recent. And, like so much of his business career, Trump's interest in Russia grew from financial desperation. During the 1990s, Trump found himself more than \$4 billion in debt to more than 70 banks, and a series of bankruptcies, heavy financial losses, and debt restructuring led almost all major American banks to simply refuse to do business with him.²⁸ Consequently, beginning in the 2000s, he began to rely very heavily on foreign banks for his lending,²⁹ and Russia—with its inner circle of wealthy oligarchs close to Putin and lax financial integrity laws—must have seemed like a cash cow to Trump.

As Slate editor Franklin Foer reported, Trump has attempted on at least five different occasions to launch large projects in Russia, including hotels, spas, and apartment buildings.³⁰ Both Trump and his son, Donald Trump Jr., have made repeated trips to Moscow in efforts to ingratiate themselves. After one such trip, the senior Trump practically crowed that “almost all of the oligarchs were in the room” for one of his meetings.³¹ Yet, all of these attempts at launching major developments in Russia fizzled, and Donald Jr., who traveled to Moscow six times in one 18-month period alone, was left to observe of the Russian business environment, “It is a question of who knows who, whose brother is paying off who.”³²

While Russia did not pan out as the location for grand new Trump developments, it did become an important wellspring for financial backing. In essence, Trump did not begin investing in Russia—rather, dark Russian money began investing in him. Trump has tried at times to deflect criticism of his deep Russia ties by tweeting, “I have zero investments in Russia,” but he has steadfastly refused to release his taxes or other information that would detail the level of Russian-linked investment in him.³³

Time magazine recently observed, “The truth, as several columnists and reporters have painstakingly shown since the first hack of a Clinton-affiliated group took place in late May or early June, is that several of Trump's businesses outside of Russia are entangled with Russian financiers inside Putin's circle.” The article went on to note, “[I]t is Trump's financing from Russian satellite business interests that would seem to explain his pro-Putin sympathies.”³⁴

Historian Francis Fukuyama similarly pondered the reasons behind Trump never having “uttered a critical word about Putin,” suggesting that Putin had hidden leverage “in the form of debts to Russian sources that keep his business empire afloat.”³⁵ And, certainly, the scramble for Russian money has entangled Trump with a web of murky figures and questionable associations, all of which seem to invariably link back to Putin and the Kremlin. Here are just some of the questionable Russian-linked individuals and associations tied to Trump:

Tevfik Arif and the Bayrock Group

Founded by former Soviet official Tevfik Arif, Bayrock Group is a development company with offices in Trump Tower in downtown Manhattan. According to Slate, Bayrock “put together deals for mammoth Trump-named, Trump-managed projects—two in Fort Lauderdale, Florida, a resort in Phoenix, the Trump SoHo in New York.”³⁶ Bayrock has been embroiled in long-running, complicated, and contentious series of lawsuits, initially launched by its former chief financial officer in 2010, that have alleged Bayrock has links to Russian criminal syndicates and \$250 million in tax evasion. Bayrock’s former chief financial officer, Jody Kriss, suggested that, at moments when Bayrock was running low on funds, large infusions of cash would come in from Russia or Kazakhstan from shadowy investors hoping to hide their money.^{37 38} Bayrock has called these charges “baseless,” and while some of the lawsuits have been dismissed, other variations have been refiled and are ongoing. Trump and Arif have also settled a somewhat overlapping lawsuit for several million dollars in which it was claimed that they had misled investors in Trump SoHo.³⁹

The New York Times notes that, according to one of this series of lawsuits against Bayrock, the company “brokered a \$50 million investment in Trump SoHo and three other Bayrock projects by an Icelandic firm preferred by wealthy Russians ‘in favor with’ President Vladimir V. Putin.”⁴⁰ The *Times* went on to report other key figures involved in these deals, including Soviet-born Bayrock associate Felix Sater—who declined to comment on dealings with Trump and Bayrock but who was “implicated in a huge stock manipulation scheme involving Mafia figures and Russian criminals”⁴¹—and founder of the Sapir Organization, Tamir Sapir, another former Russian-born real estate developer, now deceased, who lived in Trump Tower and was linked to Putin’s inner circle.⁴²

The Washington Post noted that when Trump invested in real estate in Panama, wealthy Russians “became a key market” based on their findings from reviewing separate litigation filed in Florida.⁴³ It came as **no surprise then when, in 2008**, Donald Jr. told a real estate conference, “Russians make up a pretty disproportionate cross-section of a lot of our assets.”⁴⁴

Paul Manafort

Given Trump’s reliance on Russian finance for his real estate deals, it was not surprising that he turned to Paul Manafort to serve as his de facto campaign manager during a significant stretch of the presidential race. Manafort is a lobbyist and mercenary political operative with a long and checkered past representing clients, many of whom are nefarious, for exorbitant sums, including important figures close to Putin. These previous clients, include Oleg Deripaska, a former member of the Soviet army “said to be ‘Putin’s favorite industrialist.’”⁴⁵ In 2008 Deripaska was denied entry into the United States because of his ties to Russian crime syndicates.⁴⁶ Interestingly, as *The Washington Post* notes, that same year, Deripaska sued Manafort in a Cayman Islands court, accusing him “of taking nearly \$19 million intended for investments, then failing to account for the funds, return them or respond to numerous inquiries about exactly how the money was used.”⁴⁷ According to the *Post*, court records show that as of August 2015, this suit is ongoing.⁴⁸

Manafort also represented Putin’s handpicked Ukrainian autocrat, former President Viktor Yanukovich, who hewed a strong pro-Putin policy after Manafort and Russian intelligence services helped him secure an election win in Ukraine in 2010.⁴⁹ As Franklin Foer notes, Manafort “became an essential adviser to the [Ukrainian] president.”⁵⁰ And *Time* magazine reported that secret ledgers in Ukraine detailed \$12.7 million in illegal and unreported payments to Manafort before Yanukovich fled into exile to—where else—Russia.⁵¹

Although Manafort resigned from the Trump campaign shortly after the story about the illicit Ukrainian payments appeared in the press, he has reportedly been advising the Trump transition team.⁵²

Rex Tillerson

Trump nominated Rex Tillerson to be the next secretary of state despite the Exxon Mobil Corp. CEO having no government or diplomatic experience. In fact, Tillerson's primary qualification seems to be his very close and personal associations with Putin. In 2013, after sealing investment deals with Russia's state-owned energy conglomerates two years prior, Tillerson was awarded the Kremlin's "Order of Friendship," Russia's highest civilian honor, by Putin.⁵³ In 2014, after Russia's military intervention in Ukraine, Tillerson spoke out against U.S. sanctions imposed on Moscow, which blocked Exxon Mobil's Russian deals and reportedly have cost the company more than \$1 billion.⁵⁴ Should the next administration lift these sanctions, "out of all the energy companies, Exxon would be the biggest beneficiary," commented energy analyst Brian Youngberg at Edward Jones.⁵⁵ Tillerson, who already holds more than \$140 million in Exxon Mobil shares, has also, according to CNN, "been promised more than 2 million Exxon shares over the next decade. That nest egg, worth a stunning \$184 million at current prices, poses ethical and legal questions given the tremendous impact the nation's chief diplomat has over Exxon's business."⁵⁶

Tillerson also has had a close personal relationship for over a decade with Igor Sechin⁵⁷—a former KGB agent and close Putin ally—who is the head of the Russian oil conglomerate Rosneft and also maintains an extensive network of current FSB links.⁵⁸ Sechin is one of those individuals currently under direct sanction by the U.S. Treasury Department because of Russia's illegal occupation of Ukraine.⁵⁹ The U.S. Treasury Department has said that, "Sechin has shown utter loyalty to Vladimir Putin - a key component to his current standing."⁶⁰ Hardline anti-American Russian officials have celebrated Tillerson's nomination.⁶¹ Tillerson was also the director of Bahamas-based Russian-U.S. oil firm Neftegaz.⁶² And, when it comes to potential conflicts of interest, Tillerson's are matched only by those of Trump himself.

Lt. Gen. Michael Flynn

The former head of the Defense Intelligence Agency, or DIA, retired Lt. Gen. Flynn has been selected by Trump to serve as his national security advisor. An avid distributor of fake news during the campaign, Flynn has demonstrated a remarkable inability to discern basic fact from fiction, which is extremely troubling considering he headed an intelligence agency and will be the Trump's key adviser on issues of war and peace.⁶³

Flynn, who was squeezed out of his position running the DIA due to claims of mismanagement in 2014, developed a cozy relationship with Moscow in recent years. Only 18 months after leaving his post at the DIA, Flynn was paid—although he refuses to reveal how much—to appear at a gala dinner in Moscow celebrating the anniversary of the Russian propaganda channel *Russia Today*.⁶⁴ At the dinner, Flynn was seated at the head table with Putin.⁶⁵ “It was extremely odd that he showed up in a tuxedo to the Russian government propaganda arm’s party,” a former Pentagon official told *Politico*.⁶⁶ Flynn subsequently made regular appearances on *Russia Today*, for which he was also presumably paid, though he has refused to answer questions on the subject.⁶⁷ At one point he declared, while appearing on the Russian propaganda channel, “[W]e have to try to figure out: How do we combine the United States’ national security strategy along with Russia’s national security strategy.”⁶⁸

Although not specifically an issue with regard to Russia, as part of Trump’s transition team, Flynn has sat in on classified briefings, which may have violated ethics requirements, since he continued to consult for foreign clients at the same time.⁶⁹ In addition, it was revealed that according to Defense Department documents, Flynn inappropriately shared classified military intelligence with foreign military personnel.⁷⁰ Defense officials have disputed Flynn’s claim that he had permission to share the materials.

Carter Page

One of the very first names Donald Trump cited as a key foreign policy adviser was Carter Page, a person largely unheard of in foreign policy circles. Indeed, the only international credentials that he seems to possess based on his somewhat-inflated resume is an unusual fondness for Russian oligarchs.⁷¹ Page claims to have advised Russian state-held natural gas company Gazprom and told Bloomberg News that he still holds shares in the scandal-plagued industrial giant.⁷² The Trump campaign briefly disavowed ties with Page after Western intelligence officials told well-regarded investigative journalist Michael Isikoff that Page had met with Igor Sechin—the Russian chief of oil giant Rosneft and former KGB officer during—the summer of 2016 and that the two had discussed the possibility of lifting U.S. sanctions against Russia.⁷³ Isikoff also indicated that U.S. intelligence agencies had also received reports that Page met with Igor Diveykin in Moscow, who is believed to have played a key role in coordinating Russian intelligence activities related to the U.S. election.⁷⁴ Page has denied those allegations.⁷⁵

Unsurprisingly, Page, who made a trip to Moscow in December 2016, was one of the first individuals associated with the Trump team to make the transparently ludicrous suggestion that the Russian hacks were actually a “false flag” operation by the United States to make Russia look bad.⁷⁶ Page has also made clear that Trump’s election would significantly boost the fortunes of some of his Russian confidants who have been hit by U.S. sanctions as a result of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine.⁷⁷

Julian Assange and WikiLeaks

The international nonprofit organization publishing news leaks and secret information, WikiLeaks, served as a vital conduit for the Russian election hacks. In August, even *The Intercept*, no cheerleader for Hillary Clinton, observed, “The WikiLeaks Twitter feed has started to look more like the stream of an opposition research firm working mainly to undermine Hillary Clinton than the updates of a non-partisan platform for whistleblowers.”⁷⁸ Indeed, WikiLeaks slowly bled out the hacks, making clear that their interest was not in transparency but in inflicting maximum damage on Clinton while distracting the media when negative stories on Trump emerged. For example, WikiLeaks released additional hacked material on Clinton literally minutes after Trump’s infamous “Access Hollywood” tape emerged.⁷⁹ Alina Polyakova, deputy director of the Eurasia Center at the Atlantic Council, commented, “I think the Russian government is in fact using WikiLeaks: the connection seems pretty clear to me.”⁸⁰ WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange, who is still resisting deportation related to rape charges in Sweden, claims WikiLeaks has no ties to Russia. Those claims, however, appear to be sharply undercut by diagnostics and investigations of the Russian hacks to date.⁸¹ It is also worth noting that Assange once was a talk show host on the Russian propaganda channel Russia Today. Additionally, at one point during his continued stint in the Ecuadorian embassy, where he has political asylum, Assange requested a Russian security detail.⁸²

Roger Stone

An infamous political operative who was implicated in Richard Nixon’s Watergate scandal, Roger Stone, served as an adviser to the Trump campaign.⁸³ He is also a former business partner to the aforementioned Paul Manafort. Stone repeatedly appeared to have advance knowledge of the timing and substance of the WikiLeaks hack releases designed to damage the Clinton campaign. Moreover, Stone admitted during the campaign that he had “communicated” with WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange.⁸⁴ So, although less of an issue with regard to potential direct links to the Kremlin, Stone did appear quite eager to facilitate and promote WikiLeaks.

Steve Bannon and right-wing nationalists

Steve Bannon has been tapped as Trump’s senior counselor. He is also the former head of Breitbart News, which has actively courted—and many view as the mouthpiece of—white supremacist and anti-Semitic groups.⁸⁵ It is no surprise that Bannon, Breitbart, and a constellation of right-wing nationalist groups all have strong threads that connect them to Putin and his policy of undermining Western democracies. Bannon has been openly supportive of Putin, praising him as “very, very intelligent” and as a man who adheres to “traditionalist values.”⁸⁶ Likewise, David Duke, the former Ku Klux Klan Imperial Wizard, has dubbed Russia and Putin as “the key to white survival” and, writing in 2005, said that “Putin and the Russian people dare to defend themselves from the powers of Jewish supremacism.”⁸⁷

Russia has become a frequent stop for leading figures in right-wing nationalist circles. Putin and the FSB, for their part, see support for far-right groups and actors in Europe and the United States as key to undermining Western institutions and democracies.⁸⁸

Aras Agalarov

Born in Azerbaijan, Aras Agalarov is sometimes referred to as the Trump of Russia.⁸⁹ Trump and Agalarov partnered on a Miss Universe Pageant in Moscow, and Agalarov has benefitted considerably from Russian government contracts, which *The Washington Post* notes is a sign of his “closeness to the Putin government.”⁹⁰ Trump and Agalarov have been eager to partner on real estate developments in Moscow, just another example of the many conflicts of interest that Trump has failed to address. Trump even appeared in the music video of Agalarov’s aspiring pop-musician son, Emin.⁹¹

Richard Burt

A former Reagan administration official, Richard Burt has advised Trump on foreign policy issues and has been sharply critical of NATO and urged greater cooperation with Putin.⁹² Burt is also on the board of an investment firm with large holdings in Gazprom and serves on the board of the largest commercial bank in Russia, Alfa-Bank.⁹³ Burt is yet another pro-Putin Trump loyalist whose policy perspective appears to be well lubricated by financial interests in Moscow.

Burt helped provide input to Donald Trump's first major foreign policy speech of the campaign at the same time that he and a colleague received \$365,000 in lobbying fees during the first half of 2016 to promote a natural gas pipeline controlled by the Russian government.⁹⁴

Kompromat

Much of the focus on Trump's slavish support of Putin suggests that it likely stems from his deep reliance on Russian finance propping up his often shaky real estate empire. However, those familiar with the hardball tactics of Russian intelligence agencies have also suggested that Trump may also be pressured due to damaging kompromat, or compromising information, gathered on him by the Russians during his trips to Moscow. *The Guardian* noted, "[T]he FSB may have videoed Trump inside the suite. There is no proof that any compromising video exists. But the FSB would certainly have been interested in this kind of stuff: this is, after all, what it does."⁹⁵ An anonymous former Western intelligence official indicated that he had shared with the FBI findings that the Russian intelligence services had compromised Trump after a long campaign to cultivate him for their own ends.⁹⁶ *The New York Times* notes that a common Kompromat tactic is to ensnare politicians in sexually compromising positions.⁹⁷ Perhaps the most notorious moment of Donald Trump's campaign came as a result of the release of the now infamous "Access Hollywood" footage in which he crudely discussed grabbing women.

In addition to those individuals listed here, there were reports during the campaign that an unnamed Trump associate met clandestinely with a pro-Putin member of the Russian parliament.⁹⁸ Adding fuel to this speculation is the fact that, after the U.S. presidential election, Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Ryabkov practically bragged of his close ties to the Trump campaign, saying, "Obviously we know most of the people from his entourage."⁹⁹

The bottom line, according to David Kramer, a former State Department official in the George W. Bush administration, is that "[t]he relationships that Trump's advisors have had with pro-Russian forces are deeply disturbing ... Trump has staked out views that are really on the fringe."¹⁰⁰

Never before has a U.S. president appeared so deeply enmeshed and beholden to a foreign power whose interests are clearly hostile to our own.

The quid pro quo

With Trump so clearly a champion of Putin's Russia and continuing to deny the almost irrefutable evidence of Russian interference in the U.S. election, it is reasonable to ask what the quid pro quo between Putin and Trump will look like going forward. In many ways, Russia's support and cultivation of Trump has already yielded benefits beyond Putin's wildest dreams: a U.S. president skeptical of NATO; fond of spouting wild, unproven conspiracy theories; unwilling to even acknowledge deep Russian transgressions of international law and norms in Syria and Ukraine; as well as a penchant for appointing individuals to his cabinet with myriad ties to corrupt Russian oligarchs and current and former intelligence officials.

But one suspects that neither Trump nor Putin will be satisfied to stop there. Putin's wish list from Trump will surely include:

- Dropping the sanctions regime imposed on Russia after their invasion of Ukraine
- Hollowing out NATO commitments to protect the Baltic states and other key European allies
- Muting criticism of indiscriminate Russian bombing of civilians in Syria that has almost nothing to do with actually combating ISIS
- Ending U.S. support for moderate Syrian rebels opposed to Assad
- Recognizing Russia's illegal occupation of Crimea
- Supporting right-wing nationalist pro-Kremlin candidates in Europe
- Giving carte blanche to crack down on what remains of an active civil society in Russia

An embrace of any of these policies will only further demonstrate the dangerous path that Trump is propelling the United States down. It will mark a period when it is impossible to determine whether major national security decisions are being made in the U.S. national interest or in the interests of Putin and the shadowy cabal of dark Russian money with which Trump has surrounded himself.

Putin will likely allow Trump some small propaganda victories to demonstrate the flower of their new cooperation, likely including the potential release of Austin Tice, a journalist and former Marine believed to be held by the Assad government. Putin may also pull some of his forces back in certain locations, knowing full well that he can engage in further and even greater adventurism without resistance from Washington, as Trump effectively weakens key transatlantic and multilateral institutions. And, of course, Putin will be eager to shower business deals on U.S. firms willing to play ball. As Sergei Parkhomenko, a broadcaster for Echo of Moscow—a rare bastion of media not yet collapsed by the government—said:

Putin is convinced that absolutely everything in this world is done for money. He is a religious fanatic, and money is his god. With money, it is possible to solve any problem, buy any interlocutor. He bought the Olympic Games, he bought the World Cup. It will be easy to deal with Trump. He won't need to use words in negotiations, only figures. When they don't agree, it will only be necessary to find the right price.¹⁰¹

Conclusion

President-elect Trump may have used an infusion of cash from Russian oligarchs to keep his frequently struggling real estate afloat. And he may have used his embrace of Putin's authoritarianism to his short-term tactical gain, as he clearly benefitted from massive and unprecedented Russian interference in the U.S. election. Soon, Trump will be president, and it will be his job to serve as commander and chief to the U.S. armed forces and intelligence services.

Recognizing that it may be difficult for his secretary of state and defense nominees to hew to the discredited line that Russia was not involved in interfering in the U.S. election, it will not come as a surprise if Trump tries to soften his line on Russian hacking before the January hearings for Rex Tillerson and retired General James Mattis. In particular, Mattis has been blunt about Russia's intentions in past statements, saying in 2015 of Putin, "It is very, very hard to pull back from some of the statements he's made about the West, and I think that right now there are people questioning, 'Has Putin gone crazy? Is he delusional?' And I think that what we have to look at is that we have a Russia problem, not just a Putin problem."¹⁰²

So whether or not President-elect Trump continues to willfully deny the findings from 17 U.S. intelligence agencies that Russia interfered in the U.S. election as he stocks his administration with pro-Putin loyalists or if he simply tries to downplay his past denials, several steps are vital to ensure that Trump does not continue to put Vladimir Putin's interests ahead of America's own.

- **President-elect Trump must fulfil his long overdue commitment to release his tax returns.** Without full tax returns, and not just summaries, it will be impossible to judge to what degree Trump and his children rely on Russian financing, have assets comingled with FSB-linked Russians, and the scope of what continue to be staggering conflicts of interests.

- **A bipartisan national commission on foreign interference in U.S. elections must be established.** There must be a full and proper investigation of the methods and reasons behind Russian interference in the election. This is far too important a topic to merely treat as regular committee business in Congress, where it would be all too easy for one party to sweep findings with which it disagrees under the rug.
- **There must be full disclosure of foreign ties and potential conflicts by the president-elect and his nominees, with a focus on Russian entanglements.** The necessity for full disclosure should not be limited to just Senate confirmable positions but rather any top Trump administration posts. For example, National Security Advisor-designate Michael Flynn should disclose the scope of his payments related to his attendance at the Russia Today gala with Putin as well as any other speaking or appearance fees or consulting contracts with Russian entities.
- **President-elect Trump must fully divest himself from his business holdings and place them into a genuinely blind trust.** Simply claiming not to engage in “new deals” or handing management of his businesses over to his children,¹⁰³ even as they continue to be closely involved in government, leaves the United States open to corruption and foreign influence at the highest levels.

America stands at a critical threshold, not only regarding its future—but also regarding the fate of modern democracies across the globe. Allowing a hostile foreign power to influence our elections or failing to deal with massive and unprecedented foreign financial conflicts of interest would abandon the very principles upon which our constitution was moored.

Endnotes

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