



Conspiracy Against the United States

The Story of Trump and Russia

By Max Bergmann, Jeremy Venook, and the Moscow Project Team November 2018



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Introduction and summary

On January 6, 2017, the United States intelligence community released its unclassified, official assessment of Russia's unprecedented and unprovoked attack on the 2016 U.S. presidential election. In the report, all 17 intelligence agencies unanimously assessed that Russian President Vladimir Putin had personally "ordered an influence campaign in 2016 aimed at the U.S. presidential election" with the specific aim of electing Donald Trump. The assessment in effect concluded that there were two campaigns to elect Trump—one operating out of Trump Tower and the other out of the Kremlin.¹

Since then, the Russia investigation has revealed a sprawling scandal: Members of Trump's campaign, including those in the president's inner circle, were in constant contact with representatives of the Russian government throughout the election and transition. The two campaigns discussed tactics and policy, including the release of "dirt" on their mutual opponent, Hillary Clinton, and rolling back American sanctions against Russia. And they executed their strategies timed to maximally benefit Trump's chances of victory.

Following the scandal as it unfolds can feel like standing too close to an impressionist painting: It's easy to see the individual brushstrokes, but much harder to see the whole picture they create. This report, which comprises materials previously published by the Moscow Project along with new research and analysis, takes a step back from the canvas and the day-to-day deluge of stories to provide a clear picture of how Trump's long history of corruption created one of the biggest political scandals in American history.

That picture traces two main narratives, detailed in this report. In Chapter 1, the report explores Putin's vendetta against the West, which has spurred his current campaign of asymmetric warfare against the United States and Europe. Chapter 2 explores Trump's decades of corrupt business practices, which made him vulnerable to compromise by foreign powers. Connecting the two narratives is the Russian oligarchy, a class of businesspeople with whom both players have important and mutually beneficial

relationships. For Putin, that relationship is the key to both his ongoing kleptocratic regime in Russia and his attempts to influence politics abroad. He has effectively co-opted his country's wealthiest individuals to act as unofficial executors of his policy both at home and abroad. For Trump, Russian money has sustained his real estate empire through multiple bankruptcies and a financial crisis, often in ways that raise major red flags concerning money laundering and other corrupt practices.

The third chapter explores the convergence of these two men's interests—crystallized through Trump's emergence into American politics as a promoter of racist conspiracy theories and his growing ties to Russian oligarchs—that led the Kremlin to throw its weight behind Trump's bid for the presidency in 2016.

The fourth chapter delves into the details of that election and the evidence of collusion between the Trump campaign and the Kremlin. It not only details many of the key contacts and meetings between the two campaigns to elect Trump but also attempts to offer a straightforward explanation of how and why they worked together to ensure his victory. Though Trump and his allies have strenuously denied that collusion occurred, this report outlines the increasingly clear case that he and members of his campaign worked with the Russian government at the highest levels to swing the 2016 election in his favor.

This collaboration has created an ongoing crisis within the American political system. Chapter 5 shows that collusion was not confined to the election. Trump's team continued to have secret meetings with Kremlin-linked operatives throughout the transition period, while Trump's behavior toward Putin since taking office has demonstrated precisely why the Kremlin hoped to ensure his election. Chapter 6 then documents the ongoing investigation into Russia's interference efforts and the Trump campaign's complicity, documenting how the president and his congressional allies have repeatedly sought to undermine the investigation and hide the truth.

In response, the U.S. government must act swiftly to respond to Russia's unprecedented attack and preclude the possibility of future foreign interference. Doing so will require more than simply sanctioning the Russian government; it will require a concerted effort to reduce avenues for corruption within the United States, fix our broken campaign finance system, increase the security of American elections, and hold responsible those involved in the attack at home and abroad. Above all else, it will require a thorough investigation of what happened in the 2016 election and the vulnerabilities the Kremlin—and the Trump campaign—exploited in carrying out their attack. Recommendations for how the U.S. government can achieve these goals can be found in the seventh chapter of this report.

This seemingly complex story, in the end, is rather simple. In 2016, Russia launched an unprecedented and unprovoked attack against American democracy. That attack found willing partners in Trump and his campaign. For months, they conspired to undermine the U.S. electoral process in hopes of ensuring Trump's victory; for more than two years since, they have collaborated to deliver some of Russia's biggest policy goals and obscure what happened during the campaign. Overcoming that obfuscation to reveal the truth must be among the top duties of the next Congress.

An adversary returns

Russia's interference in the 2016 U.S. presidential election was not a unique nor singular event. Rather, it represents part of that country's broader strategy toward the West, one that has been largely defined by the man in charge for most of the past two decades: Vladimir Putin.

Spymaster in chief

Just as President Donald Trump's history in real estate shaped his worldview, biographies of Putin, such as Fiona Hill and Clifford Gaddy's *Mr. Putin*, Masha Gessen's *The Man Without a Face*, and Karen Dawisha's *Putin's Kleptocracy*, emphasize how the Russian president's background as a KGB officer in the waning days of the Soviet Union shaped his political philosophy.² As a former spy, they demonstrate, Putin places a high value on espionage and intelligence as foreign policy tools, and his governments have funded those tools accordingly.³

Putin's service in the KGB came at a pivotal moment not just in his own life—he joined in 1975, at age 22—but also for the Soviet Union. After training in Leningrad, he served in Dresden in East Germany from 1985 to 1990. In East Germany, Putin cultivated potential assets in the west and countered western agents in the east. When the Berlin Wall fell in 1989, Putin was leading the KGB's office when protestors massed outside its gates. As KGB officers frantically burned government documents to ensure that they would not fall into protestors' hands, Putin went outside and threatened the protestors with violence if they breached the gates. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, Putin was left searching for a new career outside of the KGB. He returned to Russia, serving as an adviser and later deputy chairman in the government of St. Petersburg before becoming part of the national government in Moscow.⁴

As his biographers note, Putin's trajectory through the government also inculcated in him an antipathy toward democracy and the West. Where America and the West saw the fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of the Soviet Union as democratizing moments, to Putin, it humiliated the once mighty Soviet Union, ended his career,

and introduced chaos into a previously stable system. The 1990s, during which he sought to reestablish his foothold in the Russian government, were marked by coup attempts, economic crises, and a weak state. Many in Russia—Putin by most accounts included—blamed this on the unbridled capitalism and corrupt privatization of industry that was backed by America and the West. As a result, it is no surprise that since Putin assumed the presidency in 1999, his responses to major world events reflect a worldview that sees Western-style democracy and liberalism as a geopolitical threat.⁵

Putin's presidency

Putin's tenures as president, as well as the interregnum when he was prime minister from 2008 to 2012, have seen popular uprisings undermine Russia's influence abroad, followed by responses from Putin that reaffirm his antipathy toward popular protests and liberal democracy. These include not only the 2003 Rose Revolution in Georgia, the 2004 Orange Revolution in Ukraine, and the 2005 Tulip Revolution in Kyrgyzstan, which deposed or endangered pro-Kremlin leaders, but also the Arab Spring protests in the Middle East that began in 2010.⁶ Putin, ascribing these uprisings to the CIA and U.S.-backed nongovernmental organizations, responded by expelling the Peace Corps and restricting foreign funding of NGOs in Russia.⁷

Putin reportedly became further convinced that the United States was trying to undermine his authority in 2011. After a wave of liberal uprisings in the Middle East that year, Russia held parliamentary elections in December, which were plagued with widespread allegations of fraud from both the Russian electorate and international observers.⁸ Russian citizens took to the streets in the largest demonstrations since the fall of the Soviet Union.⁹ When Hillary Clinton, then the U.S. Secretary of State, raised "serious concerns about the conduct of the election" and called for a "full investigation" into its legitimacy, Putin blamed her specifically for the protests.¹⁰ "She set the tone for some actors in our country and gave them a signal," he said. "They heard the signal and with the support of the U.S. State Department began active work" to undermine him and his government, according to Putin.¹¹

Putin's antipathy toward the West boiled over after the 2014 Euromaidan Revolution in Ukraine. Although Putin has never been shy about using force to subdue neighboring nations—the country launched cyberattacks against Estonia in 2007 and invaded Georgia in 2008—Russia's actions against Ukraine in 2014 nevertheless marked a turning point.¹² After Ukrainian citizens ousted the government's notoriously corrupt pro-Putin leader Viktor Yanukovich, the Kremlin seized on the ensuing chaos to illegally annex Ukraine's Crimean peninsula and invade its eastern Donbass region.¹³

Russia's attack on Ukraine took multiple forms. Along with the military occupation, Russia spread pro-Russian propaganda about the ongoing conflict through its state-run outlets, including the television networks RT and Sputnik, as well as via Kremlin-linked bots and troll farms.¹⁴ The Russian government had been financially supporting Yanukovych's regime; after the invasion of Crimea, the Kremlin also began funding separatist groups in an attempt to solidify its hold over the region.¹⁵

The West, including the United States, retaliated against Russia's aggression in Ukraine swiftly. Within two weeks of the invasion, the United States and several other countries sanctioned Russian state-backed institutions, including the energy giant Rosneft and the development bank Vnesheconombank, further angering Putin.¹⁶

Two additional events may have contributed to Putin's ire toward the United States and his decision to launch a campaign to disrupt the 2016 election. In 2012, the United States enacted the Magnitsky Act; the law permitted the U.S. government to sanction government officials implicated in human rights abuses, allowing a crackdown on Russian officials who were involved in torture and who sought to hide their money in the United States. By going after the very people on whose support Putin's power depends and whom he promised to protect in exchange for that support, these sanctions represented a direct threat to Putin's regime.¹⁷ As a result, the repeal of the Magnitsky Act has been the primary foreign policy objection for Russia and the Putin government; they have campaigned against both the law and its most visible proponent, the investor Bill Browder. Browder has suggested that Putin himself may have personally benefited from the financial crimes that led to the human rights abuses that in turn led to the Magnitsky Act's passage—crimes the Kremlin denies happened in the first place.¹⁸

Then, in May 2016, the International Consortium of Investigative Journalists leaked thousands of documents from a Panamanian law firm showing how wealthy and corrupt individuals use shell corporations to hide their money from authorities.¹⁹ The leak revealed, among other things, that one of Putin's closest associates, the cellist Sergei Roldugin, owns a network of shell companies hiding roughly \$2 billion, prompting speculation that Putin may have been using Roldugin to hide portions of his personal fortune.²⁰ The Kremlin's response to the leak was to attack the project, known as the Panama Papers, as "an undisguised paid-for hack job" against Putin; privately, however, Putin reportedly again blamed Clinton for the threat to his personal wealth and power.²¹

Active measures: War by other means

Since 2014, Russia has escalated its confrontation with the West. The resulting strategy has been dubbed many things by different analysts: “hybrid warfare,” the “Gerasimov Doctrine,” “political warfare,” and “active measures”—this last one being a reference to the KGB term for political and information efforts that fall between traditional espionage and public diplomacy.²² One of the key pillars of this strategy is to use the openness of Western democracy to undermine governments from within, a goal achieved through three often simultaneous lines of effort, outlined in the following sections.

Cultivating fringe movements and leaders in foreign countries

In recent years, the Kremlin has supported—financially and otherwise—candidates, parties, and causes in several countries. The clearest example of a Kremlin-backed political movement in a Western democracy is France’s National Front party, whose leader Marine Le Pen rode a crest of anti-Muslim and anti-immigrant fervor to a second-place finish in the country’s 2017 election; the party received loans of €11 million from the Kremlin-linked First Czech-Russian Bank in 2014.²³ Le Pen not only continually praised Putin throughout her campaign but actually traveled to Moscow in March to meet with the Russian president.²⁴ Her campaign also benefited from Russian hacking and release of emails from the campaign of her opponent, Emmanuel Macron.²⁵ However, in part due to France’s moratorium on media coverage of candidates in the last 44 hours of an election, the leak appears not to have had its intended effect.²⁶ Other European political movements with links to the Russian government include Brexit and its chief advocate Nigel Farage; the far-right German party Alternative for Germany; the Freedom Party of Austria, which signed a cooperation agreement with Putin’s party to act as an intermediary between Putin and Trump; and the Catalan independence movement, which has received significant support from Russian trolls, bots, and state television.²⁷

Russia has also supported multiple political movements in the United States. While most of the attention on the subject has gone to Putin’s support for Trump’s presidential campaign, there is also evidence that the Russian government has backed other fringe causes as well. For example, secessionist movements in both California and Texas have reportedly received office space, online support, and funding to attend conferences from sources with ties to the Russian government.²⁸ Through the state-owned television station RT, Russia also provided the left-wing Green Party with a media platform during the 2016 election. Presidential candidate Jill Stein became one of the channel’s top commentators during the campaign and was prominently featured as

counterprogramming to mainstream coverage of the presidential debates and election night.²⁹ Stein has denied any knowledge of Russian interference but has only partially complied with government requests for documents related to her campaign.³⁰

The common thread in the groups that Russia supports is not discrete policy goals but rather Russia's attempts to co-opt the movements in order to undermine democratic institutions and traditional sources of stability in the West. The European nationalist parties the Kremlin appears to support frequently argue against their countries' membership in the European Union and NATO, both organizations Putin openly rejects; separatist movements threaten countries' stability from within. Meanwhile, Jill Stein and the Green Party's critique of American democracy—that the two-party system is inherently and irredeemably corrupt—fits nicely with Russia's goal of ensuring Trump's election in 2016.³¹

Weaponizing the Russian oligarchy

As the Center for Strategic and International Studies report “The Kremlin Playbook: Understanding Russian Influence in Central and Eastern Europe” describes, the Russian government “has cultivated an opaque network of patronage across the region that it uses to influence and direct decision-making.” Under Putin, the Kremlin has developed a codependent relationship with the country's oligarchs, many of whom accumulated their wealth through illegal or ethically questionable means after the Soviet Union's dissolution. The otherwise kleptocratic Kremlin allows these oligarchs to retain their wealth through the understanding that they will act on Putin's behalf. Their duties in this regard range from elaborate displays of obeisance to, as “The Kremlin Playbook” explicates, developing corrupt financial relationships with politicians and businesspeople throughout Central and Eastern Europe to assist the Russian government in achieving its policy goals.³²

“The Kremlin Playbook” focuses mainly on countries in Central and Eastern Europe, many of which are or recently were emerging democracies and members of the Warsaw Pact.³³ However, there are indications that the Kremlin has pursued similar strategies in the West as well. For example, Arron Banks, a British financier who was one of the biggest funders of the campaign for the U.K. to leave the European Union, reportedly received multiple lucrative business offers from Russian diplomats and businesspeople in the lead-up to the Brexit referendum.³⁴ Banks has denied any wrongdoing, and there is no evidence he was involved in a direct quid pro quo with Russia. His associate Andy Wigmore, who—according to leaked emails—acted as a conduit for Banks, has claimed his only communications with the Russian government came in his capacity as a representative of the government of Belize.³⁵ However, their actions comport with

both the means of Russian interference and the Kremlin's broader goals of supporting nationalistic politicians and undermining the European Union. Underpinning the entire Trump-Russia scandal is Trump's long business history with Russian oligarchs, which, as explored in later chapters of this report, raises the possibility that he may have been cultivated in the same way for years, if not decades.

Exploiting the online environment to sow discord and influence liberal democracies

The 2016 U.S. presidential election revealed the Kremlin using many of the cybertools that they developed to influence campaigns. State-run media, most famously RT and Sputnik, support the Kremlin's favored candidate from platforms that, to those not aware of their provenance, are difficult to distinguish from mainstream news networks.³⁶ Paid troll farms and bots spread and amplify messages on candidates' behalf, purchasing advertisements on social media.³⁷ And hackers supported by the Russian government illegally gain access to opposing candidates' emails and other files and leak damaging information through cut-outs—or intermediaries—such as WikiLeaks.³⁸

Though the Kremlin tries to build plausible deniability into its techniques, such as by laundering leaks through third parties, and officially denies that it interfered in the 2016 election, it has in other ways been more upfront about its cyberoperations.³⁹ For example, in February 2016, Andrey Krutskikh, a senior Kremlin adviser on cybersecurity, gave a speech at the country's national information security forum that, in retrospect, eerily presages how Russia pursued its influence campaign in the 2016 presidential election. Speaking to his Russian audience, Krutskikh reportedly said:

You think we are living in 2016. No, we are living in 1948. And do you know why? Because in 1949, the Soviet Union had its first atomic bomb test. And if until that moment, the Soviet Union was trying to reach agreement with [President Harry] Truman to ban nuclear weapons, and the Americans were not taking us seriously, in 1949 everything changed and they started talking to us on an equal footing. I'm warning you: We are at the verge of having "something" in the information arena, which will allow us to talk to the Americans as equals.⁴⁰

Whether Krutskikh was specifically alluding to Russia's efforts to interfere in the 2016 presidential election remains unclear. But a year after he made his remarks, it was clear to the U.S. intelligence community that the capabilities he was referring to in the "information arena" had, indeed, changed the geopolitical equation.

Manafort in Ukraine

Few individuals could be better suited to orchestrate collusion with the Russian government than the second of Trump's three campaign heads, Paul Manafort. After pioneering modern influence peddling, Manafort took his talents to Ukraine in the 2000s to work for the Kremlin-backed politician Viktor Yanukovich and his party, the Party of Regions.

Manafort's work for Yanukovich epitomizes the Kremlin's strategy to influence politics in other countries. Manafort advised the party's candidates to capitalize on divisive social issues, such as ethnic divisions that pit the country's Russian-speaking eastern half against its Ukrainian-speaking west.⁴¹ Perhaps most importantly, Yanukovich and the Party of Regions ran against the West, pushing for Ukraine to become more closely aligned with Russia at a time when the European Union was rapidly expanding, and signing a collaboration agreement with Putin's United Russia party in 2005.⁴² In the process, he developed close business and personal relationships with not just Yanukovich but also alleged Russian agents, most notably Konstantin Kilimnik, and oligarchs, such as Oleg Deripaska.⁴³

On a tactical level, too, Manafort's efforts typified Russia's approach to exerting influence abroad. For example, Manafort convened a "Hapsburg Group" of high-profile businesspeople and politicians in Europe to lobby leaders in the West.⁴⁴ Though the funding for these efforts came from the Ukrainian government, which in turn benefited greatly from funding it derived from the Kremlin and Kremlin-backed oligarchs, Manafort and his team set up front organizations to provide a veneer of plausible deniability.⁴⁵ Working with friendly news outlets, they seeded misinformation about their opponents, accusing them of the corruption and Russia-friendly attitudes that were in fact endemic in the Party of Regions.⁴⁶

Manafort was ultimately successful in securing Yanukovich's election. Yanukovich subsequently stacked his administration with corrupt Kremlin cronies, who spent the next several years rebuking the West at every possible turn while pilfering millions from the country's coffers.⁴⁷ Their corruption and cronyism toward Russia, which frequently came in direct defiance of public opinion, ultimately led to massive protests in Kiev known as the Euromaidan Revolution. This in turn forced Yanukovich to flee the country for Russia—once again with help from the Kremlin—and Manafort to return to the United States, reportedly destitute after having lost his main patron.⁴⁸

Bailed out by Russia

President Donald Trump has attempted to distance himself from allegations of collusion by asserting that he has no business interests in Russia. That's not for lack of trying: Trump's efforts to establish a hotel in Moscow go back at least to 1987, when, according to his book *The Art of the Deal*, he discussed the possibility with the Soviet ambassador Yuri Dubinin.⁴⁹ But the questions regarding the Trump campaign's collusion with the Russian government go beyond whether Trump has business dealings with Russia. It is just as important, if not more, to understand the many ways that Russia has business with Donald Trump.

That Kremlin-linked entities invested significantly in Trump's properties over the years is not inherently nefarious. Since the fall of the Soviet Union, wealthy Russians have invested heavily in real estate in the West, while Americans were in turn encouraged to invest in Russia. However, in the context of a president under several investigations for his connections to the Kremlin, Russia's outsize role in Trump's reemergence from financial tribulations that nearly destroyed his real estate empire merit additional attention. What emerges is the story of a man indebted to Russia through the oligarchs that President Vladimir Putin helped create and now controls.

Upon taking office, Trump superficially distanced himself from the Trump Organization, ceding day-to-day control to his sons Donald Trump Jr. and Eric Trump.⁵⁰ However, he still owns and profits from the company, which gives him an ongoing stake in maintaining the relationships that make his company profitable, and leaked internal emails suggest he retains more control over the Trump Organization's operations than he publicly acknowledges.⁵¹ Moreover, the relationships and transactions described below occurred long before his political career, at a time when both internal and external sources have described him as exerting almost unilateral control over the organization.⁵²

Individually and collectively, these relationships form the underpinning of the Russia scandal. The Kremlin has a long history of using compromising information, or kompromat, to exert leverage over businesspeople and politicians, both in Russia

and abroad.⁵³ As a result, the question of whether Trump is financially compromised goes beyond the simple question of whether he or his company is directly in debt to Russian banks—something the president denies but has yet to demonstrate by releasing his tax returns.⁵⁴ The president’s myriad financial entanglements with individuals from Russia and the former Soviet Union may provide Russia with such kompromat, especially given the substantial evidence that Trump and the Trump Organization have engaged in questionably legal practices, many of which are outlined below.⁵⁵ The Trump Organization has repeatedly denied, both in specific cases and in general, that it has acted illegally or unethically in its business practices.

This report does not intend to suggest that all of Trump’s clients and partners from Russia and the former Soviet Union are individually connected to the Kremlin—nor that each deal is individually corrupt or connected to Russia’s interference in the 2016 election. Instead, the goal is to highlight how dependent Trump’s company has been on Russian money, a fact he has repeatedly denied, and to explicate how those connections appear to have laid the foundation for what occurred in 2016. As such, this chapter explores the totality of those business dealings, ranging from projects whose financing comes from sources directly linked to the Kremlin to potentially corrupt dealings in Azerbaijan and Georgia to the allegations that some of Trump’s Russian and Soviet buyers and business partners have used his properties as vehicles for money laundering, all of which could have generated the type of compromising material the Russian government is known to exploit.

A note on Russian oligarchs

This chapter and the remainder of this report discuss in detail Trump’s various business relationships with Russian oligarchs as proxies of the Kremlin. This is because Russian oligarchs, many of whom are former Soviet officials or hold positions of power in former Soviet states where the Russian government still holds significant influence, are widely considered an extension of the Russian state.⁵⁶ Still others are high-ranking executives at Russia’s state-owned companies, such as the oil-and-gas conglomerate Rosneft or Russia’s two state-run development banks, Vnesheconombank and Vneshtorgbank.⁵⁷

Putin has developed relationships with Russia’s business elite, both individually and collectively, in which he enables their accumulation of wealth in exchange for their assistance on his political projects; as a result, they are sometimes described as Putin’s “shadow cabinet.”⁵⁸ Domestically, this often entails carrying out large-scale,

but ultimately unprofitable, projects on behalf of the Russian state; for example, Arkady Rotenberg, a construction magnate (and Putin's former judo partner) often considered a key member of Putin's inner circle, is widely seen as having taken on construction of a bridge connecting Russia to the Crimean peninsula as an elaborate, and extremely expensive, display of fealty to the Kremlin.⁵⁹ These oligarchs often act as unofficial envoys of the Kremlin's foreign policy, especially in Eastern and Central Europe, where they form corrupt business relationships with elected politicians that they can then leverage toward accomplishing Russia's goals abroad.⁶⁰ Those who publicly oppose, or simply fail to comply with, Putin's wishes often face severe financial repercussions; most famously, in 2003, Mikhail Khodorkovsky, at the time Russia's wealthiest man, was arrested for tax evasion, had his assets seized by the Russian government, and was forced to appear in court in a cage as punishment for his political opposition to Putin.⁶¹

The result is a system where supposedly private citizens feel compelled to act on the government's behalf and where the line between government officials and wealthy citizens becomes purposefully blurred. As such, it is important to scrutinize Trump's business ties not only with the Kremlin proper but also with the many wealthy Russian and former Soviet individuals who participate in this dynamic—relationships that could compromise him in the same way as direct business with the Kremlin. In other words, if Trump has entered into a compromising financial relationship with Russian clients and partners—and overwhelming evidence documented below suggests he has—those relationships may have generated compromising material not just for the individuals involved but also for the Russian government. A more thorough exploration of this dynamic can be found in the Moscow Project's February 2018 report “Cracking the Shell: Donald Trump and the Corrupting Potential of Furtive Russian Money.”⁶²

The early years: Trump businesses in trouble

Many of Trump's businesses spent the 1990s on the verge of collapse. Abraham Wallach, who became the Trump Organization's executive vice president for acquisitions in 1990, compared joining the company to “getting on the Titanic just before the women and children were moved to the lifeboats.”⁶³ In 1990, the Trump Organization was reportedly \$3.4 billion in debt, with Trump himself liable for more than \$800 million. The next year, as several of Trump's hotels and casinos reportedly accumulated millions in debt, the New Jersey Casino Control Commission concluded, “Mr. Trump cannot be considered financially stable.” In 1992, Trump defaulted on the debt of his airline, Trump Shuttle, turning it over to U.S. Airways.⁶⁴

In Trump's own telling, his fortunes turned around in 1995, when Trump Hotels & Casino Resorts, the company through which he owned and operated many of his properties in Atlantic City and elsewhere, held an initial public offering.⁶⁵ In truth, Trump's financial struggles continued. Contrary to Trump's own lofty predictions—he mused to *Vanity Fair*'s Edward Klein that the IPO might raise \$4 billion—he only managed to raise \$140 million; meanwhile, according to his tax returns from that year, which remain the only one of Trump's tax returns revealed to the public, Trump declared a loss of nearly \$916 million.⁶⁶ His businesses continued to struggle, with his casinos posting \$66 million in losses by the end of 1996 and another \$42 million in 1997.⁶⁷

As *The New York Times* uncovered in 2018, Trump almost certainly wouldn't have survived the period without the financial support of his father, Fred Trump, who not only loaned his son millions of dollars to keep his struggling businesses afloat but also helped orchestrate massive, likely illegal tax fraud schemes to hide those transactions from authorities.⁶⁸ Unfortunately for Trump, that safety net disappeared in the late 1990s, first when Trump and his siblings officially took over the family company in 1997 and later when his father died in 1999.⁶⁹ But Trump's financial struggles continued: his flagship companies declared bankruptcy in both 2004 and 2009, with Trump resigning from his position as head of the board of Trump Entertainment Resorts in 2009.⁷⁰

Compounding Trump's financial problems was the Wall Street stigma his business failures attracted. *The Guardian* has reported that, in the 1990s, "Wall Street banks, which had previously extended him credit, turned off the tap."⁷¹ According to *The New York Times*, bankers went so far as to coin the phrase "the Donald risk" to describe the widespread aversion to lending to Trump.⁷² In 2013, one banker told *The Atlantic*, "If a major institution in New York—whether it was a Chase or a Goldman or a law firm or something—wanted to have a building built . . . I can give you almost 100 percent assurance that Donald would not be on the list."⁷³

The Russian-fueled comeback

So how, then, did 15 Trump-branded projects break ground between 1998 and 2012?

Given that Trump has defied decades of political tradition by assiduously refusing to release his tax returns, it's difficult to truly get to the bottom of his finances.⁷⁴ But the public record is more than enough to demonstrate that the answer, in part, lies with Russia.

With the collapse of the Russian economy in 1998, Russian oligarchs who had made their fortunes buying up formerly state-held assets now sought to stash their money in international real estate.⁷⁵ The Trump Organization offered an appealing haven for several reasons, ranging from its ostentatious gold-plated aesthetic to its reputation for lax reporting standards.⁷⁶ As a result, several Trump-branded projects from 1998 onward received significant financing from sources with ties to Russia, most notably the Bayrock Group, a real estate company headquartered in Trump Tower and founded by the Kazakhstan-born former Soviet official Tevfik Arif, and Deutsche Bank, one of the few major financial institutions to still lend to Trump and which paid \$630 million in penalties in 2017 for involvement in a \$10 billion Russian money laundering scheme.⁷⁷

Russia also provided many of the buyers for Trump-branded real estate. According to a *Bloomberg* investigation into Trump World Tower, which broke ground in 1998, “a third of units sold on floors 76 through 83 by 2004 involved people or limited liability companies connected to Russia and neighboring states.”⁷⁸ Reuters, meanwhile, has reported that “at least 63 individuals with Russian passports or addresses have bought at least \$98.4 million worth of property in seven Trump-branded luxury towers in southern Florida.”⁷⁹

And the Trump Organization reportedly welcomed the clientele. For example, a 2013 article in *The Nation* about the influx of Russian money in Miami real estate noted that Elena Baronoff, a Russian American socialite once described on the cover of a Russian magazine as “the Russian Hand of Donald Trump,” operated a real estate company out of the lobby of the city’s Trump International Beach Resort that catered to Eastern European buyers.⁸⁰ *The New Republic* has also extensively documented how the Trump Organization actively sought Russian buyers, so much so that the area around Trump Sunny Isles in Florida became known as “Little Moscow.”⁸¹ Though these transactions are not inherently suspect, they demonstrate that the Trump Organization was sufficiently aware of its reliance on Russian money to actively cultivate relationships with Russian clients.

Some of the individual deals have attracted attention, most notably the Russian fertilizer magnate Dmitry Rybolovlev’s 2008 purchase of one of Trump’s mansions in Palm Beach. He paid a reported \$95 million for it—\$53 million more than Trump paid for it four years earlier.⁸² The transaction has received scrutiny from investigators, particularly because, though Trump justified the price increase by claiming he had “gutted the house” and spent \$25 million on renovations, there were few apparent alterations.⁸³ Such rapid and unexplained increases in price are

frequently cited as red flags for money laundering through real estate.⁸⁴ According to Sen. Ron Wyden (D-OR), the transaction is one of several special counsel Robert Mueller and his team are investigating for “potential money laundering or other illicit financial dealings between the president, his associates, and Russia.”⁸⁵ Rybolovlev drew additional attention for his behavior during the final months of the 2016 election, during which his private plane was spotted on separate days in Las Vegas and Charlotte within hours of Trump’s arrival in each city.⁸⁶ A spokesman for Rybolovlev dismissed the incidents as a coincidence, and Trump has denied meeting Rybolovlev; a White House official described questions about their relationship as a conspiracy theory.⁸⁷ In November 2018, Rybolovlev was arrested in Monaco on apparently unrelated charges of corruption, to which he pleaded not guilty.⁸⁸

Trump SoHo, which broke ground in 2007, typifies how the Trump Organization benefited from financing coming out of Russia and the former Soviet Union. Much of the project’s financing came from the Bayrock Group.⁸⁹ Several reported funders of the project, including Arif, Tamir Sapir, and Alexander Mashkevich, hail from the former Soviet Union and have reported ties to the current Kremlin. Some have also faced allegations of corrupt and criminal behavior, ranging from money laundering to smuggling to involvement in a prostitution ring.⁹⁰ For example, in 2009, Sapir pleaded guilty to illegally importing animal parts.⁹¹ Mashkevich has been repeatedly accused of bribery and money laundering on projects in Kazakhstan, and settled a case in 1996 without admitting guilt.⁹² The same can be said for some of the property’s clientele. For example, Viktor Khrapunov, who formerly served as mayor of Almaty, Kazakhstan, went on trial in July 2018 for allegedly purchasing condominiums in the building using money stolen from state coffers and laundered through a network of offshore shell companies while serving as the country’s energy minister.⁹³ As of this writing, the case is ongoing, and Khrapunov has denied any wrongdoing.

The Russian connections

Perhaps the most notable connection emerging out of Trump SoHo involves the Russian American real estate developer Felix Sater, who formerly served as the managing director of the Bayrock Group. Sater, who served a year in jail in the 1990s for stabbing a man in the face with a margarita glass, became an FBI informant in Moscow after pleading guilty to involvement in a \$40 million stock fraud scheme orchestrated by the Russian mafia; the records for the conviction have since been sealed.⁹⁴ Sater joined the Bayrock Group in 2001 and helped secure financing for Trump SoHo, leaning heavily on sources linked to Russia.⁹⁵ After leaving Bayrock in

2009, he retained an office in Trump Tower and received Trump-branded business cards identifying him as a “senior adviser to Donald Trump.” Sater has said he had a “friendly” relationship with Trump and met with him “numerous times,” although the Trump Organization has disputed his account.⁹⁶

Sater has been involved in at least two attempts to develop a Trump Tower Moscow. According to *The Washington Post*, the Trump Organization contracted with Bayrock to develop a high-rise in the Russian capital; it was reportedly far enough along in the process that a site was chosen before the deal ultimately fell through.⁹⁷ More notably, Sater was involved in an effort to establish a Trump Tower Moscow during the early stages of the 2016 presidential campaign, eliciting a signed letter of intent from the Trump Organization in October 2015.⁹⁸ In November 2015, Sater reportedly emailed Michael Cohen—his longtime friend and the Trump Organization’s lawyer—about the project, writing, “I will get Putin on this program and we will get Donald elected. . . . our boy can become president of the USA and we can engineer it.”⁹⁹ The deal ultimately fell through in July 2016.¹⁰⁰

Sater also provides an example of a business connection attempting to transition into the political realm. Along with the email to Cohen, which seems to suggest that Sater saw developing Trump Tower Moscow as part of a broader strategy to ensure Trump’s election, Sater was involved in an attempt during the transition to influence the administration’s policy on Russia. In January 2017, Sater and Cohen reportedly worked with the Ukrainian politician Andriy (sometimes transliterated Andrey or Andrii) Artemenko to deliver a policy proposal to incoming national security adviser Lt. Gen. Michael Flynn that would roll back sanctions against Russia. Under the plan, Russia would withdraw its troops from eastern Ukraine, while Ukraine would hold a referendum on whether to “lease” Crimea to Russia; in return, the United States would lift the sanctions it had placed on Russia after the 2014 invasion of Crimea.¹⁰¹ Sater has repeatedly declined to comment on the matter, and there is no indication that the administration considered or acted upon the proposal.¹⁰²

Trump SoHo is far from the only Trump Organization project to derive funding from questionable Russia-linked sources. Another example is the Trump International Hotel and Tower Toronto, which in June 2017 dropped its affiliation with the brand and is now simply the Adelaide Hotel Toronto.¹⁰³ The project, which broke ground in 2007, was so financially embattled that, as the *Toronto Star* described in October 2017, “every investor lost money on Trump Tower Toronto” except Trump himself.¹⁰⁴ In 2010, facing mounting costs and a dearth of investment, the building’s developer Alexander Shnaider received a sudden windfall when a

then-unknown investor purchased an \$850 million stake in Shnaider's steel company Zaporizhstal. In May 2017, *The Wall Street Journal* revealed the source of those funds: the Russian state-owned development bank Vnesheconombank (VEB). The Trump Organization has distanced itself from the project, claiming that, despite reports in 2012 that Trump had a minor ownership stake, the company "was not the owner, developer or seller" of the property, was not involved in the financing, and "did not hold" equity. Shnaider, meanwhile, has offered conflicting accounts as to how much of the money from VEB ended up in the project: His lawyer at first told *The Wall Street Journal* that \$15 million from the sale went into the property, but Shnaider has since said he is "not able to confirm that any funds went into the Toronto project."¹⁰⁵

The Trump Organization has also pursued multiple projects in former Soviet states. *The New Yorker's* Adam Davidson has written extensively on developments in Baku, Azerbaijan, and Batumi, Georgia, where the Trump Organization has dealt with companies and oligarchs with extensive histories of corruption and ties not only to Russian entities but also, in Azerbaijan, to the Iranian Revolutionary Guard.¹⁰⁶ These projects, Davidson argues, are worrisome not only because of the specific actors involved but also because they leave the president open to accusations of abetting corruption abroad and demonstrate the Trump Organization's tendency to skimp on due diligence, which could expose Trump to prosecution under the Foreign Corrupt Practices Act.¹⁰⁷

Trump's other business practices during the 2000s also raise red flags for corruption and financial crime. His relationship with Deutsche Bank—which, as noted above, was by the late 1990s the only major financial institution willing to lend to him—was remarkably contentious.¹⁰⁸ In 2008, Trump defaulted on the \$640 million loan he had received from Deutsche Bank in 2005 to build Trump Tower Chicago. Deutsche Bank sued Trump and was seeking an immediate \$40 million. Trump then countersued a group of lenders, led by Deutsche Bank, for \$3 billion, alleging that the banks had played a role in causing that year's financial crisis and were therefore responsible for Trump's inability to repay his debts.¹⁰⁹ Two years later, Trump and Deutsche Bank settled—after which Deutsche Bank, to which Trump still owed hundreds of millions of dollars, went back to lending money to Trump.¹¹⁰ According to *Newsweek*, Trump "paid back Deutsche with a massive lifeline—from Deutsche" and these Deutsche Bank loans "rescued Trump after the [2008] crash."¹¹¹ By the time Trump was elected in 2016, he reportedly owed Deutsche Bank \$300 million.¹¹²

That Deutsche Bank would continue to lend to Trump so soon after a contentious legal battle that stemmed from Trump's inability or unwillingness to repay his debts has raised significant suspicions about the sources of these funds.¹¹³ Compounding these suspicions is Deutsche Bank's ties to Russia.¹¹⁴ On January 30, 2017, the New York State Department of Financial Services fined Deutsche Bank \$425 million for violating New York's anti-money laundering. The bank admitted to a massive \$10 billion Russian money laundering scheme involving "mirror trades," which moved money out of Russia to the West between 2011 and 2015.¹¹⁵ The investigation by special counsel Robert S. Mueller III into possible collusion between the Trump campaign and Russia has reportedly subpoenaed records from Deutsche Bank.¹¹⁶

Moreover, in the mid-2000s, the Trump Organization made a radical shift in its business model. For decades, Trump had built a reputation as the self-proclaimed "King of Debt," borrowing heavily to finance his projects.¹¹⁷ That Trump was able to do so and stay financially solvent was a key part of his mystique, although, as *The New York Times* has revealed, it was more a function of his father's largesse than Trump's abilities as a businessman.¹¹⁸ However, in the mid-2000s, the Trump Organization began dealing in massive sums of cash, a move uncharacteristic not just for the company but also for large real estate developers generally.¹¹⁹ Dealing in cash can be not only risky but also difficult, as raising liquid assets for a company that deals mostly in real estate may require selling off properties, and potentially invites corruption by side-stepping due diligence and anti-money laundering requirements that loans and banks introduce.¹²⁰ But for the Trump Organization, the decision may have actually facilitated its business practices: During the development of Trump SoHo, Eric Trump reportedly said that "the best property buyers now are Russians," who "can go around without a mortgage loan from American banks, that require income checks and they can buy apartments with cash."¹²¹

For all of Trump's protestations, then, there is ample evidence that the Trump Organization has repeatedly done business with Russian investors and clients. Trump not only did not deny this fact until he began running for president but actually spoke about it frequently, boasting of the amount of Russian money that flowed through his projects in numerous interviews.¹²² So, too, did his sons Donald Trump Jr. and Eric Trump. In 2008, Trump Jr. told investors in Moscow that "Russians make up a pretty disproportionate cross-section of a lot of our assets," while Eric Trump reportedly told a golf reporter in 2014 that the Trump Organization was able to expand during the financial crisis because, "We don't rely on American banks. We have all the funding we need out of Russia."¹²³

Why it matters

As mentioned above, Trump is not the only real estate developer to have dealings with Russian individuals and entities. Aside from the questions about the Foreign Corrupt Practices Act and Trump's repeated lies about his involvement with Russia since he began running for president, those deals wouldn't necessarily be suspicious.

But most real estate developers with extensive financial ties, and possibly debts, to a hostile foreign power do not then run for president; most presidents do not evince such unprecedented obeisance to a hostile foreign power; and most presidents do not require the appointment of a special counsel to investigate whether the president's campaign conspired with that nation's government. As a result, Trump's long history of accepting money from Russian investors and clients takes on additional significance as the beginning of his relationship with Russia and, given the allegations of corruption that swirl around Trump and his company's business dealings, appear to form the potential underpinnings for Russian collusion in the 2016 election.

How Russia weaponizes money laundering and corruption

One mainstay of Putin's efforts to increase Russian influence abroad has been his weaponization of corruption. As the Moscow Project previously explored in the report "Cracking the Shell: Trump and the Corrupting Potential of Furtive Russian Money," the Russian government and the oligarchs who frequently operate on its behalf pursue corrupt business relationships because they can be used as both a carrot and a stick. Powerful individuals can be induced to support the Kremlin's line via offers of lucrative business deals; this can happen without targets' knowledge that they are being cultivated, as they arrive at a positive opinion based on what they perceive to be the Russian government's legitimate support for their business. But if these dealings cross into unethical or even illegal territory, Russia has generated "kompromat"—or compromising material—that it can use as leverage to force those individuals to act on the Kremlin's behalf.¹²⁴

Already, real estate is a popular vehicle for money laundering, as it provides numerous opportunities for the type of small-scale transactions frequently used to mask illicit flows of money. But Trump's business practices leave him particularly vulnerable to this type of cultivation.¹²⁵ Especially after his multiple bankruptcies, Trump has relied heavily on projects in jurisdictions notorious for their corruption, including in former Soviet states where Russian influence is still strong. The Trump Organization has developed a reputation for skimping on the due diligence that is designed to avoid financing from illicit or questionable sources.¹²⁶ When asked about its partners' unsavory connections—as, for example, when Adam Davidson of *The New Yorker* traced financing for the Trump Organization's aborted project in Baku, Azerbaijan, to the Iranian Revolutionary Guard—the company distances itself by claiming that, as a licensor, they have little or no role in the actual development.¹²⁷

These practices, coupled with the Trump Organization's shift in the last decade from financing projects through debt to dealing largely in cash, raises significant red flags for potential money laundering.¹²⁸ As a result, Trump's decision to retain his businesses while president leaves him vulnerable not only to conflicts of interest but also to compromise, should Russia—or another country in which he's dealt with corrupt actors—seek to gain leverage over him.

Cultivating an asset

Following its established playbook, Russia has increasingly interfered in the politics of traditional opponents throughout the West in the hopes of undermining democracy and stability from within. Donald Trump was a political novice with a longstanding public admiration for Russian President Vladimir Putin and a penchant for advancing conspiracy theories. He espoused isolationist policies and had potentially compromising financial relationships with Kremlin-aligned oligarchs. He also had few apparent scruples and was running against a woman Putin considers among his main adversaries. Trump was simply an ideal candidate for the Kremlin to back. There is also reason to suspect that Russia began cultivating Trump as an asset long before his campaign for president, a common tactic the Kremlin pursues with people it suspects may be useful in the future.

Trump's political rise

According to journalist Luke Harding, the author of *Collusion: Secret Meetings, Dirty Money, and How Russia Helped Donald Trump Win*, Russia has been interested in Trump since at least 1987, when Trump visited Moscow with the Russian ambassador to the United States, Yuri Dubinin.¹²⁹ Harding has also reported on documents that reveal that Czechoslovakia spied on Trump in the 1970s and 1980s during his marriage to his Czechoslovakia-born first wife, Ivana Trump.¹³⁰ According to Harding, the Czechoslovakian government specifically targeted Trump because of his high profile as a businessman and political ambitions.¹³¹ At the time, the Czechoslovakian government was known to have close ties to the KGB; it is unknown if they shared information on Trump specifically.¹³² As it relates to the 2016 election, though, the natural starting point for analyzing the relationship is Trump's rise to political relevance in the early 2010s, largely as an outspoken—and outspokenly racist—crusader against President Barack Obama.

It is easy to forget that Trump initially supported Obama. In 2008, Trump—at the time a registered Democrat—praised Obama during the latter's primary campaign, saying, "I think [Obama] has a chance to go down as a great president."¹³³ This praise

continued into 2009, when he told Larry King that Obama was “totally a champion,” and 2010, when Trump wrote in his book *Think Like a Champion* that “Obama proved that determination combined with opportunity and intelligence can make things happen—and in an exceptional way.”¹³⁴

By 2011, however, Trump not only soured on Obama but was a leading proponent of the so-called birther movement. On March 23 of that year, Trump told the “Today” show he had “some real doubts” about Obama’s birthplace and had sent investigators to Hawaii to explore.¹³⁵ On another “Today” appearance, on April 7, Trump again questioned Obama’s citizenship, falsely saying that Obama’s “grandmother in Kenya said he was born in Kenya, and she was there and witnessed the birth. He doesn’t have a birth certificate or he hasn’t shown it,” and that Obama had spent \$2 million in legal fees “to get away from this issue.”¹³⁶ Even after Obama released his birth certificate, Trump continued his birther crusade over the coming years, tweeting about Obama’s birthplace 73 times in 2012 alone.¹³⁷ He only publicly acknowledged that Obama was born in the United States in September 2016, and then blamed Clinton for propagating the conspiracy theory—and, according to *The New York Times*, continued to privately question Obama’s citizenship.¹³⁸

How—and even whether—Trump came to believe Obama was born in Kenya remains unknown. Given that Trump was at the time flirting with running for president, some have suggested that he began espousing birtherism as a matter of political expediency, evincing a recognition that racism was a key tool for appealing to large segments of the Republican base.¹³⁹ Regardless, Trump’s promotion of this conspiracy theory, and his concurrent political rise, would have been attractive to Russian intelligence. As described in Chapter 1, the Kremlin has a long and well-documented history of exploiting racial tensions in its efforts to influence politics abroad. Many of the European fringe parties Russia supports, such as France’s National Front, the U.K. Independence Party, and Alternative for Germany, employ thinly veiled or outright racist appeals.¹⁴⁰ Russian bots and trolls on social media frequently aim to boost these tensions, as in January 2016, when Russian propagandists pushed false reports that German authorities had covered up evidence that a German teenager had been gang-raped by Muslim immigrants, and in June 2016, when they promoted a similar, and similarly unsubstantiated, story in Twin Falls, Idaho.¹⁴¹ Moreover, birtherism isn’t simply racist; it also fundamentally attacks American democracy, asserting that tens of millions of Americans were duped into electing an illegitimate president and suggesting a massive cover-up by the government and media.

Trump rode birtherism to political prominence in the early 2010s. He became an increasingly regular guest on Fox News and other conservative media outlets throughout the period, appearances that many analysts argue laid the groundwork for his presidential campaign.¹⁴² In early 2011, he publicly floated the possibility of running in the 2012 Republican primary; though some polls showed him as a strong contender, or even frontrunner, he ultimately chose not to run.¹⁴³ Nevertheless, the 2012 election offered proof of his increasing influence within conservative politics, culminating in Republican nominee Mitt Romney actively seeking—and ultimately receiving—Trump’s endorsement, reportedly partly out of fear that Trump would launch a third-party candidacy.¹⁴⁴ That such a famous American, with a hit television show, a massive Twitter following, a penchant for racist conspiracy theories, and a long history of friendly business relations with Russia, was gaining clout within the historically anti-Russia Republican Party would not have gone unnoticed in Moscow.

It’s likely no coincidence then that, according to the dossier compiled by former MI6 agent Christopher Steele, Trump began feeding Russian intelligence information around the same time.¹⁴⁵ The dossier, citing four sources—two officials in Russia (a senior former intelligence official and a senior foreign ministry official) and two Russian expatriates—claims that Trump had a relationship with Russian intelligence for at least five years:

Speaking to a trusted compatriot in June 2016 sources A and B, a senior Russian Foreign Ministry figure and a former top level Russian intelligence officer still active inside the Kremlin respectively, the Russian authorities had been cultivating and supporting US Republican presidential candidate, Donald TRUMP for at least 5 years. . . .

*Source close to TRUMP campaign however confirms regular exchange with Kremlin has existed for at least 8 years, including intelligence fed back to Russia on oligarchs’ activities in US.*¹⁴⁶

The dossier’s allegation that Trump was providing information on Russian oligarchs living in his properties fits not only with how intelligence services operate—they often begin with such simple requests that targets do not realize they have become intelligence assets—but also with Russia’s efforts to keep tabs on its oligarchs, as well as Trump’s own track record of surveilling his buildings.¹⁴⁷ Trump and members of his campaign named in the dossier have broadly denied its veracity, although they have not mounted any significant effort to discredit its individual allegations.

The Miss Universe Pageant trip

Trump's trip to Moscow for the 2013 Miss Universe Pageant provided another ideal opportunity for Russia to cultivate him as an asset and to create the connections the Kremlin could then leverage in 2016. In planning and executing the pageant, Trump met with several individuals who would ultimately resurface during his presidential campaign, including Rob Goldstone, the music producer who arranged the June 9, 2016, meeting in Trump Tower; Azerbaijani Russian oligarch Aras Agalarov and his pop-star son Emin, on whose behalf Goldstone reached out to arrange the June 9 meeting; and Ike Kaveladze, an executive in the Agalarovs' real estate company, whose actions formed the basis of a 2000 Government Accountability Office report on Russian money-laundering tactics and who attended the June 9 meeting.¹⁴⁸ (The report does not allege any illegal behavior by Kaveladze, who has denied any wrongdoing.)¹⁴⁹ Trump filmed a cameo appearance in the music video for Emin Agalarov's song "In Another Life" at Moscow's Ritz Carlton and rubbed elbows with other members of the Russian elite, such as Herman Gref, Russia's former minister of economics and trade and the current CEO of Russia's largest bank, Sberbank.¹⁵⁰

The Steele dossier describes the trip as a critical juncture in Russia's cultivation of Trump as an asset. It is on this trip, Steele alleges, that Russia obtained kompromat on Trump in the form of a compromising video. This allegation, among the more explosive in the dossier, has been neither conclusively corroborated nor conclusively disproven. Trump denies that the event occurred; his personal bodyguard Keith Schiller testified before Congress that he actually turned down an offer from a Russian individual to "send five women" to Trump's hotel room. Though Schiller presented the story as exculpatory, he also said he only stayed by the door to Trump's hotel room for part of the night, leaving open the possibility that the encounter may have occurred after Schiller left.¹⁵¹ The episode also comports with Russia's known tendency to produce kompromat on visiting government officials and business elite, often by bugging their hotel rooms and orchestrating embarrassing sexual encounters.¹⁵²

It is not unlikely, in fact, that there may be many instances of kompromat on Trump based on years of doing business in the region.¹⁵³ For example, as described in the first two chapters of this report, Putin has for the past several years exploited Russia's oligarchs and their relationships with businesspeople and politicians in Western countries to advance the interests of the Kremlin. Trump's tendency to court Russia-based financing for projects in not just the United States and Russia but also other former Soviet countries, including Georgia, Azerbaijan, and Kazakhstan, appears to have brought Trump into the orbit of many of the same oligarchs.¹⁵⁴ The Trump

Organization's reputation for skimping on due diligence with regard to its clientele and business partners creates the possibility that one or more of his business partners may possess compromising information on his financial dealings along with the sexual kompromat described in the dossier.¹⁵⁵

Whether or not Russia obtained kompromat on Trump during the weekend of the Miss Universe Pageant, the trip clearly left Trump with a high opinion of Russia and Putin. In interviews and speeches during and after the trip, Trump boasted about his relationship with the country and its leader, alluding to receiving a gift from and speaking “indirectly—and directly—with President Putin, who could not have been nicer.”¹⁵⁶ By the time he returned to the United States, Trump was primed for Russia to exploit him to undermine democracy in the 2016 election.

Carter Page

In 2013, the FBI indicted three Russian nationals for spying in the United States. Among their illegal actions was an attempt to recruit Carter Page, at the time the founder and head of a New York-based investment firm called Global Energy Capital. Page later became a foreign policy advisor to the Trump campaign. In court documents from 2015, the FBI revealed that it had succeeded in secretly recording conversations among the three Russian intelligence operatives, including one in which the spies discussed Page, identified only as “Male-1” in the resulting documents. Though one spy considered Page an “idiot,” he also said that Page’s “enthusiasm works for me;” another said that he would “feed [Page] empty promises” to continue their efforts. Two of the Russian nationals, who claimed innocence, avoided arrest thanks to diplomatic immunity; the third, who had entered the country as a private citizen, pleaded guilty to acting as an unregistered foreign agent and was sentenced to 30 months in prison.¹⁵⁷

The documents—including notes from an interview the FBI later conducted with Page—offer a window into Russian intelligence’s efforts to cultivate assets in the United States and elsewhere. As Page later described, the Russian operatives approached him with simple requests that did not set off any alarm bells, including asking for materials from a course on energy and politics he was teaching at the time. Upon being identified as “Male-1” in subsequent reporting, Page stressed that he only “shared basic immaterial information and publicly available research documents,” suggesting he still did not consider the interactions notable. One of the spies also suggested he could help Page land contracts through his connections with Russian trade officials.¹⁵⁸

The pattern is, in other words, similar to what Steele’s sources say occurred with Trump: Russian intelligence agents apparently began by approaching with a request for information their target would not find unusual, then stepped up to offers of lucrative business opportunities accomplished through their connections to the government.

The election

It is now apparent that there was no bright line separating the two campaigns to elect Donald Trump. Throughout his presidential campaign, members of Trump's inner circle had secret conversations and meetings with numerous Kremlin-linked individuals, which they repeatedly lied about or failed to disclose. Though much about these contacts remains unknown, what is known provides strong evidence that the Kremlin and the Trump campaign were in continual communication.

A pro-Russia candidate

From the day he entered the race, June 16, 2015, Trump staked out a pro-Russia platform. Trump told Fox News's Bill O'Reilly that his experiences with Russians in Moscow led him to believe that "you can get along with those people and get along with them well." Over the course of the next month, Trump made similar on-air comments to Fox News's Sean Hannity and in a speech at the City Club of Chicago.¹⁵⁹ On July 11, he made his first direct reference to repealing sanctions when responding to a question from Maria Butina, a graduate student who the U.S. Department of Justice later identified as an alleged Russian agent. Butina also allegedly infiltrated the National Rifle Association and other conservative groups on behalf of the Russian government. (Butina has pleaded not guilty to the charges and, as of this writing, is in jail awaiting trial.)¹⁶⁰ In a question-and-answer session with Trump in Las Vegas, Butina asked whether sanctions were part of his "foreign politics." Trump replied, "I know Putin and I'll tell you what, we get along with Putin. . . . I don't think you'd need the sanctions."¹⁶¹ Trump went on to praise President Vladimir Putin dozens of times during the primaries, frequently pairing his praise with suggestions that, if elected, he would consider lifting sanctions on Russia.¹⁶²

These remarks stood out because they directly contradicted decades of Republican sentiment. Since the end of World War II, the Republican Party had actively staked out a hawkish position on Russia. The party's previous presidential nominee, Mitt Romney, famously described Russia as America's "number one geopolitical foe."¹⁶³

Trump's Republican opponents frequently attacked not only Putin but also Obama, whom they saw as having enabled Putin's increased stature through Obama's nonconfrontational foreign policy.¹⁶⁴ Trump, on the other hand, repeatedly called for even greater deference to Putin and Russia, saying at a debate in November 2015 that he hoped to work with Russia to “knock the hell out of ISIS.”¹⁶⁵

What also makes Trump's stance on Russia notable is that it was one of the few issues on which he remained consistent, despite there being no clear political rationale for doing so. During his campaign, Trump was both famously heterodox (for example, he repeatedly attacked free-trade agreements, long a linchpin of Republican economic policy) and famously difficult to pin down on any one position (for example, he promised he would both repeal the Affordable Care Act and protect Medicaid and Medicare, and frequently outright denied his own previous statements and policy positions).¹⁶⁶ Even Trump's noted affinity for autocratic leaders failed to account for his stance; for example, though he has praised Chinese President Xi Jinping for his authoritarian ways, Trump has also repeatedly criticized—as well as directly antagonized—China on economic issues.¹⁶⁷ As a result, his continual praise for Putin and Russia drew significant attention, even before reporting after the election revealed the extent of Russian interference and the dozens of contacts and meetings between Trump's campaign and Kremlin-linked officials.¹⁶⁸

2015: Laying the groundwork

By the time Trump announced his candidacy on June 16, 2015, the U.S. intelligence community was reportedly already aware of the Kremlin's interest in Trump.¹⁶⁹

According to *The Wall Street Journal*, in spring 2015, “US spy agencies captured Russian government officials discussing associates of Mr. Trump, including Mr. [Paul] Manafort,” who would later serve as the second of Trump's three campaign heads.¹⁷⁰ In late 2015, U.K. intelligence agencies also reportedly spotted suspicious “interactions” between people in Trump's orbit and Kremlin-linked individuals during “routine surveillance of Russian intelligence assets.”¹⁷¹

That Russia was in contact with Trump associates early on is especially notable considering that, at this point, the Trump campaign was reportedly largely a family affair. According to *Forbes*, when reporters visited the campaign's headquarters in Trump Tower in November 2015, several months after Trump announced his candidacy, “there was literally nothing there. No people—and no desks or chairs or computers awaiting the arrival of staffers. Just campaign manager Corey Lewandowski, spokesperson Hope Hicks and a strategy that centered on Trump making headline-grabbing statements.”¹⁷²

Around the same time, Russia reportedly began the cyberattacks that would prove central to its influence campaign. According to the cybersecurity firm CrowdStrike, that summer the Russian hacking group Cozy Bear began its first phishing operation targeting the Democratic National Committee.¹⁷³ By September, the FBI knew of the attack and informed the DNC that Russian hackers had “compromised at least one computer.”¹⁷⁴

One contact between Trump’s inner circle and the Kremlin early in the campaign involved Trump’s business. The Trump Organization signed a letter of intent to license its name for a Trump Tower Moscow in October 2015.¹⁷⁵ The next month, Trump’s lawyer, Michael Cohen—one of the few individuals involved with the campaign from the beginning—and Cohen’s longtime friend Felix Sater, the Russian-American real estate developer, explicitly discussed the deal in the context of the election.¹⁷⁶ On November 3, Sater, who has claimed ties to Russian organized crime and to the Kremlin, said the project would offer a chance for Trump to demonstrate his business acumen to the public.¹⁷⁷ Sater then bragged, “I will get Putin on this program and we will get Donald elected. . . . our boy can become president of the USA and we can engineer it.”¹⁷⁸ In January 2016, Cohen reportedly emailed Putin’s spokesman Dmitry Peskov to request help with the project.¹⁷⁹ Peskov has said that he received the email but did not respond, and the project ultimately did not go forward.¹⁸⁰

March 2016: The campaigns gain steam

The first few months of 2016 saw Trump’s campaign build both momentum and connections to Russia. This period was marked by three major concurrent developments. First, Trump began to win in Republican primary contests, increasingly staking a claim as the prohibitive favorite for the nomination. Second, Russia became significantly more aggressive in implementing its influence campaign. And third, Trump’s campaign hired several individuals with conspicuous ties to Russia, many of whom would become key players in his campaign’s collusion with the Kremlin.

Russia escalates its online campaign

As Trump won primaries, Russia significantly escalated its hacking campaign. Having already penetrated the DNC, Russian hackers launched another phishing expedition on March 10, 2016, targeting Democratic operatives.¹⁸¹ It was during this round of attacks that, on March 19, 2016, Clinton’s campaign chairman John Podesta received the phishing email that would provide Russian hackers with access to his account and the emails they would later publish in the final month of the campaign through WikiLeaks—a known cut-out for Russian intelligence.¹⁸² (Podesta is the founder of the Center for American Progress Action Fund and the Center for American Progress.)

Hacking was not the only measure Russian agents took to support their candidate. They also implemented a multifaceted media campaign to boost Trump's candidacy, an effort that became increasingly brazen in early 2016. According to the U.S. intelligence community's January 2017 report, "Starting in March 2016, Russian Government-linked actors began openly supporting President-elect Trump's candidacy in media aimed at English-speaking audiences," such as the state-run news outlets RT and Sputnik.¹⁸³

Russia-linked figures join the campaign

In February, Reuters reported that the retired Lt. Gen. Michael Flynn, who in December 2015 sat next to Putin at RT's annual gala in Moscow, was advising Trump.¹⁸⁴ On March 21, in an interview with the editorial board of *The Washington Post*, Trump named his foreign policy team, led by then-Senator Jeff Sessions and including Carter Page and George Papadopoulos.¹⁸⁵ At the time, the announcement drew attention because few people had heard of Page or Papadopoulos; both have since become important figures in the Russia investigation.¹⁸⁶ However, the FBI already had reason to believe Page was a Russian asset: In 2015, the bureau broke up a Russian spy ring that had attempted to recruit Page, and had one Russian agent on tape saying that Page's "enthusiasm works for me."¹⁸⁷ Finally, on March 28, Paul Manafort, a longtime political operative who spent a decade working for a pro-Putin party in Ukraine, joined the campaign as an unpaid adviser.¹⁸⁸ He would later serve as the second of Trump's three campaign leads.

Campaigns in contact (March through July)

Between March and the Republican National Convention in Cleveland in July 2016, at least five individuals from the Trump campaign reportedly communicated with Kremlin officials or allies. According to the October 2017 guilty plea he signed, on March 14, 2016, George Papadopoulos met for the first of at least three meetings with Joseph Mifsud, a Maltese professor and reported Russian intelligence asset.¹⁸⁹ Mifsud later told Papadopoulos that Russia had "dirt" on Hillary Clinton in the form of "thousands of emails" and introduced him to a woman identified in Papadopoulos's plea agreement as "the Female Russian National," whom Mifsud claimed was Putin's niece, and Ivan Timofeev, who claimed to be an employee of Russia's Ministry of Foreign Affairs.¹⁹⁰ After Papadopoulos's plea deal became public, Mifsud described the allegations as "baloney" and denied that he "spoke of secrets regarding Hillary Clinton," but Mifsud appears to have disappeared since.¹⁹¹ Papadopoulos informed multiple senior campaign officials about the meeting, including Lewandowski and Trump campaign senior policy advisor Stephen Miller.¹⁹² He also discussed meeting Mifsud with the Australian ambassador to the United Kingdom, who in turn informed U.S. intelligence officials; their conversation would ultimately become the inciting incident for the U.S. intelligence community's investigation into Russian interference in the 2016 election.¹⁹³

On April 11, Manafort reportedly emailed his former deputy, Konstantin Kilimnik, who was later named as a Russian intelligence officer by the Mueller investigation, starting a conversation in which Manafort appeared to offer to set up private briefings for the Russian oligarch Oleg Deripaska, who has alleged that Manafort owes him almost \$20 million. Manafort's lawyers have denied that this was the intent behind the emails, and dispute that Manafort owes Deripaska money.¹⁹⁴

On April 27, Trump gave a foreign policy address at the Center for National Interest at the Mayflower Hotel in Washington, D.C., where he called for warmer relations with Russia. Prior to the speech, then-Sen. Sessions met with the Russian ambassador Sergey Kislyak.¹⁹⁵

In late May, Trump Jr. met with Aleksander Torshin, the deputy head of Russia's central bank and a leading member of Putin's United Russia Party, at an NRA convention in Louisville, Kentucky.¹⁹⁶ Torshin also played a key role in assisting Maria Butina, the Russian graduate student who, as previously mentioned, allegedly infiltrated the NRA and other conservative groups on behalf of the Russian government.¹⁹⁷

And in June, the Trump campaign aide Rick Dearborn fielded an email from a West Virginia-based Republican operative named Rick Clay offering to set up a meeting between Trump and Putin; according to CNN, "the Trump campaign appears to have rejected the meeting request."¹⁹⁸

The June 9 meeting: Collusion at Trump Tower

The most famous meeting between the two campaigns took place on June 9, 2016. The roots of the meeting go back to July 2015, one month after Trump announced his candidacy. That month, Rob Goldstone, a music producer and publicist who first became acquainted with the Trumps during the Miss Universe Pageant in 2013, emailed Trump's assistant asking whether Trump "would welcome a meeting with President Putin." According to *The Washington Post*, "there is no indication that Trump or his assistant followed up on Goldstone's offer," and Goldstone's attorney declined to comment.¹⁹⁹

Goldstone had more success when, on June 3, 2016, he sent an email to Trump Jr. with the subject line "Russia – Clinton – private and confidential" in which he offered to set up a meeting regarding "official documents and information that would incriminate Hillary [Clinton] and her dealings with Russia and would be very useful to your father" as "part of Russia and its government's support for Mr. Trump." Trump Jr. responded, "if it's what you say I love it especially later in the summer." On June 7, 2016, the pair set up the meeting for June 9.²⁰⁰

The meeting occurred on June 9, 2016, at 4 p.m. in Trump Tower. Attending on behalf of the Trump campaign were Trump Jr., Jared Kushner, and Paul Manafort; representing Russian interests were Goldstone, the lawyer and Magnitsky Act opponent Natalia Veselnitskaya, the real estate executive and suspected money launderer Irakly Kaveladze, and the lobbyist and former counterintelligence officer Rinat Akhmetshin, along with a translator. According to the Trump campaign, the group discussed “adoptions,” believed to be code for the discussion of the American sanctions bill known as the Magnitsky Act because Putin’s response to the Magnitsky Act was to ban America adoptions of sick and disabled Russian orphans.²⁰¹

Taken together, these contacts demonstrate the overlap between the two campaigns to elect Donald Trump. By the end of June, at least eight individuals involved with the Trump campaign—George Papadopoulos, then-Sen. Jeff Sessions, Michael Cohen, Jared Kushner, Paul Manafort, Donald Trump Jr., Lt. Gen. Michael Flynn, and Rick Dearborn—reportedly had contacts or meetings with at least 13 Kremlin-linked individuals: Joseph Mifsud, the “Female Russian National,” Ivan Timofeev, Sergey Kislyak, Felix Sater, Rob Goldstone, Natalia Veselnitskaya, Rinat Akhmetshin, Irakly Kaveladze, Konstantin Kilimnik, Aleksander Torshin, Vladimir Putin, the individual who emailed Rick Dearborn, and, potentially, Oleg Deripaska.²⁰² Though it is unknown how directly each individual was engaged in the Kremlin’s effort to support Trump, both the number of meetings and contact and the high level of many of the participants on both sides offer key evidence of the two campaigns’ willingness to collude.

The world takes notice

At least eight countries reportedly passed information to U.S. intelligence agencies about Russia’s attempts to interfere in the 2016 election between the time of Trump’s announcement and his nomination. According to *The New York Times*, the FBI launched its investigation into the matter after Papadopoulos drunkenly mentioned his meetings with Mifsud to the Australian ambassador to the United Kingdom, who passed the information back to his government, which passed it to the U.S. intelligence community.²⁰³ Other countries sharing intelligence reportedly included the United Kingdom, Germany, Estonia, Poland, France, the Netherlands, and “one of the Baltic States,” which in April 2016 reportedly gave CIA Director John Brennan “a tape recording of a conversation about money from the Kremlin going into the US presidential campaign.”²⁰⁴

Meanwhile, in June, the former MI6 agent Christopher Steele began compiling his dossier on the Trump campaign’s ties to Russia, which appears to allude to some of the contacts that were not yet public knowledge. In his first report, Steele wrote that

two sources—a “senior Russian Foreign Ministry figure” and “a close associate of TRUMP who had organized and managed his recent trips to Moscow”—told him that “the Kremlin had been feeding TRUMP and his team valuable intelligence on his opponents, including the Democratic presidential candidate Hillary CLINTON.” Steele also noted that “the Kremlin’s cultivation operation on TRUMP also had comprised offering him various lucrative real estate development business deals in Russia,” but that the offers did not pan out.²⁰⁵

July: Quid pro quo at the Convention?

July saw more meetings and contacts between the Trump campaign and Russia and marked a turning point not only because Trump officially secured the Republican nomination for president but also because Russia began to implement its digital strategy.

On July 7, Carter Page traveled to Russia to speak at the New Economic School in Moscow. According to the Steele dossier, during the trip Page met with Igor Sechin, a close associate of Putin’s and the head of the Russian state-run energy company Rosneft, and Igor Divyekin, the head of the lower house of the Russian legislature.²⁰⁶ Page denied these meetings occurred; however, according to his own congressional testimony, after the speech Page met with Russia’s deputy prime minister, Arkady Dvorkovich, and Andrey Baranov, the head of investor relations at Rosneft.²⁰⁷ The next day he emailed another of Trump’s advisers, J.D. Gordon, a longtime Republican operative, about “incredible insights and outreach . . . from a few Russian legislators and senior members of the presidential administration here.” Page later testified that he communicated with multiple Trump campaign officials in advance of his trip, including then-Sen. Sessions, Gordon, campaign manager Corey Lewandowski, and spokeswoman Hope Hicks, to receive approval.²⁰⁸

Page’s Moscow trip features prominently in the Steele dossier. According to Steele, the Russian officials with whom Page met “raised with PAGE the issues of future bilateral energy cooperation and prospects for an associated move to lift Ukraine-related Western sanctions against Russia,” to which Page “reacted positively . . . but had been generally non-committal in response.” The dossier also says the Rosneft executives with whom Page met offered him “the brokerage of up to a 19 per cent (privatized) stake in Rosneft in return” for lifting sanctions, and that Page “confirmed that were TRUMP elected US president, then sanctions on Russia would be lifted.”²⁰⁹ Page has denied the allegations, calling the dossier “dodgy,” but acknowledged that he did meet with Russian officials while in Moscow.²¹⁰

A week later, during the debates over the GOP's official platform, the Trump campaign reportedly requested a change that represented a major divergence from Republican norms—and that seemed to manifest the campaign's pro-Russia stance. Prior to the 2016 election, Republican politicians had almost universally attacked the Obama administration for refusing to provide lethal weapons assistance to Ukraine.²¹¹ Language calling upon the government to do so was reportedly included in a draft of the official GOP platform.²¹²

But during the debates over the platform, which lasted from July 11 to July 15, 2016, that language was softened, from offering “lethal defensive weapons to Ukraine’s Armed Forces” to merely calling for “appropriate assistance.”²¹³ The platform committee reportedly made the change at the behest of J.D. Gordon.²¹⁴

Initially, the Trump campaign dissembled about the change. Speaking on “Meet the Press” on July 31, Trump’s then-campaign chairman Paul Manafort said the change “absolutely did not come from the Trump campaign.”²¹⁵ The same day, Trump told ABC that his campaign was behind the change, but denied having been personally involved in the decision.²¹⁶ Gordon, too, offered conflicting accounts, disputing that he played a role before acknowledging he had pushed the platform committee to change the language.²¹⁷

Since then, it has become clearer that the Trump campaign was behind the change. Page, who had just returned from Moscow, reportedly emailed Gordon and other campaign advisers praising their work on changing the amendment, and several other Republican operatives involved in the platform committee have since corroborated reports that Gordon led the effort to change the platform.²¹⁸ Gordon was also one of three members of the Trump campaign, along with Sessions and Page, to reportedly meet with Russian ambassador Kislyak at the Convention on July 20.²¹⁹

DNC hack and release

After the RNC, Russia began implementing one of the major planks of its digital strategy. On July 22, WikiLeaks published the first batch of what would become a steady stream of emails it had stolen from Democratic operatives, revealing messages acquired from the Democratic National Committee’s servers.²²⁰ The leak seemed orchestrated to disrupt the Democratic National Convention, which began three days later in Philadelphia. The leak included emails from the committee’s chairwoman, congresswoman Debbie Wasserman Schultz (D-FL), and other operatives in which they seemed dismissive toward Senator Bernie Sanders’s candidacy.²²¹ The emails fueled outrage among Sanders supporters who felt the national Democratic Party had unduly influenced the primary process toward Hillary Clinton, leading to protests during the convention and to Rep. Wasserman Schultz’s resignation.²²²

By the convention's end, consensus was growing that Russia was behind the leaked emails. On July 26, U.S. intelligence sources told *The New York Times* that they had "'high confidence' that the Russian government was behind the theft of emails and documents from the Democratic National Committee," although they had not yet determined whether the hacks were "intended as fairly routine cyberespionage . . . or as part of an effort to manipulate the 2016 presidential election."²²³

Trump not only cast doubt on the intelligence community's assessment but called upon Russia to do more. In a July 27 press conference, Trump said that blaming Russia was "a total deflection," adding, "it's probably China, or it could be somebody sitting in his bed." He then urged Russia to hack into Clinton's email account: "Russia, if you're listening, I hope you're able to find the 30,000 emails that are missing," he said, referring to the ongoing scandal regarding Clinton's private email server, continuing, "I think you will probably be rewarded mightily by our press."²²⁴ According to the special counsel's 2018 indictment of the 12 Russian hackers who allegedly stole emails from John Podesta and the DNC, they attempted later that night to infiltrate Clinton's private email server.²²⁵ Though the campaign claimed the comment was a joke, Trump doubled down the next morning, tweeting, "If Russia or any other country or person has Hillary Clinton's 33,000 illegally deleted emails, perhaps they should share them with the FBI!"²²⁶

The general election: Operationalizing collusion

Individuals associated with the Trump campaign reportedly continued to interact with Kremlin-linked individuals throughout the final months of the campaign. It is now known (as of October 29, 2018) that there were at least 71 contacts and 21 meetings between the two groups, involving at least 11 Trump officials and 20 Russians.²²⁷ Additionally, despite having access to the intelligence community's growing consensus that Russia was trying to interfere in the election, Trump continued to question whether Russia was behind the hacks, including during all three presidential debates and in a September 8 interview with Russia's state-run propaganda channel RT.²²⁸

Meanwhile, Russia escalated its campaign on Trump's behalf, often in ways that strongly resembled the Trump team's own strategies. Many of Russia's tactics, including stealing and leaking private communications and attempting to hack private companies, are illegal; others, such as funding armies of online bots and trolls to spread dissent and disinformation, might be legal—if atypical—if conducted by American citizens, but not when carried out by a foreign government.

Russia's most direct contribution to Trump's campaign was hacking and releasing emails from Trump's opponents, which effectively gave the Trump campaign an

unmatched “opposition research” capability. Trump eagerly embraced WikiLeaks during the campaign, publicly mentioning the website 164 times in the final month of the campaign alone.²²⁹

Even at the time, there was evidence that people in Trump’s orbit had advance knowledge of WikiLeaks’s plans. Roger Stone, a Republican operative with a self-professed reputation as a “dirty trickster” and a long history of informally advising Trump, publicly stated multiple times in August that he was in contact with not only WikiLeaks and its founder Julian Assange but also the Russian hacker who claimed credit for stealing the emails.²³⁰ One of Stone’s statements that especially stands out came on August 21, when Stone tweeted, “Trust me, it will soon [be] Podesta’s time in the barrel.”²³¹ The tweet seemed to presage WikiLeaks’s publication of Clinton campaign chairman John Podesta’s emails, which Podesta himself did not know had been hacked until WikiLeaks began to leak them.²³² Reporting by *The Wall Street Journal* suggests that Stone, through an intermediary, had increasingly specific contacts with WikiLeaks. In emails between Stone and his longtime associate, the conservative radio host Randy Credico, Stone appears to allude to emails that have not yet been released, and even suggests rollout strategies for future releases.²³³ Stone continues to dispute reports of foreknowledge of the WikiLeaks dumps during the campaign, and at one point even preemptively denied a report on the subject.²³⁴ However, Mueller’s team has reportedly obtained emails in which Stone and an associate not only passed information to the Trump campaign regarding WikiLeaks but also claimed credit for upcoming revelations.²³⁵

Reporting since the election has revealed that others associated with the Trump campaign also communicated with WikiLeaks or Russian hackers during the campaign. The closest to Trump was his son Donald Trump Jr., who received a direct message from WikiLeaks on Twitter on September 20. The two exchanged several messages during the final month of the campaign, including one in which WikiLeaks suggested Trump contest the results of the election if he lost.²³⁶ Alexander Nix, the head of Cambridge Analytica, the data firm Jared Kushner hired to run the campaign’s digital operations, also reportedly contacted WikiLeaks in June 2016 about assisting with the dissemination of the hacked emails. Both sides have confirmed that the outreach occurred. Assange has said that WikiLeaks received, but rejected, the offer.²³⁷ Additionally, the Republican donor Peter Smith told *The Wall Street Journal* in June 2017 that he had independently organized a team to try to establish contact with Russian hackers to obtain Clinton’s emails during the campaign.²³⁸ Finally, George Papadopoulos apparently knew before anybody else that Russia had the Clinton campaign’s emails, having heard about them from Mifsud in April.²³⁹

The clearest evidence that WikiLeaks and Russia were working on Trump's behalf came on October 7, 2016. That afternoon, at 4:03 p.m., *The Washington Post* published the explosive "Access Hollywood" tape, behind-the-scenes footage from 2005 in which Trump bragged about groping women without their consent.²⁴⁰ Just 29 minutes later, WikiLeaks began publishing the contents of Podesta's email inbox.²⁴¹ Whether there was explicit coordination between the Trump campaign and WikiLeaks remains unknown. Nevertheless, the move seemed to demonstrate Russia and WikiLeaks's intent to help the Trump campaign: It is hard to imagine WikiLeaks timing the release on a Friday afternoon right after the biggest bombshell of the campaign unless the organization was actively trying to distract from *The Washington Post's* story.

Second, the Kremlin provided communications support. As the intelligence community's January 6, 2017, report documents, Russia used networks of online bots and trolls, as well as state-run media such as RT America and Sputnik, to aggressively promote Trump's candidacy from almost the moment he announced he would be running.²⁴² Russian bots and trolls allegedly helped tilt the online discourse in a pro-Trump direction throughout the campaign (and, even as social networks try to combat their influence, reportedly these bots and trolls retain the ability to steer conversations through hashtags and trending topics).²⁴³

To supplement its online campaign, the Kremlin also reportedly purchased advertisements on social media platforms, including Facebook and Twitter. Though Facebook initially denied that its platform had been used to spread disinformation, it later revealed that Kremlin-linked companies spent at least \$150,000 during the election on promoted posts, prompting a cascade of revelations showing how Russian-produced content across a variety of social networks reached millions of users.²⁴⁴ While most of the content was confined to the internet, some of the ads promoted real-world events, including an anti-refugee rally in an Idaho town where *Breitbart News* falsely claimed the local government was covering up a horrific crime spree by Muslim refugees.²⁴⁵

The resemblance between the Kremlin's campaign and the official Trump campaign's online strategies goes beyond mutual support for Trump. The Russian companies purchasing advertisements reportedly used targeting techniques that strongly resemble those that Cambridge Analytica frequently touts.²⁴⁶ Cambridge Analytica has denied allegations that it colluded with Russian actors.²⁴⁷ In the weeks leading up to the election, both reportedly heavily targeted the Midwestern states that ultimately proved essential for Trump's victory, despite political analysts' doubts that

he could win there.²⁴⁸ Both also specifically sought to depress turnout for Clinton among voters who supported Bernie Sanders in the primary by resurfacing wedge issues such as the Trans-Pacific Partnership and, in the Kremlin's case, by promoting Sanders and the Green Party candidate, Jill Stein.²⁴⁹ Members of Trump's digital operations team bragged about their turnout-suppressing campaign mere days before the election.²⁵⁰

These similarities raise the possibility that the campaigns shared not only a superficial strategy but also underlying data behind the decisions. The sophistication of Russia's social media campaign suggests that they had inside help: Not only did the Kremlin reportedly mirror and amplify the Trump campaign uncannily well, it also displayed a level of insight far above what could be expected from a foreign observer—it was, after all, above that of most domestic analysts. Indeed, Steele noted in July 2016 that there was an “extensive conspiracy between campaign team and Kremlin,” with “exchange of information established in both directions.”²⁵¹

A February 2018 indictment of 13 Russian operatives and three Russian companies that allegedly carried out the online propaganda campaign indicated a much broader and more sophisticated operation than was initially revealed. According to the indictment, the Russian operatives and companies cumulatively spent more than \$1 million per month on not just the ads but also real-world events and outside consulting on how best to deploy their online strategy. They also reportedly conducted outreach with other pro-Trump groups, including one local field office, although the indictment does not mention if there was additional coordination with higher-level members of the Trump campaign.²⁵²

Beyond the contacts between individuals linked to the two campaigns, they may have been able to trade information without having to meet face-to-face or exchange emails. On October 31, 2016, the journalist Franklin Foer wrote in *Slate* about a mysterious online connection between the Trump campaign and a Russian bank. According to Foer, a cybersecurity expert noticed in late July that a Trump Organization server appeared to be communicating with one at Alfa Bank, a Russian financial institution with links to the Kremlin.²⁵³ Though some experts suggested the communication could be spam, none was found to have been transferred between the two servers.²⁵⁴ In March 2017, CNN reported that the FBI and cybersecurity experts “continue to examine” the connection; however, it remains a mystery why the servers were communicating and what, if any, information was exchanged.²⁵⁵ The Trump Organization has denied “sending or receiving any communications from this email server.”²⁵⁶

Additionally, the Kremlin appears to have assisted with the financing of the campaign. All campaigns need money to support their efforts. It is why campaigns desperately fundraise. Russia has been known to provide financial backing to nationalist politicians, as it did with Le Pen's campaign in France in 2017.²⁵⁷ Though the opacity of America's campaign finance system makes definitive proof hard to find, there are at least three indications that Russia financially supported Trump as well.

- First, according to the indictment of 13 Russian operatives involved in bot and troll farms, the Kremlin spent millions of dollars not only directly purchasing advertisements on social media but also paying for consulting and the labor of its agents.²⁵⁸ This money effectively subsidized the Trump campaign, which was otherwise known as a remarkably small, ill-organized team that seemed to otherwise spend surprisingly little to support its own efforts.²⁵⁹
- Second, Trump, according to his disclosure forms, spent \$66 million of his own personal fortune to fund his campaign.²⁶⁰ Beyond the fact that, as described above, much of that personal fortune likely derives from financing and customers from Russia and other former Soviet countries, questions remain as to how Trump, whose money is largely tied up in illiquid assets such as real estate, was able to generate that much cash to spend.²⁶¹ The Kremlin may also have found other ways to secretly route money into Trump's coffers—or those of organizations that supported him. For example, the National Rifle Association spent an unprecedented \$30 million to support Trump.²⁶² Since the election, the organization has revealed that it received \$2,512.85 in contributions “from people associated with Russian addresses.”²⁶³ However, Senate Democrats claimed in an interim report on their investigation that the NRA had received, and failed to disclose, significantly more from Russian sources.²⁶⁴
- Third, investigators are reportedly probing several suspicious transactions during the campaign by Kremlin-linked figures. According to multiple reports by BuzzFeed News, these include millions of dollars in transactions involving the Agalarov family and their associates, such as Goldstone and Kaveladze, as well as wire transfers from the Russian government to its embassies in the United States.²⁶⁵ These reports suggest that Mueller and his team are investigating the allegation in the Steele dossier that the Kremlin used intermediaries to fund its efforts in 2016, including payments to Trump affiliates such as Page.²⁶⁶ Through their attorney, the Agalarovs have said that their transactions were legitimate payments to Goldstone and Kaveladze for business-related expenses, and the Kremlin has said its transfers were related to absentee voting for Russia's 2017 presidential election.²⁶⁷

Finally, the Kremlin attacked actual voting infrastructure. According to a top-secret National Security Agency report obtained by *The Intercept*, by the end of September 2016 Russian hackers attempted to hack into voting infrastructure in 21 states, as well as the election systems vendor VR Systems. The hackers then reportedly sent a second round of malware on October 31 or November 1, one week before the election.²⁶⁸ Though it remains unknown how successful these attacks were, NPR has reported that, on election day, several North Carolina precincts using software from VR Systems incurred technical difficulties that led to significant delays.²⁶⁹

Collusion in plain sight

The evidence of collusion between the Trump campaign and the Kremlin is overwhelming. Much of it was in plain sight well before the election: Russia illegally hacked prominent Democrats' email accounts, then strategically published the information through a known cut-out to damage Trump's opponent. The Trump campaign, which had apparent foreknowledge of the leaks, relied heavily on the information to make its case, especially in the contest's final month. Meanwhile, Russia mobilized online armies of bots and trolls to promote Trump's candidacy, all while he continually denied receiving their support.

There likely was also collusion behind closed doors. Most of the dozens of contacts between the two campaigns remained secret until well after the election; so did many of the details of the Russian government's online efforts to tip the election in Trump's favor. As special counsel Robert Mueller's investigation continues, it is likely that information will continue to emerge painting a more detailed picture about how, and why, the Trump campaign colluded with the Russian government against American democracy—and what the consequences of that conspiracy will be.

Maria Butina

In July 2018, the U.S. Department of Justice arrested and indicted Maria Butina, a Russian graduate student at American University in Washington, D.C. According to the DOJ, Butina spent several years illegally working as an unregistered agent of the Russian government as part of an ongoing effort to infiltrate American conservative politics, most notably by building connections with the National Rifle Association. In the process, she developed relationships with multiple prominent conservative figures, including Wisconsin Gov. Scott Walker and Rep. Dana Rohrabacher (R-CA), and met and apparently began a romantic relationship with Paul Erickson, a longtime Republican operative.²⁷⁰

Prior to her arrest, Butina had long been present on the fringes of the Trump-Russia scandal. On June 12, 2015, four days before Trump announced his candidacy, the conservative publication *The National Interest* published an article entitled “The Bear and the Elephant,” in which Butina argued that electing a Republican president would ease tensions between the United States and Russia.²⁷¹ A month later, Butina attended a question-and-answer session with Trump in Las Vegas where she asked about the role sanctions would play in his foreign policy; Trump responded by questioning the efficacy of sanctions and saying he “would get along very, very well” with Putin.²⁷² Additionally, in June 2016 at the NRA’s annual convention in Nashville, Erickson helped set up a meeting between Donald Trump Jr. and Alexander Torshin, a Russian politician and central banker who allegedly oversaw Butina’s work in the United States.²⁷³

Butina’s indictment is among the strongest evidence to substantiate allegations that Russia, through influential groups such as the NRA, attempted to coopt the Republican Party. Russia has strong gun control laws and there is little grassroots advocacy aimed at changing those laws; nevertheless, a small coterie of officials, Torshin included, have made increasingly visible efforts to cultivate ties to the NRA, including by participating in an NRA-led trip to Moscow in 2015.²⁷⁴ Moreover, Mueller is reportedly investigating whether the NRA, which spent an unprecedented \$30 million to help elect Trump, received any funding from Russian sources.²⁷⁵ The organization has so far revealed that it received at least \$2,500 from Russian sources; however, a report from Senate Democrats suggests that there is additional funding that the organization has not yet made public.²⁷⁶

Hack and release

The centerpiece of Russia's attack on the 2016 election was strategically hacking and releasing emails from Democratic operatives to undermine Hillary Clinton's presidential campaign. This attack occurred in five discrete steps.

Hacking the emails of Trump's Democratic opponents. Beginning in 2015, hackers from the GRU, Russia's military intelligence unit, began hacking into and stealing the emails of Democratic operatives and organizations, most notably the Democratic National Committee.²⁷⁷ In March 2016, they escalated the assault, spearphishing individual operatives and successfully hacking into the inbox of Clinton's campaign chairman, John Podesta.²⁷⁸

Alerting the Trump campaign. According to his guilty plea and a memo released by Democrats on the House Intelligence Committee, George Papadopoulos learned from Maltese professor Joseph Mifsud that Russia had stolen emails from the Clinton campaign.²⁷⁹

Meeting and coordinating strategy. At least 11 Trump campaign officials were in contact with at least 20 Kremlin-linked operatives during the presidential campaign.²⁸⁰ Most famously, Donald Trump Jr., Jared Kushner, and Paul Manafort met with four Russian operatives for the explicit purpose of obtaining dirt on Clinton.²⁸¹

Strategically releasing the emails. Using WikiLeaks as an intermediary, Russia released the stolen emails at two times designed to maximally benefit the Trump campaign: on July 22, right before the Democratic National Convention, and on October 7, just 29 minutes after the publication of the "Access Hollywood" tape.²⁸²

Campaigning on the emails. Donald Trump capitalized heavily on the hacked and released emails, citing WikiLeaks 164 times—more than five times per day—in the campaign's final month.²⁸³ At times, there appeared to be coordinated media strategies around individual emails, the rapid deployment of which suggests foreknowledge of what emails would be released.²⁸⁴

Putin's payoff

The threat Russian interference poses to American democracy didn't end with Donald Trump's election. Trump has pursued a foreign policy agenda that advances Russia's objectives, including by attacking the U.S. intelligence community, opposing sanctions and strong responses against Russia, weakening the transatlantic alliance, and undermining democratic institutions at home, all while praising autocrats and attacking democratically elected leaders of close allies.

Scrutiny of Trump and his campaign's ties to Russia has not quelled the president's public and private pursuit of better relations between the United States and Russia. During the transition, members of Trump's team continued secretly meeting and conversing with representatives of the Russian government, coordinating strategies to counter the Obama administration's policies toward Russia. Meanwhile, Trump has repeatedly demonstrated his affinity toward President Vladimir Putin in both his rhetoric and his actions, all while the Kremlin has continued its campaign of asymmetrical aggression.

The transition

Russia wasted no time celebrating the election's results. Members of Russia's parliament applauded when Trump's victory was announced.²⁸⁵ The next day, a senior Russian official acknowledged what Trump and his team would continue denying for months: There had been many connections between the Trump campaign and representatives of the Kremlin. "There were contacts," said Sergei Ryabkov, Russia's Deputy Foreign Minister. "We are doing this and have been doing this during the election campaign. Obviously, we know most of the people from his entourage. . . . I cannot say that all of them, but quite a few have been staying in touch with Russian representatives."²⁸⁶

Suspicious meetings and contacts

The contacts between Trump's team and Kremlin-linked figures continued throughout the transition period.

Kislyak meets with Flynn and Kushner

On December 1 or 2, 2016, Trump's son-in-law Jared Kushner and Trump's pick for national security adviser Lt. Gen. Michael Flynn secretly met with the Russian ambassador Sergey Kislyak in Trump Tower.²⁸⁷ The White House only disclosed the meeting the following March, when Kushner refiled his security clearance paperwork due to significant omissions on his first submission.²⁸⁸ In May 2017, *The Washington Post* reported the purpose of the meeting: Kushner, Flynn, and Kislyak discussed "setting up a secret and secure communications channel between Trump's transition team and the Kremlin, using Russian diplomatic facilities in an apparent move to shield their pre-inauguration discussions from monitoring" by U.S. intelligence.²⁸⁹ The White House did not comment on the details of the report, but said the meeting was typical by diplomatic standards. But as a former Justice Department employee wrote in *Politico*, establishing a back-channel with an adversary, with the specific intent of circumventing the American diplomatic and intelligence apparatus, not only was a major breach of protocol but also raised questions of whether Kushner and Flynn had illegally acted to benefit a foreign government.²⁹⁰

Kushner meets with Gorkov in Trump Tower

Kislyak then reportedly arranged for Kushner to meet with Sergei Gorkov, the head of the sanctioned Russian state-run bank Vnesheconombank and a close adviser to Putin.²⁹¹ Accounts of the meeting, which Kushner failed to disclose until months later, differed significantly. The White House claimed the meeting was a standard diplomatic affair; VEB, however, said Gorkov and Kushner discussed Kushner's real estate company.²⁹² The conflicting explanations highlight a major concern about the Trump campaign's ties to Russia: Several high-ranking members of Trump's team, including Kushner and the president himself, have violated longstanding norms of financial divestment and disclosure by retaining ownership and partial control of their private businesses while in office. Kushner came into office reportedly deep in debt and seeking a bailout for his floundering real estate empire, making him uniquely vulnerable to conflicts of interest and potentially even compromising him financially.²⁹³ Kushner's conflicts of interest and meetings with Russia-linked figures are reportedly part of the reason he didn't receive permanent security clearance until more than a year into his position with the administration.²⁹⁴ Through a spokesperson, Kushner has denied that his business interests have played any role in his decisions.²⁹⁵

Carter Page returns to Moscow

In mid-December 2016, former campaign aide Carter Page headed to Moscow again for meetings with senior Russian officials.²⁹⁶ By then, the U.S. intelligence community had been surveilling Page for at least two months based on a Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act (FISA) warrant they had received in October. The warrant was ultimately renewed at least four times, indicating that the intelligence community and the FISA court had agreed on four separate occasions that the surveillance was yielding valuable information.²⁹⁷

Flynn-Kislyak phone calls

The biggest controversy surrounding Trump's transition team involved Lt. Gen. Flynn's phone calls with Kislyak. On December 29, 2016, President Barack Obama announced that, in response to Russia's interference in the 2016 election, the United States was sanctioning five Russian entities and four individuals and expelling 35 Russian operatives.²⁹⁸

Over the next several hours, Flynn (at the time in the Dominican Republic) and Kislyak had five phone conversations about the sanctions; between their calls, Flynn called Trump's transition team headquarters at Mar-a-Lago in Palm Beach, Florida.²⁹⁹ The next morning, the Russian government announced it would not retaliate for the sanctions; three hours later, Trump praised Putin in a tweet, saying, "Great move on delay (by V. Putin)—I always knew he was very smart!"³⁰⁰

Flynn's phone calls with Kislyak remained secret for two weeks. On January 12, 2017, *The Washington Post* first reported that the conversations had happened, along with statements from the Trump transition team asserting that the calls began before the Obama administration announced its sanctions and that the pair did not discuss the topic.³⁰¹ The Trump transition team sent high-ranking officials such as Vice President-elect Mike Pence and future chief of staff Reince Priebus to repeat the assertion on national television.³⁰²

The Trump transition team's actions began catching up to them shortly after Trump took office. Just two days after becoming national security adviser, Flynn lied to the FBI about the subject of his calls with Kislyak.³⁰³ After the interview, acting Attorney General Sally Yates approached White House counsel Donald F. McGahn II to warn him that she believed Flynn was compromised.³⁰⁴

The administration's story fell apart on February 9, 2017, when *The Washington Post* reported that Flynn and Kislyak did discuss sanctions and that the phone calls "were interpreted by some senior U.S. officials as an inappropriate and potentially illegal signal to the Kremlin that it could expect a reprieve" from sanctions.³⁰⁵ Four days later,

Flynn resigned, ostensibly pushed out for lying to Pence about his communications with Kislyak.³⁰⁶

But the story of Flynn's departure has never added up. According to the guilty plea Flynn signed in December 2017, in which he pleaded guilty to lying to the FBI about his conversations with Kislyak, Flynn was in touch with Trump transition officials at Mar-a-Lago in between the phone calls.³⁰⁷ If Flynn truly resigned because he lied to Pence, it seems that other transition officials were aware of his behavior, which suggests that either they, too, were lying to Pence or that Flynn resigned—or was pushed out—for another reason. His son, Michael Flynn Jr., has tweeted that his father did not lie to Pence, apparently confirming a tweet in which Trump appeared to say he fired Flynn for lying to the FBI.³⁰⁸ Additionally, Trump's team had long been vocal about improving relations with Russia, which makes it unclear why Flynn would seek to keep his conversations with Kislyak a secret, as they were a part of achieving that very public goal. These contradictions suggest there is another explanation, to which former Deputy Attorney General Sally Yates seems to have alluded in May 2017 when she told the Senate that, even before his interview with the FBI, Flynn's "underlying conduct" was "problematic in and of itself."³⁰⁹

Seychelles meeting

On or around January 11, 2017, Erik Prince, the founder of the mercenary firm Blackwater and an unofficial adviser to Trump, met in the Seychelles with Kirill Dmitriev, the head of the sanctioned Russian Direct Investment Fund (RDIF). According to *The Washington Post*, Prince "presented himself as an unofficial envoy for Trump" in a meeting intended "to establish a back channel between the incoming administration and the Kremlin." Prince initially claimed the meeting was unplanned and had nothing to do with his relationship to Trump; however, *The Washington Post* has since reported that Mueller has evidence that the meeting's purpose was in fact to establish back-channel communications with the Kremlin.³¹⁰

It wasn't until September 2018, when reporters at The Daily Beast published excerpts from Dmitriev's contemporaneous notes from the meeting, that the American public first began to learn what actually took place in the Seychelles. The note outlines several possible policy areas for increased cooperation between the United States and Russia, with two consistent themes. First, most of the proposals would require that the United States lift sanctions to facilitate cooperation between U.S. government agencies and RDIF; and second, that Dmitriev approached the meeting as if Prince was a representative of Trump's team, further discrediting Prince's initial contention that the meeting had nothing to do with his role advising Trump.³¹¹ Prince has so far declined to comment on the revelations.³¹²

The intelligence community report

Throughout the transition, the intelligence community was working on its report assessing Russian interference in the 2016 election. On December 9, *The Washington Post* reported that a secret CIA assessment had concluded that “Russia intervened in the 2016 election to help Donald Trump win the presidency, rather than just to undermine confidence in the U.S. electoral system.”³¹³ Trump’s transition team, fresh off multiple secret meetings with high-ranking Russian officials, responded by challenging the credibility of the entire intelligence community: “These are the same people that said Saddam Hussein had weapons of mass destruction,” the transition team said in a statement.³¹⁴

The intelligence community ultimately released the report on January 6, 2017. The declassified version of the assessment, which reflected a unanimous consensus from 17 separate intelligence agencies, not only found that Russia had acted out of direct interest in ensuring Trump’s election but also outlined many of the mechanisms used to do so.³¹⁵ Additionally, the intelligence community also briefed Trump on a declassified version. According to *The New York Times*, the briefing included not just the content of the report but also “texts and emails from Russian military officers and information gleaned from a top-secret source close to Mr. Putin, who had described to the C.I.A. how the Kremlin decided to execute its campaign of hacking and disinformation.”³¹⁶ Trump publicly addressed the report on January 11, 2017, at his only press conference during the transition, acknowledging for the first time that Russia had hacked the DNC and John Podesta during the election, but adding, “I think we also get hacked by other countries and other people.”³¹⁷

The administration

Sanctions

The Trump administration began working to improve relations with Russia minutes after Trump became president. During Trump’s inaugural address, Lt. Gen. Flynn reportedly texted an associate that sanctions against Russia would be “ripped up” as part of a deal to build nuclear power plants in the Middle East.³¹⁸ The “Middle East Marshall Plan,” developed by two companies Flynn advised prior to becoming national security adviser, would require cooperation between companies in the United States and Europe and sanctioned Russian entities, and would therefore provide cover for the Trump administration’s efforts to remove sanctions on Russia.³¹⁹ The plan was put before the career National Security Council staff, who balked at the proposal and protested the effort because it was seen a giveaway to Russia and potentially dangerous from a nuclear proliferation perspective.³²⁰

According to The Daily Beast, in the early days of Trump's presidency, the administration also considered withdrawing troops from Eastern Europe to please Putin. A National Security Council staffer reportedly suggested in February 2017 that the United States move troops from Russia's borders as part of a broader strategy proposal to "refram[e] our interests within the context of a new relationship with Russia." The administration did not act on the suggestion.³²¹

Despite its reported early efforts to do so, the Trump administration has not undone sanctions that the Obama administration placed on Russia.³²² However, it has repeatedly undermined attempts to impose new measures to punish Russia's attacks on the United States and other countries.

In July 2017, Congress passed a bill imposing new sanctions on Russia and restricting the White House's ability to remove existing sanctions.³²³ In retaliation, Putin ordered the United States to drastically cut its diplomatic staff in Moscow—a decision Trump praised, saying it would save the country money.³²⁴ Trump, facing veto-proof majorities in both houses of Congress (419-3 in the House and 98-2 in the Senate), signed the bill in August 2017, but released a signing statement calling some of the provisions of the law unconstitutional.³²⁵

Since then, the Trump administration has repeatedly demonstrated it has no desire to enforce the sanctions. First, the administration ignored the October 1, 2017, deadline for providing guidance on implementing the sanctions, ultimately doing so on October 26.³²⁶ In the intervening weeks, the U.S. Department of State defunded and dissolved the office of the coordinator for sanctions policy, whose job it would have been to enforce the measures.³²⁷

Then, when it came time to enact the legislation in January 2018, the administration again abdicated its responsibility. The bill has three main components: First, the State Department is supposed to impose new sanctions on the Russian defense and intelligence sector; second, the U.S. Department of the Treasury is supposed to identify Russian oligarchs and government-linked figures on whom new restrictions could be placed; and third, the Treasury Department is supposed to release a report on the potential impact of additional sanctions on Russian sovereign debt.³²⁸

The administration capitulated on all three fronts. Despite warnings from several government officials, including then-Secretary of State Rex Tillerson, that Russia was continuing to meddle in foreign elections, the State Department announced on January 29 that the administration considered sanctioning the Russian govern-

ment unnecessary to deter further meddling.³²⁹ Meanwhile, the list of oligarchs and Kremlin-linked individuals the Treasury Department published was quickly revealed to have been copied from a combination of a *Forbes* list of Russian billionaires and the Kremlin's own website, creating a document so all-encompassing as to be effectively useless.³³⁰ *The Guardian* subsequently reported that the list was a replacement for a more carefully cultivated list that had been previously drafted.³³¹ Finally, the sovereign debt report concluded that the downstream economic effects, or “contagion,” from potential future sanctions on Russian sovereign debt were too dangerous for the United States to ever impose new sanctions.³³² When the administration did announce new sanctions in March, they almost exclusively targeted individuals who were already under sanction or indictment, rendering them effectively useless.³³³

However, on April 6, the Treasury Department announced wider-ranging sanctions that hammered the aluminum empire of Kremlin-linked oligarch Oleg Deripaska.³³⁴ Though the sanctions were initially presented as the first in a series of steps that would punish Russia not only for its election interference but also its military actions in Syria, the administration soon announced it had no intention to roll out additional measures.³³⁵ After word of no further action, Russia's stock market rebounded, counteracting the sanctions' intended effects.³³⁶ Furthermore, the Treasury Department is now exploring giving the aluminum magnate Deripaska a reprieve from the sanctions on him and his company.³³⁷

Expelling diplomats

Trump reportedly attempted to undercut the U.S. response to the Kremlin's alleged attempt to assassinate a former Russian intelligence agent living in the U.K.³³⁸ After the United States expelled 60 Russian diplomats in retribution, Trump reportedly fumed that the response was too harsh and would worsen relations with Russia.³³⁹

Crimea

Lt. Gen. Flynn was also involved in another effort to undermine American sanctions on Russia during the transition. In early 2017, Felix Sater and Trump's lawyer Michael Cohen attempted to facilitate discussions between Flynn and the pro-Kremlin Ukrainian politician Andriy Artemenko. According to *The New York Times*, Artemenko approached Sater with a “peace plan” for Ukraine and Russia in which Ukraine would vote to lease Crimea to Russia; in return, the United States would lift the sanctions it had placed on Russia in the aftermath of the 2014 invasion of Ukraine. Sater passed the plan to Cohen, who delivered it to Flynn. Cohen, Sater, and Artemenko have all acknowledged their roles in the plan; it is unclear whether Flynn considered the proposal, and he resigned without implementing or commenting on it.³⁴⁰

Trump has also repeatedly suggested that he would be willing to recognize Russia's invasion of Crimea as legitimate. In direct contradiction to members of his own cabinet, Trump has refused to categorically condemn the annexation.³⁴¹ He has repeatedly blamed Obama, and not Putin, for Russia's annexation of Crimea, saying that the invasion occurred because Obama didn't provide Putin a worthy enough adversary.³⁴² Behind closed doors, he reportedly told other G-7 leaders that he believes Crimea is part of Russia "because everyone who lives there speaks Russian," closely mirroring one of Putin's chief talking points on the subject.³⁴³

Implicitly, Trump has also moved to legitimize Russia's annexation of Crimea. On the campaign trail, he repeatedly criticized sanctions the West implemented to punish the annexation, and in office he has said Russia should be allowed to rejoin the G-7 after having been expelled in the invasion's aftermath.³⁴⁴ Trump has even said that it is within his authority to unilaterally override a congressional directive against "any activity that recognizes the sovereignty of the Russian Federation over Crimea."³⁴⁵

In praise of Putin

Another major pattern of Trump's presidency has been the contrast between his praise of Putin and his apparent rejection of transatlantic alliances. Trump has repeatedly insulted Western leaders and questioned the value of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization; meanwhile, he refrained from criticizing Putin until more than a year into his first term.³⁴⁶ On May 25, 2017, while speaking at NATO's annual summit in Brussels, Belgium, Trump failed to reaffirm the United States' commitment to the treaty's Article 5, which asserts that an attack against one member organization is an attack on all of its members; it is one of the cornerstones of the North Atlantic Alliance.³⁴⁷ After the summit, *Politico* reported that a previous draft of Trump's speech did reaffirm Article 5, but the sentence was deleted at the last minute without the knowledge of Trump's national security team.³⁴⁸

Trump eventually did reaffirm the United States' commitment to Article 5 in a speech in Poland on July 6, 2017, only to again demonstrate his preference for Putin the next day at the G-20 summit in Germany.³⁴⁹ During the summit, Trump had at least two meetings with Putin, lasting for at least three hours, without any U.S. diplomatic staff present.³⁵⁰ The administration failed to disclose one of these meetings, which occurred during a dinner for all the world leaders at the summit. Trump responded to reports about the conversations on Twitter, saying, "Fake News story of secret dinner with Putin is 'sick.' All G 20 leaders, and spouses, were invited by the Chancellor of Germany. Press knew!"³⁵¹ According to *The Washington Post*, however, while other world leaders noticed Trump's conversations with Putin, the press did not learn of the conversation for several days.³⁵²

In December 2017, Trump exchanged two calls with Putin that reinforced concerns about Trump's pro-Putin stance. On December 14, Trump called Putin to thank him for "acknowledging America's strong economic performance in [Putin's] annual press conference."³⁵³ Three days later, Putin returned the favor, calling Trump to thank him for an intelligence tip that had helped prevent a terrorist attack in St. Petersburg.³⁵⁴

And in March of 2018, despite explicit instructions from his national security staff not to do so, Trump called Putin to congratulate the Russian president on winning an election that international observers described as "characterized by restrictions on fundamental freedoms [and a] lack of genuine competition."³⁵⁵ The Kremlin subsequently revealed that during the conversation Trump invited Putin to a White House summit.³⁵⁶ Meanwhile, Trump avoided mentioning Russian interference in the 2016 election or the ongoing international incident involving the Russian government's alleged attempted assassination of the former Russian intelligence agent living in Britain.³⁵⁷ Trump later tweeted that he congratulated rather than criticized Putin because "getting along with Russia (and others) is a good thing," a sentiment he echoed in a press conference with Baltic leaders.³⁵⁸

Attacks on the U.S. intelligence community

Trump has also benefited Putin through his continued attempts to undermine the U.S. intelligence community's conclusion that Russia meddled in the 2016 election. During his first year in office, Trump publicly and repeatedly expressed his doubts that Russia interfered, at one point citing Putin's personal assurances that the Kremlin had not done so.³⁵⁹ Behind-the-scenes reports contend that he remains privately skeptical about the origin of the hacks.³⁶⁰

Attacking NATO allies

Trump's antagonism toward Western allies goes far beyond his initial refusal to reaffirm NATO's Article 5. Trump has repeatedly attacked European leaders, straining relations with countries ranging from Canada and the United Kingdom to Australia.³⁶¹ He has repeatedly undermined unifying aspects of global summits, such as when he unexpectedly backed out of a traditional joint communiqué at the end of the 2018 G-7 summit and threatened to impose additional tariffs on Canada in response to a perceived slight from Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau.³⁶² Trump's own staff have reportedly begun negotiating deals with other leaders attending upcoming summits, prior to Trump's arrival, to ensure that he doesn't create further tensions and derail their alliances.³⁶³

One of the most frequent targets of Trump's ire is Germany's Prime Minister Angela Merkel. Trump repeatedly criticized Merkel during his campaign, accusing her of implementing unfair trade practices and attacking her relatively permissive stance toward refugees.³⁶⁴ In office, his criticisms have continued: Trump has insulted his German counterpart on Twitter, saying that Germans "are turning against their leadership" on the subject of illegal immigration, and appointed the notorious far-right troll Richard Grenell as the U.S. ambassador to Germany. Grenell told Breitbart News that he considers it part of his job to "empower" conservative politicians across Europe.³⁶⁵

In person, Trump's treatment of Merkel has been, if anything, even worse. When Merkel came to the White House in March 2017, her first such visit during Trump's administration, Trump appeared to refuse to shake her hand at a joint press conference in the Oval Office.³⁶⁶ During the 2018 G-7 summit in Quebec, Canada, a member of Merkel's staff posted a photo on Instagram in which Merkel stood at the head of the rest of the summit's leaders in apparent tense negotiations with Trump, who remained seated with his arms crossed in apparent defiance.³⁶⁷ At the summit, Trump reportedly threw Starburst candy on the table in front of Merkel and told her, "Don't say I never give you anything."³⁶⁸

These insults matter for two main reasons. The first is that they deliver on one of Putin's key goals, which is to divide NATO and other transatlantic alliances, thus strengthening Putin's own hand in international negotiations.³⁶⁹ Trump's erratic behavior toward other world leaders appears to have contributed to a precipitous drop in other countries' sense of trust in the United States.³⁷⁰ Additionally, Trump's constant criticism highlights just how unusual his praise for Putin truly is: Trump apparently sees no problem with potentially alienating the leaders of some of America's closest allies, but repeatedly refuses to criticize Putin, citing the desire to improve relations with Russia.

The Helsinki summit

Perhaps the most shocking demonstration of the president's deference to and admiration for Putin came at their joint summit in Helsinki, Finland, on July 16, 2018. The preceding week, Trump attacked allies at NATO's annual summit in Brussels and during a visit to the U.K., including by accusing the German government of being a "captive" of Russia and attacking British Prime Minister Theresa May for her Brexit negotiation strategy.³⁷¹

The Friday prior to the summit, the special counsel indicted 12 agents in the GRU, Russia's main intelligence directorate, for allegedly hacking and disseminating Democratic operatives' emails during the 2016 election. Though the fact that the GRU carried out the hacks was widely known prior to the indictment, the charging documents outlined numerous previously unknown details, such as the names of the hackers and, in

some instances, the times of specific cyberattacks. The indictment also revealed additional contacts between Americans and suspected Russian agents, including at least one congressional candidate who directly reached out to a GRU cut-out with a request for stolen documents, and noted that GRU officers attempted to penetrate Clinton's private email server hours after Trump publicly suggested they do so.³⁷² Several Democratic officials, and even some Republicans, responded by calling on the president to cancel the upcoming summit.³⁷³ As if to underscore the extent of Russia's interference, the Justice Department announced on July 15 that it had arrested Maria Butina, a Russian graduate student in Washington, D.C., for allegedly infiltrating conservative political groups, most notably the NRA, on behalf of the Russian government.³⁷⁴

On July 16, Trump had an extended meeting with Putin, behind closed doors and with no staff members present except for a translator; what they discussed remains unknown.³⁷⁵ Afterward, Trump and Putin held a joint press conference at which the president made several alarming statements. Within days of the indictment of 12 Russian agents for an unprecedented and unprovoked attack on American democracy, Trump failed to dispute Putin's denial that the Kremlin was responsible for the hacking and release of Democratic operatives' emails in 2016. Trump said, "I don't see any reason why it would be" Russia, and repeatedly condemned the investigation into that attack. He also complimented Putin on his "interesting idea" to allow members of Mueller's team to come to Russia to continue their investigation into indicted GRU operatives—but only in exchange for Trump sending some of Putin's most vocal critics in the United States and the West, including former U.S. ambassador to Russia Michael McFaul and investor and Magnitsky Act proponent Bill Browder, to Russia for questioning.³⁷⁶

As he has with several of his most appalling statements, Trump soon attempted to walk back his comments in the wake of a firestorm of outrage, claiming he had misspoken and intended to say he didn't "see any reason why it wouldn't be Russia." Though the clarification was quickly embraced by Republicans eager to let Trump off the hook at all costs, the rest of the world knew what they had seen: the president siding with a hostile foreign leader who ordered an attack on American democracy over those in his own country attempting to punish that attack and prevent further interference.³⁷⁷

Trump's motivations

What makes Trump's actions and rhetoric toward Russia so difficult to comprehend is that, with an intense political scandal raging over Trump's links to Russia, he has every political incentive to adopt a stronger and more confrontational approach to Russia. Instead, Trump has repeatedly praised Putin and refused to act against Russian interests.

Trump's inauguration fund

One of the major unsolved mysteries surrounding the Trump transition involves the money raised for the president's inauguration. After dramatically underspending his primary opponent during the campaign, Trump and his team raised an unprecedented \$107 million for his inauguration, more than Obama had spent on his 2009 and 2013 ceremonies combined.³⁷⁸ There have been reports that many wealthy Russians were "granted unusual access."³⁷⁹ These include Viktor Vekselberg, an oligarch with close ties to the Kremlin, who sat with Michael Cohen at an exclusive dinner the night of Trump's inauguration; Kazakh mining magnate Alexander Mashkevitch; Russian ambassador Sergey Kislyak; and Natalia Veselnitskaya and Rinat Akhmetshin, who attended the June 9 meeting in Trump Tower.³⁸⁰

The first question about the inauguration is how, and from whom, the Trump campaign raised the money. Much of that information can be gleaned from financial reports the transition team filed; however, even those leave key questions unanswered.³⁸¹ There were, for example, several major donations from Putin-linked individuals or corporations, including \$285,000 from a company tied to Vekselberg and \$1 million from Leonard Blavatnik, a Soviet-born, U.K.-based billionaire and former business partner of Vekselberg.³⁸² But there are rumors of additional Russian money in Trump's inauguration fund—rumors that only intensified after Sam Patten, a longtime associate of Paul Manafort and Konstantin Kilimnik, pleaded guilty in 2018 to setting up front corporations to steer \$50,000 into the inauguration fund from an unknown Ukrainian donor.³⁸³

An even bigger question is where all that money went. Multiple experts, including the overseers of Obama and George W. Bush's inaugurations, have expressed confoundment at how Trump could have spent so much on an event that, despite Trump's insistence to the contrary, was relatively small by historical standards.³⁸⁴ In February 2018, *The New York Times* partially solved the mystery, tracing \$26 million to a firm owned by Stephanie Winston Wolkoff, a longtime friend and adviser of Melania Trump.³⁸⁵ Trump's deputy campaign chairman Rick Gates, who was reportedly heavily involved in running the event, has admitted to absconding with some of the remaining money.³⁸⁶ Still, tens of millions of dollars remain largely unaccounted for—a fact that special counsel Robert Mueller is reportedly investigating.³⁸⁷

The investigation

The ongoing investigation into the Trump campaign's ties to Russia has become one of the most persistent stories among his administration's many scandals. What began as a probe under FBI Director James Comey into the Kremlin's interference in the 2016 election has evolved into a wide-ranging investigation by special counsel Robert Mueller into everything from Donald Trump's business history to the vehicles through which foreign governments secretly inject money into American politics.

The early months

As Trump's inauguration neared, the investigation into his campaign and transition team accelerated. On January 6, the intelligence community briefed Trump on its report regarding Russian interference in the election.³⁸⁸ The declassified report, released the same day, was the first public assessment to assert that Russia "developed a clear preference for President-elect Trump" and sought not only to undermine Clinton's campaign but also to actively support Trump's candidacy.³⁸⁹

Then, on January 10, CNN reported that the intelligence community had briefed the president-elect on the contents of the Steele dossier; that night, BuzzFeed News published the document.³⁹⁰ Trump responded almost immediately, decrying it via a tweet as "FAKE NEWS - A TOTAL POLITICAL WITCH HUNT!"³⁹¹

Cohen, who the dossier alleges traveled to Prague to facilitate collusion with Russia, also responded, calling the dossier "ridiculous on so many levels" and denying the allegations.³⁹² He initially sued BuzzFeed and Fusion GPS, which financed the dossier, for libel, but dropped the suit amid reports that Mueller has evidence that Cohen did travel to Prague in 2016.³⁹³ Since the dossier's publication, other individuals named in the document, including Page and Trump's body guard Keith Schiller, have also denied its allegations.³⁹⁴ The next day, at his only press conference during the transition, Trump vehemently denied the contents of the dossier, attacking its claims regarding Russian kompromat and calling CNN "fake news" and BuzzFeed a

“failing pile of garbage.”³⁹⁵ Trump did acknowledge during the press conference that Russia had hacked the DNC and John Podesta’s emails, but added, “I think we also get hacked by other countries and other people.”³⁹⁶

By the time Trump took office, the investigation was widening. On January 19, the day before his inauguration, *The New York Times* reported that U.S. intelligence agencies were examining “intercepted communications and financial transactions as part of a broad investigation into possible links between Russian officials and associates” of Trump. Officials who spoke to *The New York Times* reportedly identified Page, Trump’s former campaign chairman Paul Manafort, and Roger Stone as among the Americans under investigation.³⁹⁷

The FBI began interviewing members of the Trump administration and campaign during Trump’s first week in office. On January 24, 2017, the FBI interviewed then-national security adviser Lt. Gen. Flynn about his conversations with Kislyak; two days later, acting Attorney General Sally Yates warned White House counsel Don McGahn that she believed Flynn was potentially compromised.³⁹⁸ On January 27, the FBI interviewed George Papadopoulos about his contacts with Maltese professor Joseph Mifsud.³⁹⁹ Both Papadopoulos and Flynn have pleaded guilty for lying to the FBI in these conversations.⁴⁰⁰

Almost immediately, Trump tried to stymie the investigation. Having already asked FBI Director Comey during the transition to publicly announce that Trump was not under investigation, the president asked him to do so again on January 27.⁴⁰¹ The same day, Trump fired Yates, reportedly for refusing to enforce his unconstitutional travel ban.⁴⁰² After Flynn resigned, Trump reportedly met with Comey and pressured him to drop the agency’s investigation into Flynn, saying, “I hope you can see your way clear to letting this go, to letting Flynn go. He is a good guy. I hope you can let this go.”⁴⁰³

Meanwhile, Attorney General Jeff Sessions began coming under fire for his remarks about the Trump campaign’s contacts with Kremlin-linked individuals. Asked about the topic during his confirmation hearing on January 10, 2017, Sessions had said, “I am not aware of any of those activities. I have been called a surrogate at a time or two in that campaign and I did not have communications with the Russians.”⁴⁰⁴ After he was confirmed on February 8, 2017, multiple outlets reported that Sessions not only knew of the campaign’s Russian contacts but had in fact personally met three times with ambassador Kislyak.⁴⁰⁵ Shortly after his confirmation, Sessions announced that, due to his involvement with the Trump campaign, he would be recusing himself from the Justice Department’s investigation into Russian interference.⁴⁰⁶

Trump has repeatedly fulminated about Sessions' recusal. According to *The New York Times*, before Sessions recused himself, Trump instructed McGahn to lobby Sessions not to do so.⁴⁰⁷ Trump has subsequently attacked Sessions publicly on multiple occasions, calling his attorney general "beleaguered" and telling *The New York Times* that, had he known Sessions would not be able to participate in the investigation, Trump would never have appointed him to the position.⁴⁰⁸

Investigation and obstruction

As the investigation has proceeded, so have Trump's attempts to derail it, with increasing help from congressional Republicans. On March 4, Trump claimed on Twitter that, during the election, President Obama surveilled Trump's campaign, saying, "Terrible! Just found out that Obama had my 'wires tapped' in Trump Tower just before the victory. Nothing found. This is McCarthyism!" and "How low has President Obama gone to tapp (sic) my phones during the very sacred election process. This is Nixon/Watergate. Bad (or sick) guy!"⁴⁰⁹

For two weeks, the Trump administration scrambled to defend the baseless accusation. As Obama administration officials dismissed the claim, White House Press Secretary Sean Spicer asserted that, because the words *wires tapped* were in quotes in the initial tweet, Trump was referring not to actual wiretapping but to general surveillance.⁴¹⁰ Spicer also alleged the Obama administration had asked the Government Communications Headquarters (GCHQ), the British intelligence agency, to spy on Trump's campaign, which GCHQ called "utterly ridiculous" and "nonsense."⁴¹¹

On March 21, Devin Nunes (R-CA), the chairman of the House Intelligence Committee, mounted his own effort to legitimize Trump's accusation. On the morning of March 23, Nunes held a press conference on Capitol Hill where he said he had just informed Speaker of the House Paul Ryan (R-WI) that he had received information from a "whistleblower" indicating that Trump and his associates had been "incidentally swept up" in legal foreign surveillance by American spy agencies and that Obama administration officials had improperly "unmasked" Trump associates. Nunes then went to the White House to "brief Trump on his findings," which was followed by another press conference.⁴¹² Trump later said Nunes "somewhat" vindicated his claims that Obama had wiretapped Trump Tower.⁴¹³

But Nunes's story quickly unraveled. It was soon revealed that the previous night, Nunes had reportedly received a communication on his phone while in an Uber car with a staffer. He immediately got out of the car and reportedly went to the White

House, where he received intelligence reports from two White House lawyers and a National Security Council staffer.⁴¹⁴ Facing an ethics investigation into his handling of sensitive material, Nunes announced on April 6 that he would be recusing himself from his committee's investigation into Russia.⁴¹⁵

The Russia investigation reached a turning point in May 2017. On May 3, Comey testified before the Senate Judiciary Committee about the intelligence community's conclusion that Russia was responsible for the DNC hack.⁴¹⁶ Having confirmed in previous testimony in March that the FBI was carrying out a counterintelligence investigation into the Trump campaign, Comey refused to comment on the bureau's investigation into the Trump campaign.⁴¹⁷ He also reportedly asked the Justice Department that week for additional staff to accelerate the probe.⁴¹⁸

Trump then made his most brazen move to undermine the investigation. According to *The New York Times*, on May 5, 2017, an aide for the Justice Department began asking congressional staffers for damaging information on the FBI Director.⁴¹⁹ Then, on May 9, Trump abruptly fired Comey.⁴²⁰

The administration's initial justification was a letter from Deputy Attorney General Rod Rosenstein reviewing the FBI's handling of the investigation into Clinton's private email server. The letter, which argued that the FBI, and Comey especially, was unnecessarily harsh in its treatment of Clinton, directly contradicted Trump's repeated calls for Clinton to face criminal prosecution over the matter.⁴²¹

The official explanation fell apart as Trump repeatedly admitted he fired Comey in order to impede the Russia investigation. On May 10, the day after firing Comey, Trump met privately in the Oval Office with Kislyak and Russian foreign minister Sergey Lavrov, to whom he described the former FBI Director as "crazy, a real nut job" and bragged that firing Comey had "taken off" the "great pressure" the investigation had created.⁴²² On May 11, Trump told NBC's Lester Holt he had planned to fire Comey over "this Russia thing" regardless of Rosenstein's conclusion.⁴²³ Rosenstein later confirmed in a closed-door Senate briefing that he had known Trump intended to fire Comey before writing the letter.⁴²⁴

That same day, *The New York Times* reported that Trump had asked Comey three times to publicly announce that the FBI was not investigating Trump, and that Comey had prepared detailed memos describing their interactions.⁴²⁵ In response, Trump implied he had recorded the conversations, tweeting, "James Comey better hope that there are no 'tapes' of our conversations before he starts leaking to the

press!”⁴²⁶ It wasn’t until more than a month later, two weeks after Comey testified to the Senate Intelligence Committee about the meetings, that Trump admitted that he had not, in fact, recorded their conversations.⁴²⁷ He has since insisted, without any evidence, that Comey should face prosecution for leaking classified information and lying to Congress, claims the White House has yet to retract.⁴²⁸

In April 2018, Comey’s memos became public; the identity of who leaked the memos remains unknown.⁴²⁹ In the documents, Comey described the conversations as largely monologues from Trump in which he repeatedly cycled back, unprompted, to talk about the Russia investigation. Along with the details that had previously been leaked to the press, the memos note that Trump repeatedly brought up the allegation in the Steele dossier that the Russian government obtained kompromat on Trump during his 2013 trip to Moscow. The memos said Trump claimed he could not have consorted with prostitutes because he did not stay in the city overnight.⁴³⁰ This claim, which Trump denies having made in the first place, was quickly debunked, as flight records, other individuals present, and contemporaneous social media posts all confirm he was in Moscow for almost two full days.⁴³¹

The Mueller investigation

Trump’s decision to fire Comey quickly backfired. Eight days later, amid calls for an independent investigation free from the possibility of presidential interference, Rosenstein appointed the former FBI Director Robert S. Mueller III as special counsel.⁴³² Comey later testified that he decided to leak the memos about his meetings with Trump specifically to ensure that a special counsel would be appointed.⁴³³

Congressional Republicans initially praised the appointment. Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell (R-KY) said he “had a lot of confidence in Bob Mueller;” Speaker of the House Paul Ryan said he “welcome[d Mueller’s] role at the Department of Justice;” and Senate Intelligence Committee Chairman Richard Burr (R-NC) said he saw the Russia investigation “as a positive thing, especially having Bob Mueller involved. It brings a lot of public credibility to whatever process they go through.”⁴³⁴

As the investigation has proceeded, however, Republicans have become more critical of Mueller and the Justice Department. In November 2017, after Mueller had already indicted Manafort, Manafort’s deputy campaign chairman Rick Gates, and Papadopolus, three Republican lawmakers introduced a bill calling for Mueller to step down, alleging he could not be impartial due to his history at the FBI and

his relationship with Comey.⁴³⁵ Further criticism came in December 2017, when it was revealed that two FBI agents who had worked on Mueller’s team had criticized Trump in private texts, sparking allegations that, although the agents were no longer on Mueller’s team and had criticized Democratic officials as well, the investigation was compromised.⁴³⁶ Moreover, despite multiple indictments from the Mueller investigation, listed below, the first—and so far only—criminal charges recommended by either the House’s or the Senate’s investigations were against Christopher Steele, alleging he lied to the FBI about his contacts with the media.⁴³⁷

Republicans’ most blatant attempt to undermine Mueller came, again, from Nunes. In January 2018, Republican staff on the House Intelligence Committee prepared a memo claiming the FBI mishandled an application for a warrant to surveil Carter Page.⁴³⁸ The FBI, they alleged, failed to disclose to a foreign intelligence surveillance court that Steele received funding from political sources; they further alleged that the investigation into the Trump campaign’s collusion with Russia wouldn’t exist without the dossier.⁴³⁹ Therefore, they claimed, the whole investigation was illegitimate. Republican politicians—along with WikiLeaks, Russian bots and trolls, and conservative commentators such as Sean Hannity—began calling upon Congress and the White House to “#ReleaseTheMemo.”⁴⁴⁰ Over objections from congressional Democrats, the Justice Department, and some elected Republicans, the House GOP soon voted to send the memo to the White House, which quickly declassified the information.⁴⁴¹

The memo’s central claim—that the DOJ had not revealed that Steele had received funding from political sources—fell apart when it was subsequently revealed that the DOJ had, in fact, disclosed the origin of the dossier’s funding.⁴⁴² Nunes later admitted he overlooked the information because it was in a footnote.⁴⁴³ Moreover, the memo’s final paragraph contradicted the whole purported reason for the memo, acknowledging that the FBI began investigating after Papadopoulos told an Australian diplomat about his conversations with Mifsud.⁴⁴⁴ And the revelation that the court renewed the FBI’s warrant to surveil Page multiple times demonstrated not Justice Department overreach but rather, that courts had sufficient reason to believe Page was a Russian asset and therefore warranted continued surveillance.⁴⁴⁵

House Democrats, meanwhile, prepared their own memo rebutting Nunes’s.⁴⁴⁶ After the White House at first blocked the memo’s publication, it released the memo on February 24, 2018.⁴⁴⁷ Along with disputing many of Nunes’s assertions, the Democrats memo revealed that the FBI interviewed Carter Page in March 2016, the month he joined Trump’s campaign.⁴⁴⁸

On March 12, House Republicans voted to conclude their investigation, claiming not only that they had not found evidence of collusion but also that there was no evidence that Russia had supported Trump.⁴⁴⁹ In response, Democrats on the committee released a report detailing the many gaps in the investigation. A Moscow Project analysis of the report determined that the committee failed to interview or received insufficient information from participants in 81 percent of the meetings between the Trump campaign and transition team and Russia-linked individuals.⁴⁵⁰ The final report the committee published on April 27 only reinforced the House Republicans' complicity in Trump's cover-up, going so far as to suggest a repeal of the Logan Act, the 200-year-old law banning freelance foreign policy of the kind Lt. Gen. Flynn conducted during the transition.⁴⁵¹

Congressional Republicans' attempts to stymie the Russia investigation didn't end with their report. They have continually worked to legitimize the conspiracy theory that the FBI, in cahoots with the Obama administration and the Clinton campaign, began the Russia investigation to undermine Trump's candidacy.⁴⁵² In the process, Republicans have attacked individuals within the intelligence and law enforcement community who they perceive to be responsible for the Russia investigation.

One of their most prolonged targets was Peter Strzok, an FBI official who worked on both the Russia probe and the investigation into Clinton's private email server. During the election, Strzok sent Lisa Page, a fellow FBI agent with whom he was engaged in an extramarital affair, text messages in which he was critical of Trump.⁴⁵³ Strzok's involvement with the Russia investigation ended in the summer of 2017, when Mueller learned of the texts.⁴⁵⁴ However, Republicans continued to claim that Strzok's personal opinions irreparably tainted the probe.⁴⁵⁵ Though a report by the Justice Department's inspector general found no evidence that Strzok's opinions affected the investigations, and in fact suggested that other agents' animosity toward Clinton did, Republicans—including Trump, who has tweeted about Strzok 37 times—continued to hound him, including bringing him in to testify in a public hearing.⁴⁵⁶ The FBI ultimately fired Strzok in August 2018.⁴⁵⁷

Strzok is not the only investigator to have drawn Republicans' ire. Trump has repeatedly attacked Justice Department lawyer Bruce Ohr, whose wife works for Fusion GPS, the private investigations firm that hired Steele for the work that ultimately produced his dossier.⁴⁵⁸ Despite the total lack of evidence that Ohr—a longtime civil servant whose career includes multiple investigations of Russian oligarchs and organized criminals—breached department protocol in any way, Republicans have attempted to smear him by casting aspersions on his professional relationship with

Steele.⁴⁵⁹ As with Strzok, congressional Republicans ultimately brought Ohr in to testify, albeit in a closed session, during which Ohr reportedly testified that Steele told him in 2016 that Russian intelligence believed it had Trump “over a barrel.”⁴⁶⁰

Ohr has also been a chief target of one of Trump’s efforts to attack critics and investigators by stripping them of their security clearances. The administration first floated the idea of stripping Obama-era intelligence community officials of their clearances in July 2018. (Former intelligence community leaders typically retain their clearances so they can advise their successors.)⁴⁶¹ On August 15, Trump began to follow through on the threat by stripping former CIA Director John Brennan of his clearance, claiming he had exhibited “erratic conduct and behavior.”⁴⁶² Consensus quickly emerged that Trump had made the decision to punish Brennan for his outspoken criticism of Trump, particularly regarding Russia; Brennan has at times appeared to allude to damning evidence the American public has not yet seen, including in a *New York Times* op-ed published the day after the White House announced it would be revoking his clearance.⁴⁶³ The administration later revealed that it had a list of others whose security clearance Trump was considering revoking—including Ohr, a sign that Trump is willing to attack sitting public servants he perceives as disloyal.⁴⁶⁴

Despite having seen the gambit backfire with the Nunes memo, Republicans have also continued trying to wield selective declassification as a weapon against the Russia investigation. In July 2018, the Trump administration declassified the warrants submitted to secure surveillance of Carter Page.⁴⁶⁵ As with the Nunes memo, the document ended up reinforcing, rather than undermining, the legitimacy of the Russia investigation: It demonstrated not only that the FBI had followed proper protocols—including by disclosing the political origin of the Steele dossier—but also that, beginning shortly after his work on the Trump campaign, multiple Republican-appointed judges had found sufficient evidence that Page was a foreign asset to renew surveillance. Nevertheless, Republicans have continued pushing to declassify more documents, including additional documents regarding Page and Ohr.⁴⁶⁶

Absent a mechanism to depose Mueller themselves, congressional Republicans have instead targeted Rosenstein, who directly oversaw the Mueller investigation after Sessions announced his recusal.⁴⁶⁷ After months of fulmination by both the president—who reportedly considered firing Rosenstein in April 2018 but backed off after Rosenstein assured him he was a “subject” and not a “target” of the investigation—and rank-and-file GOP members, 11 congressional Republicans, led by Mark Meadows (R-NC) and Jim Jordan (R-OH), introduced articles of impeachment against Rosenstein.⁴⁶⁸ The articles were entirely unfounded: Along with repeat-

ing numerous debunked assertions from the Nunes memo, they held Rosenstein accountable for actions taken by the Justice Department in October 2016, several months before Rosenstein became deputy attorney general.⁴⁶⁹ Amid significant criticism, including from Republican leaders in Congress, the members backed down, but threatened to resume the push after the 2018 midterms.⁴⁷⁰

Far from hiding their efforts, congressional Republicans made impeding oversight of Trump a centerpiece of their 2018 midterm strategy. At a closed-door fundraiser for Rep. Cathy McMorris Rodgers (R-WA), one of the senior-most Republicans in the House, Nunes told donors that a Republican majority is the only thing protecting the Trump administration from real oversight.⁴⁷¹ Additionally, Axios obtained and published part of a list that has “circulated through Republican circles on and off Capitol Hill—including at least one leadership office” enumerating probes they expected Democrats to begin or to pursue more aggressively were they to resume control of the House in this year’s midterms. These probes included several strands of the Russia investigation, which in effect acknowledged that Republicans have been trying to stymie attempts at meaningful oversight.⁴⁷² After the 2018 midterms, during which Democrats regained control of the House of Representatives, members of Democratic leadership announced that they intended to pursue many of the investigative avenues Republicans had ignored or blocked over the previous two years, including by sending 64 subpoenas and more than 100 oversight letters Republican leaders had refused to send to the White House.⁴⁷³

Trump, too, has repeatedly tried to directly undermine or end Mueller’s investigation. Publicly, he has told *The New York Times* that Mueller should not be allowed to scrutinize Trump’s finances, and that investigating the Trump Organization would be a “violation.”⁴⁷⁴ After months of calling the investigation a “witch hunt” on Twitter, Trump criticized Mueller by name for the first time via a tweet on March 18, just days after *The New York Times* reported that Mueller had subpoenaed documents from the Trump Organization.⁴⁷⁵ Trump has also said he believes the investigation makes the United States look “very bad” and bragged about his “complete power to pardon.”⁴⁷⁶ Trump’s public protests also led to the early departure of the FBI’s deputy director, Andrew McCabe, whom the president repeatedly harassed because McCabe’s wife had previously run for office as a Democrat. The Justice Department ultimately fired McCabe fewer than two days before his planned retirement.⁴⁷⁷

Privately, Trump has reportedly attempted to fire Mueller twice, in June and December 2017. The first time, Trump backed off the decision when White House counsel Don McGahn threatened to quit. The second time, Trump reportedly changed his mind when he learned that the story prompting his decision—that Mueller was investigating the Trump Organization’s deals with Deutsche Bank—was inaccurate.⁴⁷⁸

Though Trump has not fired Mueller as of this writing, he has taken a strong step toward stifling the investigation by forcing out Attorney General Jeff Sessions. As is discussed earlier in this report, Sessions announced shortly after he was confirmed to the post that he would recuse himself from matters related to the investigation because of his role on Trump's campaign, a decision Trump repeatedly criticized.⁴⁷⁹ On November 7, 2018—the day after Democrats won control of the House of Representatives in the midterm elections—Sessions announced that he was stepping down at Trump's request. Trump named Sessions' chief of staff Matthew Whitaker as acting attorney general until the Senate can confirm a new appointee, giving Whitaker purview over the Mueller investigation.⁴⁸⁰

The appointment immediately drew heavy criticism due to Whitaker's past remarks on the Russia investigation, which reinforced suspicions that Trump had fired Sessions and chosen Whitaker in hopes of shutting down Mueller's probe.⁴⁸¹ For example, in an op-ed published by CNN in August 2017, Whitaker had argued that Mueller was “going too far” by looking at Trump's finances.⁴⁸² In a televised interview, Whitaker had effectively explained how the president, with help from a compliant acting attorney general, could stifle the special counsel investigation by cutting off its funding.⁴⁸³ Also under scrutiny were Whitaker's ties to Sam Clovis, who had worked on Trump's 2016 presidential campaign and reportedly hired Carter Page and George Papadopoulos to serve on Trump's foreign policy team.⁴⁸⁴ Clovis told Reuters that he considered Whitaker, who had chaired Clovis' 2014 campaign to be Iowa's state treasurer, a “dear friend.”⁴⁸⁵ Amid calls for Whitaker's recusal, *The Washington Post* reported that Whitaker had no plans to recuse from the investigation and intended to deny any attempts to subpoena Trump.⁴⁸⁶

Legal scholars such as Neal Katyal, who had served as Obama's acting solicitor general and co-authored the special counsel regulations under which Mueller was appointed, questioned the constitutionality of his appointment. In *The New York Times*, Katyal and George Conway, a conservative attorney and the husband of top Trump adviser Kellyanne Conway, argued that, because Whitaker had never been confirmed by the Senate and was appointed outside of the Department of Justice's established line of succession, Whitaker could not legally serve as acting attorney general.⁴⁸⁷ As of this writing, Senate Democrats are reportedly exploring the possibility of suing the Trump administration to block Whitaker's appointment.⁴⁸⁸

Where we are now

Despite the continual efforts to discredit Mueller's investigation, the results from the probe show the legitimacy of the effort. His team has interviewed a slew of Trump associates, current and former administration members, and campaign officials, including Steve Bannon, Stephen Miller, Sean Spicer, Reince Priebus, and Attorney General Sessions, as well as Comey, Steele, and Russian lobbyist and alleged former counterintelligence official Rinat Akhmetshin.⁴⁸⁹ Which of these interviews relate to specific criminal matters, and whether individual interviewees are subjects or targets of the investigation, remains unknown. Agents have also raided the homes of Manafort and Cohen and questioned Russian oligarchs flying into U.S. airports.⁴⁹⁰ As of this writing, Mueller has indicted 32 individuals and three corporations and obtained one conviction and five guilty pleas, the details of which are as follows:

- On October 5, 2017, George Papadopoulos pleaded guilty to lying to the FBI about his contacts with Russian-linked individuals during the 2016 presidential campaign.⁴⁹¹ Papadopoulos pursued these contacts with the intention of connecting the Trump team to Russian government officials.⁴⁹² He was ultimately sentenced to 14 days in prison.⁴⁹³ In October 2018, Papadopoulos repeatedly suggested he was considering withdrawing his guilty plea, claiming he now believed that his meetings during the campaign with Maltese professor Joseph Mifsud were part of a British plot to frame Papadopoulos and undermine the Trump campaign.⁴⁹⁴
- On October 27, 2017, Mueller indicted Paul Manafort and Manafort's deputy and senior Trump aide Rick Gates on charges of conspiracy against the United States for their work with pro-Russian parties in Ukraine.⁴⁹⁵ Both men initially pleaded not guilty and were placed under house arrest.⁴⁹⁶ After Mueller filed new charges on February 22, 2018, Gates pleaded guilty.⁴⁹⁷ On August 21, 2018, in the first of two trials, Manafort was convicted on eight charges, including tax fraud, bank fraud, and concealing foreign bank accounts.⁴⁹⁸ He subsequently pleaded guilty to two charges on September 14, 2018.⁴⁹⁹ As of this writing, Mueller's and Manafort's legal teams reportedly remain in negotiations with the judge in Manafort's first trial regarding the resolution of the other charges against Manafort.⁵⁰⁰
- On December 1, 2017, Lt. Gen. Michael Flynn pleaded guilty to lying to the FBI about his contacts with Russian ambassador Sergey Kislyak.⁵⁰¹
- On February 16, 2018, Mueller indicted 13 Russian individuals and three Russian entities, including the Internet Research Agency, for embarking on an "information warfare" scheme to interfere in the 2016 U.S. presidential election.

The counts include conspiracy to defraud the United States, conspiracy to commit wire fraud and bank fraud, and aggravated identity theft. The special counsel also charged an individual named Richard Pinedo with identity fraud, to which he pleaded guilty. Pinedo sold bank account numbers used by unknown individuals to set up accounts with “a large digital payments company.” The indictment of the Internet Research Agency indicated that it used social media to influence sentiment regarding presidential candidates; Pinedo’s efforts appear to be related to this information warfare campaign.⁵⁰²

- On February 20, 2018, London-based lawyer Alex van der Zwaan pleaded guilty to lying to the FBI about his relationship with Paul Manafort and Rick Gates.⁵⁰³ On April 3, van der Zwaan was sentenced to serve 30 days in jail and pay a \$20,000 fine.⁵⁰⁴
- On June 8, 2018, Mueller released a superseding indictment of Manafort that also included charges for Konstantin Kilimnik.⁵⁰⁵
- On July 13, 2018, Mueller indicted 12 Russian intelligence officials for hacking “into the computers of U.S. persons and entities involved in the 2016 U.S. presidential election,” including employees and volunteers on Clinton’s presidential campaign, the DNC, and the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee.⁵⁰⁶

Four people implicated in broader questions of collusion and Russian influence have also been indicted by or pleaded guilty to charges brought outside the direct purview of the Mueller investigation:

- On July 16, 2018, Maria Butina, a Russian graduate student at American University in Washington, D.C., was arrested and indicted on two counts of conspiracy and acting as a foreign agent for the Russian government. According to the indictment, Butina had worked for at least four years to develop relationships within the Republican Party, including with prominent politicians and high-ranking members of the National Rifle Association.⁵⁰⁷ Butina has pleaded not guilty and says she was merely networking in a personal capacity.⁵⁰⁸
- On August 21, 2018, Michael Cohen pleaded guilty in a Manhattan federal court to eight charges, including tax evasion, bank fraud, and campaign finance violations. The charges stemmed from payoffs Cohen arranged in the fall of 2016 to ensure the silence of at least two of Trump’s alleged former mistresses. Cohen testified that the payments were made at Trump’s direction with the intent of influencing the 2016 election.⁵⁰⁹

- On August 31, 2018, Sam Patten, a longtime collaborator with Manafort and Kilimnik in Ukraine, pleaded guilty to violating the Foreign Agent Registration Act during his time working in Ukraine. Patten also admitted to illegally steering \$50,000 from a Ukrainian politician into Trump’s inaugural fund, which remains a subject of scrutiny due to unanswered questions about its ultimate dispensation.⁵¹⁰
- On October 19, 2018, the Justice Department charged the Russian national Elena Khusyaynova with conspiracy to defraud the United States for her alleged role in “Project Lakhta,” a Russian influence operation aimed at the 2018 midterms.⁵¹¹ Court documents allege that the operation was funded by Yevgeniy Prigozhin, who was also named in the February 2018 indictment of 13 Russian nationals as the primary funder of the Internet Research Agency.⁵¹² Khusyaynova was allegedly responsible for managing the finances of Project Lakhta, which was designed to “sow discord in the U.S. political system” by spreading arguments and misinformation about divisive and racially charged issues, including the Confederate flag, gun control, and protests against police brutality.⁵¹³ Khusyaynova later responded in a video posted to the Kremlin-backed news website USA Really denying any knowledge of the operations described in the indictment.⁵¹⁴

Mueller and his team have reportedly demonstrated increasing interest in Trump’s finances, including by subpoenaing documents from the Trump Organization.⁵¹⁵ Mueller is reportedly investigating a variety of subjects, including whether Trump’s decision to fire Comey, his criticism of the FBI, and his attempts to cover up information about his campaign’s interactions with Russian individuals constitute obstruction of justice; whether there was coordination between the Trump campaign’s digital operations and the Russian social media campaign supporting Trump; and if Russia helped finance the Trump campaign through means such as donations to the NRA, which has acknowledged receiving some money from Russian donors but disputes any further involvement.⁵¹⁶

In the process, the investigation has highlighted not only how Russia interfered in the 2016 election but also the structural vulnerabilities that made the United States susceptible to that operation. The probe has, for instance, exposed how unregulated social media platforms can become potent tools for influence operations run not only by foreign governments but also by domestic dark money groups, and has brought new attention to the lax disclosure laws, especially in the real estate sector, that facilitate corruption in the United States and abroad.⁵¹⁷

Finally, the Russia investigation has demonstrated the United States’ ongoing vulnerability to cyberattacks on its election system, a glaring flaw the Trump admin-

istration has done little to address. While Trump continues to ignore the problem, publicly express his desire for better relations with Russia, and call Mueller's investigation a "witch hunt," members of his own administration, including Director of National Intelligence Dan Coats, FBI Director Chris Wray, and NSA Director Michael Rodgers, have repeatedly warned that the Kremlin and other bad actors will continue attempting to interfere in America's elections.⁵¹⁸

It is increasingly clear that the president of the United States is compromised by his relationship to Russia; the only question is how deep that relationship goes. The Russia investigation, then, continues to grow more important by the day, sounding the alarm for one of the greatest threats to American democracy in the country's history.

The Stormy Daniels scandal

The Russia investigation has proceeded in parallel fashion to several other Trump administration scandals. Few have proven as informative to the ongoing collusion probe as the scandal involving Trump's attempts to conceal his affair with the adult film star Stephanie Clifford, also known by her stage name Stormy Daniels. The scandal resulted in the guilty plea of Trump's longtime lawyer Michael Cohen.

The scandal began in January 2018, when *The Wall Street Journal* revealed that Trump and Clifford had signed a nondisclosure agreement in October 2016.⁵¹⁹ Cohen had established a company known as Essential Consultants LLC to pay Clifford for her silence, using David Pecker, publisher of the *National Enquirer*, as an intermediary.⁵²⁰ Cohen reportedly also orchestrated cover-ups of Trump's alleged affair with former Playboy model Karen McDougal and an alleged affair between prominent Republican donor Elliott Broidy with another Playboy model, Shera Bechard, although some have speculated that the latter payoff was for Trump, not Broidy.⁵²¹ After the election, Cohen used the company to solicit payments for influence with the Trump administration—including from a company linked to the Russian oligarch Viktor Vekselberg.⁵²²

Cohen ultimately pleaded guilty to multiple federal crimes stemming from the payoffs.⁵²³ In his testimony, he said he orchestrated the payments at Trump's direction with the express intent of ensuring the allegations did not surface until after the election, making Trump an unindicted co-conspirator in an illegal conspiracy to violate campaign finance law.⁵²⁴

Though the scandal is not directly related to collusion with Russia, it offers key insights into the Mueller investigation. It shows Trump and Cohen illegally conspiring to cover up damaging information about Trump in the final weeks of the election. It also confirms that Cohen served more as Trump's "bag man," running Trump's unsavory errands, than as Trump's lawyer; this comports with the allegation in the Steele dossier that Cohen traveled to Europe to make payments facilitating collusion.⁵²⁵

Perhaps most importantly, because of the scandal, Cohen pleaded guilty—and agreed to cooperate with the Mueller investigation and tell investigators what he knows about Trump's dealings in his business and campaign.

Recommendations

Responding to Russia's unprecedented and unprovoked attack on American democracy requires a multifaceted approach that not only imposes costs on the Kremlin but also addresses vulnerabilities in the American political system that Russia's attack exposed. Recommendations for how to do so, outlined below, fall into four broad categories. The first is suggested next steps for the investigation into the 2016 election, as understanding what happened and holding to account those responsible may be the single most important step that can be taken toward preventing future attacks. The second is potential responses to Russian aggression, including targeted sanctions and general improvements to American cybersecurity capabilities. The third is a set of measures aimed at shoring up America's election systems to ensure that such an attack is less likely in the future. Finally, the fourth is recommendations for anti-corruption legislation that will reduce the type of behavior the Kremlin exploited in 2016.

Investigating Russia's 2016 attack

Investigating and understanding Russia's 2016 attack on American democracy is a vital first step toward both holding those behind the attack responsible and preventing future attempts to interfere in American democracy. Up until now, the investigations into the attack have faced significant opposition from the president and his allies. Revitalizing the congressional investigations and protecting special counsel Robert Mueller and his team through the steps outlined below is thus essential to protecting American democracy.

Call additional witnesses and recall witnesses who are suspected to have lied or provided inadequate information to Congress

The House Intelligence Committee's investigation into Russia's attack on American democracy, led by the former Trump transition official Devin Nunes, was little more than a cover-up aimed at deflecting accusations away from the White House.⁵²⁶ The Senate's investigation, while more thorough than its counterpart in the House, also

left significant gaps. For example, neither chamber subpoenaed individuals who have pleaded guilty to Mueller or subpoenaed phone records that would identify the individual with a blocked number with whom Donald Trump Jr. spoke while planning the June 9 meeting at Trump Tower.⁵²⁷ Nor has either chamber acted upon multiple credible allegations of perjury by members of Trump's team, including Erik Prince, K. T. McFarland, Jared Kushner, and Trump Jr.⁵²⁸

Revitalizing the investigations will not only help ensure that any Americans who were complicit in Russia's attack are brought to justice but also provide a much-needed public accounting of what happened during and since the 2016 election. Ensuring the public understands how the Kremlin carried out its interference, and how some Americans facilitated and furthered that attack, is a vital step toward insulating American democracy from future assaults, whether perpetrated by Russia or another foreign power.

[Pass legislation to protect the special counsel investigation from presidential interference](#)

President Trump has repeatedly demonstrated his willingness to tamper with investigations into himself and those in his inner circle. The most famous example, by far, is his decision to first repeatedly lobby FBI Director James Comey to drop the Russia investigation, then fire Comey when he refused to do so.⁵²⁹

Mueller's investigation is no exception. As this report documents, Trump has staked out an antagonistic position toward Mueller, repeatedly calling the investigation a "witch hunt" on Twitter and in interviews and outlining restrictions he believes should be placed on the scope of the probe.⁵³⁰ He has attempted or threatened to fire both Mueller and Deputy Attorney General Rod Rosenstein, who oversaw the investigation after Sessions announced his recusal.⁵³¹ In November 2018, Trump forced out Attorney General Jeff Sessions and named Matt Whitaker, who has repeatedly criticized Mueller's investigation, as acting attorney general, which many observers have characterized as a clear step toward stifling the special counsel probe.⁵³²

Already, bills exist in both the House and Senate that would make it significantly more difficult for Trump to fire Mueller or block the release of any report stemming from his investigation.⁵³³ However, Speaker of the House Paul Ryan and Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell have blocked them from coming to the floor.⁵³⁴ The beginning of a new congressional session will provide a much-needed opportunity to pass this urgently needed legislation and ensure that the president is not allowed to declare himself above the law.

Call on the administration to give the special counsel independence in accordance with the “Watergate standard”

The clearest precursor to Trump’s continual efforts to undermine Mueller’s investigation is President Richard Nixon’s similarly relentless antagonism toward the Watergate investigation. Successive attorneys general under President Nixon entered into an agreement with the special prosecutors outlining their independence.⁵³⁵ Their agreement stated, in writing, that

*The Attorney General will not countermand or interfere with the Special Prosecutor’s decisions or actions. The Special Prosecutor will determine whether and to what extent he will inform or consult with the Attorney General about the conduct of his duties and responsibilities. . . . The Special Prosecutor will not be removed from his duties except for extraordinary improprieties on his part.*⁵³⁶

Whitaker must enter into a similar agreement to ensure his ongoing independence, as must whomever Trump appoints to replace Sessions as attorney general. This agreement, as outlined by Ben Olinsky and Sam Berger in the September 2018 Center for American Progress report “Ensuring the Special Counsel’s Independence If Rosenstein Is Fired” and excerpted here, should have five key tenets:

- **Removal:** The special counsel cannot be removed except for “extraordinary improprieties” on his part and will continue his work until satisfied that he has completed his mandate.
- **Independence and noninterference:** Political appointees at the Department of Justice will not countermand or interfere with the special counsel’s decisions or actions, and he will determine whether and to what extent to inform or consult with the acting attorney general.
- **Access to information and resources:** The special counsel will be able to maintain a team of his choosing and continue to be granted full access to information and resources from the FBI, the Department of Justice, and other federal agencies.
- **Scope:** The special counsel will have the mandate of investigating any violations of the law related to Russian interference in our elections; any related matter that may present itself upon following the evidence; and any collateral matters (such as obstruction of justice, perjury, etc.). The scope of the special counsel’s investigation shall include any additional matters the special counsel has been approved to investigate since his appointment.

- **Transparency:** The special counsel will be free to make information public at his sole discretion and at a time and place of his choosing while protecting classified information and information covered by grand jury secrecy requirements. The special counsel shall provide unmediated reports to Congress at his discretion and at a time of his choosing and immediately notify bipartisan committee leadership should the administration prevent him from making public relevant information of a classified nature.⁵³⁷

Responding to Russia

The Trump administration has continually resisted attempts to censure Russia for its attack on the 2016 election. As a result, Russia has continued its attempts to meddle in the American political system. Taking a more active stance will help deter not only Russia, but also other adversarial countries, from attempting to exploit vulnerabilities in America's election systems and influence American politics.

Aggressively implement existing sanctions

Sanctions targeting the Kremlin elite have a real impact. As James Lamond argued in "The Origins of Russia's Broad Political Assault on the United States":

*The most important policy lesson . . . is that the package of diplomatic and economic measures put into place following the invasion of Crimea that intended to isolate Putin by targeting his base of support was ultimately so forceful that that Putin was willing to undertake this extraordinarily ambitious and risky campaign to strike back.*⁵³⁸

Yet the Trump administration has failed to adequately implement the Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act (CAATSA), which was passed with a nearly unanimous bipartisan majority in 2017 in response to Russia's election interference. Instead, the administration has only issued sanctions related to election interference in just a few, limited cases.

Pass and sign the Defending American Security from Kremlin Aggression Act of 2018

The lack of action from the Trump administration to implement CAATSA requires Congress to push for additional measures. A bipartisan group led by Senators Lindsay Graham (R-SC) and Robert Menendez (D-NJ) has introduced new legislation to increase economic, political, and diplomatic pressure on Russia in response to its continued interference in U.S. elections as well as other activities, including aggression in Crimea and influence in Syria.⁵³⁹ This legislation is a necessary

follow-up to CAATSA. In addition to reconfirming America's support for NATO, the legislation expands sanctions on new Russian sovereign debt; against investment in state-owned energy projects; and on targeted political figures, oligarchs, and family members who facilitate illicit and corrupt activities on behalf of President Vladimir Putin. Congress should immediately move forward with the legislation.

Reinstate the State Department's office of sanctions coordination

This office, which was created under the Obama administration to coordinate an increasingly complicated network of financial and geoeconomic tools, was shuttered in 2017 by the Trump administration. The responsibilities of the office, which were previously handled by a senior career ambassador and a staff of at least five, were transferred to a single mid-level staffer in the office of policy planning. Given the expansion of sanctions, their increasing complexity, and the Trump administration's failure to adequately implement CAATSA, the sanctions coordination office at the State Department should immediately be reinstated and empowered to coordinate these mechanisms across the government.⁵⁴⁰

Increase protections against asymmetric attacks

The Kremlin has demonstrated that it will seek to hit back in response to sanctions. Therefore, the United States and Europe need to work energetically to better defend themselves and to limit potential avenues of attack.⁵⁴¹ Specifically, NATO should improve information-sharing capabilities among its member states' cyberwarfare units and develop, in concert with European allies, a comprehensive strategy to combat Russian hacking.⁵⁴²

Enhance government coordination to counter foreign interference

Foreign interference in American democracy is an issue that cuts across issue verticals and agency responsibilities. To improve coordination among the multiple agencies responding to and preventing foreign influence, the U.S. government should either stand up a high-level dedicated interagency task force or create a new center to coordinate government efforts, modeled after the National Counterterrorism Center.⁵⁴³ This group should bring together law enforcement, intelligence, and subject matter experts to conduct threat analysis, facilitate information sharing, and conduct strategic operation planning across the government.

Fight the information war by significantly expanding public diplomacy efforts

As the United States cut funding for public diplomacy efforts after the Cold War, Russia—as well as other countries, including Iran and China—significantly expanded funding of state-supported media.⁵⁴⁴ Meanwhile, many Western news

networks decided it was not profitable enough to invest in foreign language media in small markets such as the Balkans. Russia has sought to fill this gap in the news media marketplace through the expansion of Russian state-funded media. Many of the local media environments are increasingly Russian dominated—where anti-U.S., anti-NATO, anti-EU, and anti-democratic messages carry the day.⁵⁴⁵

The United States needs to support and expand efforts to provide an independent alternative to Russian disinformation. Congress should significantly expand funding for U.S.-sponsored outlets such as Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty and Voice of America, which are funded by the United States but governed by the Broadcasting Board of Governors. These efforts are currently woefully underfunded and fall short of what is needed to challenge Russian-backed media, which has become entrenched in many countries.

Congress should also ensure the Global Engagement Center (GEC) is resourced and empowered to counter Russian disinformation. While Congress has authorized a significant increase in the GEC budget and expanded its mandate, the Trump administration has been extremely slow to transfer funds and empower the GEC.⁵⁴⁶ In addition, Congress should hold public hearings to hold the administration accountable for the lack of action it has taken to respond to Russian disinformation.

Deter state-sponsored cyberattacks by sending clear messages about U.S. cyber redlines

The United States needs to establish boundaries and deterrence in cyberspace through the clear messaging of U.S. cyber redlines and by loudly calling out cyber intrusions. Developing clear messages and redlines about what the United States would deem to be a cyberattack under the law of war could decrease ambiguity and help deter such attacks against America. Indeed, President Obama privately confronted Putin at the G-20 summit in China and warned him that hacking the voting systems would cross the line and merit a strong retaliatory response.⁵⁴⁷ The United States should more clearly articulate sectors that it believes should be off limits to a cyberattack and warn that if these sectors are deemed to be under attack—such as interference in an election or an attack on critical infrastructure—the United States will respond forcefully. While deterring adversaries should be an executive branch function, the lack of action once again from the Trump administration requires Congress to act.

Bolster U.S. intelligence and cyberdefense capabilities to better cope with Russia

The United States needs to bolster the intelligence resources and assets devoted to monitoring Russia, especially in countering Russian intelligence efforts against the United States and its allies. Since 9/11, counterterrorism has appropriately been the priority. However, given the escalation of Russian influence and espionage efforts, more resources and personnel need to be devoted to countering Russian espionage within the United States. Congress must properly resource these efforts and ensure that investigations into Russian intervention continue. This should include investing in the education and recruitment of individuals with the necessary cyber expertise to develop defensive capabilities. Additionally, the United States needs to take urgent steps to ensure the security of its cyberweapons and to combat Russian cybercriminals.

Establish an Eastern European Security Investment Initiative

Congress should establish an initiative through the State Department to help eastern NATO countries transition from Russian military equipment without sacrificing their short-term military readiness. This initiative would provide a mix of financing and direct assistance to facilitate expensive fighter and helicopter acquisitions, just as the Bush administration did to help Poland procure F-16s in 2002.⁵⁴⁸ Currently, countries, such as Bulgaria, are balancing expensive fighter acquisitions with maintaining short-term readiness. Congress should help these allies bolster their forces.⁵⁴⁹

Strengthening America's election systems

Russia's attack on the 2016 presidential election highlighted major structural vulnerabilities in America's election systems. Some of these flaws, such as America's incredibly lax campaign finance laws, are political; others, such as the nation's outdated election infrastructure and the lack of paper trails generated in current electronic voting systems, are purely technical. Fixing these vulnerabilities will not only help prevent future attacks but also improve the integrity of American elections outside of questions about foreign interference.

Pass legislation to address gaps in campaign finance disclosure regulations

Key aspects of Russia's attack on the 2016 election were possible, in part, because of the United States' incredibly lax laws regarding campaign finance disclosure. For example, Russia was able to flood social media with pro-Trump advertisements in large part because there are effectively no disclosure requirements for political ads on social media. The news that Russia purchased the ads only broke because Facebook revealed that the transactions had been made in rubles.⁵⁵⁰ Moreover, if

allegations that Russia routed money into the American political system through the NRA are accurate, that process will have been possible largely because, since the 2010 *Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission* decision, political organizations are no longer required to disclose the identities of their donors.⁵⁵¹

- **Two bills have already been introduced that would significantly reduce the gaps in America's campaign finance laws.** The DISCLOSE Act, introduced in 2017, would expand the timeframe during which any ads that reference a candidate must be reported to the Federal Election Commission from 30 days to 60 days while increasing disclosure requirements for organizations that act as conduits for large amounts of money into the American political system and for domestic subsidiaries of foreign companies.⁵⁵² Another bill, the Honest Ads Act, would subject social media advertisements to the same disclosure requirements as ads in other media, reducing the ability of foreign powers to influence elections through online advertisements.⁵⁵³

Utilize all possible measures to strengthen election infrastructure, on state and federal levels

As a 2018 Center for American Progress report detailed, America's election infrastructure is woefully unprepared for the demands of the general voting public, let alone for the possibility of concerted cyberattacks designed to undermine the legitimacy of an election.⁵⁵⁴ Though it remains unknown how successful Russian hackers were in penetrating state voter databases and election hardware vendors in 2016, and whether those efforts substantially affected voting or turnout, the attempt itself is a vital wake-up call to strengthen election security.⁵⁵⁵

That wake-up call can be met with several measures. One key step is for Congress to act swiftly to free up federal money for states to spend on election security, a measure that has in the past been uncontroversial but which House Republicans refused to pass in July 2018, then blocked again the next month.⁵⁵⁶ Additionally, states should take advantage of funding that already has been allocated for election security; according to plans posted by the U.S. Election Assistance Commission, as of August 2018, 41 states had sought support from the \$380 million allocated for election security in March 2018, consuming a total of 36.3 percent of the available funds.⁵⁵⁷ One particularly urgent use for the money is improving cybersecurity standards for voter registration systems, a major vulnerability that foreign or domestic hackers could exploit to wreak havoc on American elections, whether by altering registration lists or simply making them more difficult for poll workers to access, thus potentially depriving registered voters of the opportunity to cast a ballot.⁵⁵⁸

States can also unilaterally implement policies that will increase election security. States can and should institute automatic election audits to verify vote totals in the aftermath of elections and introduce ballot measures that produce a paper trail that can be used to verify individual votes.⁵⁵⁹ This would have the added bonus of reducing controversy surrounding especially close elections and reduce the appearance of partisanship if one or multiple candidates challenge the results of a vote.

- **Congress should pass the Secure Elections Act.** Introduced in December 2018 by Senators Amy Klobuchar (D-MN), James Lankford (R-OK), Kamala Harris (D-CA), and Lindsey Graham (R-SC), this bipartisan bill authorizes block grants for upgrading electronic voting machines and implementing cybersecurity measures and also improves channels through which state officials can communicate with the U.S. Department of Homeland Security about perceived vulnerabilities.⁵⁶⁰

Strengthening anti-corruption laws and enforcement

As is documented in the first three chapters of this report, Russia frequently exploits corruption in the countries whose politics it is seeking to influence. The United States is no exception: Trump first forged his relationship with Kremlin-linked actors through his corrupt business dealings, and speculation persists that these shady financial ties make him and other members of his administration vulnerable to compromise by foreign governments. Strengthening anti-corruption laws will not only help prevent the underlying conditions that led to collusion in 2016 but also help make American economic and political systems more responsive to the general public, all while cutting down on the possibility for corrupt actors at home and abroad to hide their ill-gotten gains in the United States.

Enact policies to curtail the abuse of shell corporations in the United States, especially in the real estate sector

There are currently multiple jurisdictions in the United States that effectively serve as tax havens due to their lax—or complete lack of—disclosure laws surrounding shell corporations. Delaware, Nevada, and Wyoming are particularly notorious for the ease with which an individual can anonymously register a shell corporation without having to disclose the corporation's beneficial owner. Moreover, despite widespread understanding that luxury real estate is a common vector for money laundering, the U.S. government does not hold real estate purchases to the same level of scrutiny as large-scale transactions in other sectors, such as banking and

gambling. These may enable international elites, whether they attained their wealth through licit or illicit means, to effectively hide their money in the United States, away from the eyes of tax authorities and international investigators.

- **Congress should pass legislation to curtail the formation and abuse of anonymous shell corporations.** Bills that have already been introduced in both houses of Congress, including the TITLE Act, introduced by Sen. Sheldon Whitehouse (D-RI) in June 2017, and the Corporate Transparency Act, introduced in the Senate by Sens. Ron Wyden (D-OR) and Marco Rubio (R-FL) and in the House by Reps. Carolyn Maloney (D-NY) and Peter King (R-NY) in August 2017, would provide much-needed transparency to incorporation processes. Meanwhile, increasing the budget allocated to the Treasury Department’s Financial Crimes Enforcement Network and amending the Bank Secrecy Act and Money Laundering Control Act of 1986 to include real estate institutions and brokers among the financial institutions required to disclose suspicious transactions would significantly reduce the ability of bad actors to launder money through U.S. real estate.

Implement measures to reduce conflicts of interest in the federal government and rigorously enforce existing requirements

The U.S. Constitution contains language, known as the Foreign Emoluments Clause, forbidding federal officials from receiving any “present, Emolument, Office, or Title, of any kind whatever, from any King, Prince, or foreign State.” Proper enforcement of the clause, by necessitating congressional approval of anything of value the president receives from a foreign power, would significantly reduce the vulnerability of not just president but all federal officials to the possible influence from foreign powers.⁵⁶¹ Congress should implement procedures that will make it easier to ensure compliance from both current and future elected officials, including setting clear reporting requirements, tasking specific agencies and offices with investigating potential emoluments, and outlining penalties for violations.⁵⁶² Additionally, current law requires all executive branch officials except the president and vice president to divest themselves of any business interests that may create conflicts with their duties.⁵⁶³ Requiring the president, the vice president, and their families to resolve conflicts of interest would likewise reduce the vulnerability of the president and vice president to influence by foreign powers or by domestic business concerns.

The lack of information regarding Trump’s finances only exacerbates the difficulty of addressing his conflicts of interest. Defying decades of tradition, the president has steadfastly refused to release his tax returns.⁵⁶⁴ However, what documents the press and general public have seen have revealed a bevy of malfeasance, ranging from ethi-

cally dubious to obviously fraudulent.⁵⁶⁵ Though he has filed required financial disclosure documents listing his own assets, they leave significant gaps in the public's understanding, not the least of which is that the contents are entirely self-reported and the organization that receives the documents, the Office of Government Ethics, lacks the investigatory capacity to verify the information.⁵⁶⁶ Requiring the current president to release his tax returns, whether by subpoena or by enacting new legislation, would enable the kind of public scrutiny necessary to understand precisely how compromised a president may be. Passing a law requiring future candidates to do so would prevent the rise of similarly compromised candidates.

Conclusion

In an administration largely defined by the constant churn of controversy, the Russia investigation has become one of the largest scandals in American political history. As it has unfolded, President Donald Trump and his accomplices in Congress have not only attacked the investigation but also sought to repeatedly shift the goal posts. First, they asserted there had been no meetings with Russia. Next, they acknowledged their meetings with Kremlin-linked operatives, but denied that any collusion had taken place. Then, they claimed that even if collusion had taken place, collusion isn't a crime. And finally, they argued the scandal is meaningless because Russian interference didn't change the outcome of the election.

All of these assertions are false. There were dozens of contacts and meetings between the two campaigns to elect Trump, each of which the Trump campaign, transition team, and administration sought to hide. Their steadfast obfuscation amid the flood of revelations suggests there are still more to come.⁵⁶⁷ In those secret contacts and meetings, the participants colluded, sharing and coordinating plans to undermine the legitimacy of American democracy. That collusion almost certainly constitutes a criminal conspiracy, which, given Trump's long history of corrupt behavior and reputation for micromanagement, very well may implicate the president himself.⁵⁶⁸

As more details emerge, the evidence that Russian interference, and the Trump campaign's complicity, affected the results of the 2016 presidential election has grown steadily stronger. The president won the three key states of Pennsylvania, Michigan, and Wisconsin by less than one percent; with those wins he garnered their electoral college totals, for a margin of fewer than 80,000 voters. The narrowness of this margin, coupled with the breadth of Russian interference and the eagerness with which the Trump campaign integrated WikiLeaks into its messaging, have led multiple analysts to conclude that the Kremlin's actions not only could have, but in fact did, alter the results of the election.⁵⁶⁹

The ongoing investigation into Russia's attack on the 2016 election hasn't just revealed unprecedented—and likely criminal—wrongdoing by the president and members of his inner circle, it has fundamentally called into question the legitimacy

of Trump's presidency. Meanwhile, the Kremlin's assault on American democracy has continued, largely unabated, with several Democratic candidates having reported Russian hacking attempts during the 2018 midterms.⁵⁷⁰

Trump and his accomplices have proven not just unwilling but also unable to uncover the full truth about Russian interference in the 2016 election, leaving the United States vulnerable to further attack. It is time not just for a full public accounting of what happened but also for decisive action to shore up American democracy for the future.

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