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The connections are even more extensive than I realized.

Slate

Putin's Puppets

If the Russian president could design a candidate to undermine American interests—and advance his own—he'd look a lot like Donald Trump.

By Franklin Foer

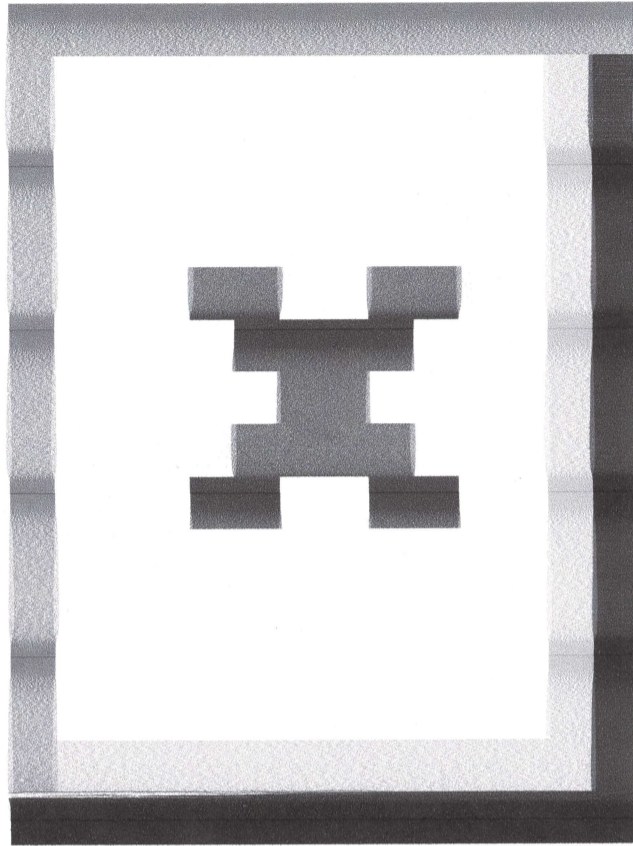


Photo illustration by Lisa Larson-Walker. Photos by Spencer Platt/Getty Images News, Mikhail Svetlov/Getty Images.

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Vladimir Putin has a plan for destroying the West—and that plan looks a lot like Donald Trump. Over the past decade, Russia has boosted right-wing populists across Europe. It loaned money to Marine Le Pen in France, well-documented transfusions of cash to keep her presidential campaign alive. Such largesse also wended its way to the former Italian premier Silvio Berlusconi, who profited “personally and handsomely” from Russian energy deals, as an American ambassador to Rome once put it. (Berlusconi also shared a 240-year-old bottle of Crimean wine with Putin and apparently makes ample use of a bed gifted to him by the Russian president.)

There’s a clear pattern: Putin runs stealth efforts on behalf of politicians who rail against the European Union and want to push away from NATO. He’s been a patron of Golden Dawn in Greece, Ataka in Bulgaria, and Jobbik in Hungary. Joe Biden warned about this effort last year in a speech at the Brookings Institution: “President Putin sees such political forces as useful tools to be manipulated, to create cracks in the European body politic which he can then exploit.” Ruptures that will likely multiply after Brexit—a campaign Russia’s many propaganda organs bombastically promoted.

The destruction of Europe is a grandiose objective; so is the weakening of the United States. Until recently, Putin has only focused glancing attention on American elections. Then along came the presumptive Republican nominee.

Donald Trump is like the Kremlin’s favored candidates, only more so. He celebrated the United Kingdom’s exit from the EU. He denounces NATO with feeling. He is also a great admirer of Vladimir Putin. Trump’s devotion to the Russian president has been portrayed as buffoonish enthusiasm for a fellow macho strongman. But Trump’s statements of praise amount to something closer to slavish devotion. In 2007, he praised Putin for “rebuilding Russia.” A year later he added, “He does this work well. Much better than our Bush.” When Putin ripped American exceptionalism in a *New York Times* op-ed in 2013, Trump called it “a masterpiece.” Despite ample evidence, Trump denies that Putin has assassinated his opponents: “In all fairness to Putin, you’re saying he killed people. I haven’t seen that.” In the event that such

killings have transpired, they can be forgiven: "At least he's a leader." And not just any old head of state: "I will tell you that, in terms of leadership, he's getting an A."

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That's a highly abridged sampling of Trump's odes to Putin. Why *wouldn't* the Russians offer him the same furtive assistance they've lavished on Le Pen, Berlusconi, and the rest? Indeed, according to *Politico's* Michael Crowley, **Russian propaganda** has gone full throttle for Trump, using its *Russia Today* apparatus to thrash Hillary Clinton and hail the courage of Trump's foreign policy. (Sample headline: "Trump Sparks NATO Debate: 'Obsolete' or 'Tripwire That Could Lead to World War III.'") Russian intelligence services **hacked** the Democratic National Committee's servers, purloining its opposition research files on Trump and just about everything else it could find. They also wormed their way into the computers of the Clinton Foundation, a breach reported by **Bloomberg**. And though it may be a mere coincidence, Trump's inner circle is populated with advisers and operatives who have long careers advancing the interests of the Kremlin.

We shouldn't overstate Putin's efforts, which will hardly determine the outcome of the election. Still, we should think of the Trump campaign as the moral equivalent of Henry Wallace's **communist-infiltrated** campaign for president in 1948, albeit less sincere and idealistic than that. A foreign power that wishes ill upon the United States has attached itself to a major presidential campaign.

Donald Trump's interest in Russia dates back to Soviet times. In fact, there's extraordinary footage of him shaking hands with Mikhail Gorbachev. It comes from 1988, the peak of perestroika and Gorbachev's efforts to charm the American public. On his **legendary** trip to Washington and New York, the Soviet in chief left the confines of his limousine and security cordon to glad-hand with the American people. Donald Trump suggested to reporters that the Soviet leader would be making his way to Trump Tower, a crucial station on his journey to capitalism. This was, in fact, a **self-aggrandizing fabrication** that Trump himself planted in the tabloids, but it was a convincing lie. A year earlier, Trump had traveled to Russia at the invitation of the Soviets. They wanted Trump to develop luxury hotels in Moscow and Leningrad to feed the regime's new appetite for Western business. "The idea of building two monuments in the U.S.S.R. has captured his imagination," *Newsweek* reported.

Trump likely reveled in the newspaper stories that reported Gorbachev's forthcoming visit to his HQ as fact. But surely even he never expected his fake story to become reality. He must have been gobsmacked when he received word that Gorbachev wanted to pay a spontaneous visit to Trump Tower. The skyscraper's namesake rushed down from his penthouse office to pay

obsequious. From the video, we can see the blotched head of Gorbachev emerge from his car. Trump and his retinue push through the crowd. "Great, great honor," the mogul says as he pumps the hand of the Soviet supremo.

One of Trump's vulnerabilities is that he doesn't always vet his people, whether it's business partners, the dubious characters he retweets, or the foreign leaders who show up at his door. As it turns out, this Gorbachev wasn't really the Soviet leader but an impersonator called Ronald Knapp. Trump was lavishing praise on the winner of a look-alike contest.

It was merely the first instance of Trump carelessly sucking up to Russian power in the hopes of securing business. Those Soviet hotel projects never went anywhere. But over the years, Trump has returned to the idea of building in Russia again and again. Effective real estate developers are genuine seers; they can conjure mental images of glorious structures and vibrant neighborhoods where other mortals see mere blight. Trump had the brashness to imagine developing hotels in Moscow when that was a fatal enterprise. In 1996, a Kalashnikov sprayed the American hotelier Paul Tatum, who had the temerity to complain about the Chechen mafia and the less-than-scrupulous business culture he endured. Yet it wasn't hard to see the appeal of Russia, to both the bottom line and the ego. An article in the *Moscow Times* described Trump as the city's first grand builder since Stalin. Indeed, he later planned a development on the site where Stalin once hoped to construct the Palace of Soviet Congresses.

Five separate times Trump attempted Russian projects, hotels, apartments, and retail on the grandest scale. In one iteration, he promised an ice rink, a "members club," and a spa, for "the finest residences in Moscow." Another project he described as "the largest hotel in the world." His gaudy style appealed to Russian nouveau riche, and he knew it. "The Russian market is attracted to me," he once boasted. He registered his name as a trademark in Moscow and even licensed it to a liquor company, which sold Trump Super Premium Vodka. Government officials claimed that they wanted to do business with Trump because they also considered him super premium. In the mid-'90s, the general-turned-politician Alexander Lebed told him, "If Trump goes to Moscow, I think America will follow."

Trump never could quite simultaneously align all the elements—investment, approval—to actually break ground. Yet his foray into Russia should be considered a smashing success; Trump set himself up for triumph even as he failed. With each doomed real estate project, he lavished praise on the key constituency that blesses deals, namely Russian politicians. (In front of a pack of reporters he told Lebed, "We've been reading a lot of great things about this gentleman and his country.") The praise encouraged Russian officials to keep inviting Trump back for big potential

deals. Each time he travelled to Moscow for a high profile visit, he attracted press attention and his stature increased. (After one trip, he bragged about a meeting where "almost all of the oligarchs were in the room.") This elevated profile ultimately attracted investors. Russians helped finance his projects in Toronto and SoHo; they snapped up units in his buildings around the world—so much so that he came to target them, hosting cocktail parties in Moscow to recruit buyers. (His tenants included a Russian mobster, who ran an illegal poker ring in the Trump Tower and accompanied Trump to the staging of the Miss Universe contest in Moscow.) Even when he built a tower in Panama, he narrowcast his sales efforts to draw Russians, as the Washington Post has reported. "Russians make up a pretty disproportionate cross-section of a lot of our assets," Trump's son, Donald Jr., bragged. "We see a lot of money pouring in from Russia."

The nature of the Donald Trump campaign is its fundamental blurring of his political and business interests—on display just recently in Scotland, when he praised the Brexit vote as a boon for his golf courses. As one campaign finance expert told the *New York Times*, "Historically, candidates would separate themselves from their business interests when running for office. Trump has done the opposite by promoting his businesses while running for office." Such mercantilist motives likely undergird Trump's ornate praise of Putin, too. Having a friend in the Kremlin would help Trump fulfill his longtime dream of planting his name in the Moscow skyline—a dream that he pursued even as he organized his presidential campaign. "Russia is one of the hottest places in the world for investment," he once said. "We will be in Moscow at some point."



Photo illustration by Lisa Larson-Walker. Photo by Ron Jenkins/Getty Images, Mikhail Svetlov/Getty Images.

One of the important facts about Trump is his lack of creditworthiness. After his 2004 bankruptcy and his long streak of lawsuits, the big banks decided he wasn't worth the effort. They'd rather not touch the self-proclaimed "king of debt." This sent him chasing less conventional sources of cash. BuzzFeed has shown, for instance, his efforts to woo Muammar Qaddafi as an investor. Libyan money never did materialize. It was Russian capital that fueled many of his signature projects—that helped him preserve his image as a great builder as he recovered from bankruptcy.

The money didn't come directly. Hunting for partners with cash, he turned to a small upstart called the Bayrock Group, which would pull together massive real estate deals using the Trump name. Its chairman was a former Soviet official named Tefvik Arif, who made a small fortune running luxe hotels in Turkey. To run Bayrock's operation, Arif hired Felix Satter, a Soviet-born, Brighton

Beach-bred college dropout. Satter changed his name to Sater, likely to distance himself from the criminal activity that a name-check would easily turn up. As a young man, Sater served time for slashing a man's face with a broken margarita glass in a barroom brawl. The Feds also busted him for working in a stock brokerage tied to four different Mafia families, which made \$40 million off fraudulent trades. One lawsuit would later describe "Satter's proven history of using mob-like tactics to achieve his goals." Another would note that he threatened a Trump investor with the prospect of the electrocution of his testicles, the amputation of his leg, and his corpse residing in the trunk of Sater's car.

"Russia is one of the hottest places in the world for investment," Trump said. "We will be in Moscow at some point."

What was Trump thinking entering into business with partners like these? It's a question he has tried to banish by downplaying his ties to Bayrock and minimizing Sater's sins. ("He got into trouble because he got into a barroom fight which a lot of people do," Trump once said in a deposition.) But he didn't just partner with Bayrock; the company embedded with him. Sater worked in Trump Tower; his business card described him as a "Senior Advisor to Donald Trump." Bayrock put together deals for mammoth Trump-named, Trump-managed projects—two in Fort Lauderdale, Florida, a resort in Phoenix, the Trump SoHo in New York. Several of those projects broke ground, but they were a mere prelude. "Mr. Trump was particularly taken with Mr. Anif's overseas connections," the *Times* reported (after buyers of units in the Trump SoHo sued him for fraud). "In a deposition, Mr. Trump said that the two had discussed 'numerous deals all over the world' and that Mr. Anif had brought potential Russian investors to Mr. Trump's office to meet him." Trump described the scope of their ambitions: "[T]his was going to be Trump International Hotel and Tower Moscow, Kiev, Istanbul, etc., Poland, Warsaw."

Based on its cast of characters, Bayrock itself was an enterprise bound to end in a torrent of litigation. The company's finance chief Jody Kriss has sued it for fraud. In the course of the litigation, which is ongoing, Kriss alleged a primary source of funding for Trump's big projects: "Month after month for two years, in fact whenever Bayrock ran out of cash, Bayrock Holdings would magically show up with a wire from 'somewhere' just large enough to keep the company going." According to Kriss, these large payments would come from sources in Russia and Kazakhstan that hoped to hide their cash. Another source of Bayrock funding was a now-defunct Icelandic investment fund called the FL Group, a magnet for Russian investors "in favor with" Putin, as a lawsuit puts it. (The *Daily Telegraph* has reported that Bayrock mislabeled FL's investment as a loan, in order to avoid at least \$20 million in taxes.)

These projects are simply too ambitious, too central to his prospects, for Trump to have ignored the underlying source of financing. And it was at just the moment he came to depend heavily on shadowy investment from Russia that his praise for Putin kicked into high gear. In 2007, he told **Larry King**, "Look at Putin—what he's doing with Russia—I mean, you know, what's going on over there. I mean this guy has done—whether you like him or don't like him—he's doing a great job."

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While Putin hasn't dirtied his hands in American elections, the Russians have cultivated Washington—hiring fancy firms to craft strategy, donating money to think tanks, building a small coterie of wonks sympathetic to their leader's view of the world. The Trump campaign is the unlikely culmination of this effort. It has been a magnet for like-minded fans of Putin. Fans might not be quite the right term, since so many of these advisers have profited from proxies of the Russian state.

Let's begin at the top. Trump's campaign manager is a wizened operative named Paul Manafort. It's true that Manafort is a mercenary by trade. His old Washington consulting firm pioneered the practice of representing the dictators of the world, no matter their grim record. (I profiled his authoritarian ambit earlier this year.) Late in his career, however, Manafort dedicated himself to working on behalf of clients close to the Kremlin. His grand achievement was reviving the doomed career of the anti-charismatic politician Viktor Yanukovich. Manafort's image-crafting and shrewd strategy culminated in Yanukovich's election to Ukraine's presidency in 2010. Thanks to Manafort's handiwork, Ukraine pulled into Putin's sphere of influence. Unlike other American consultants who flitted in and out of Kiev, Manafort set up camp there. He became an essential adviser to the president—his tennis partner even.

If Manafort were the only Kremlin connection in the Trump campaign, his presence might signify nothing. But he's hardly isolated. Many pundits have scoffed at the idea that Trump has a circle of foreign policy advisers given that his initial list of gurus emerged abruptly in March and included names unknown to most experts. Yet the list suggests certain tendencies. One of the supposed Trump whisperers was an investment banker named Carter Page. During a stint in Moscow in the 2000s, he advised the state-controlled natural gas giant, **Gazprom** and helped it attract Western investors. (In March, Page told **Bloomberg** that he continues to own shares in the company.) Page has defended Russia with relish. He wrote a column explicitly comparing the Obama administration's Russia policy to chattel slavery in the American South. His reasoning: "Numerous

quotes from the February 2015 National Security Strategy closely parallel an 1850 publication that offered guidance to slaveholders on how to produce the "ideal slave."

Also on the list of advisers is Lt. Gen. Michael Flynn, the former head of the Defense Intelligence Agency. Eighteen months after he departed government, he journeyed to Moscow and sat two chairs away from Putin at the 10th anniversary gala celebrating *Russia Today*. In *Politico*, an anonymous Obama official harshly criticized Flynn: "It's not usually to America's benefit when our intelligence officers—current or former—seek refuge in Moscow."

More recently, Richard Burt, a Reagan administration official, has begun advising Trump on foreign policy. His criticisms of NATO and pleas for greater cooperation with Putin grow from a deeply felt realism. Yet his ideological positions jibe with his financial interests. Burt is on the boards of Alfa-Bank, the largest commercial bank in Russia, and an investment fund with a large position in Gazprom.

Trump's advisers have stakes in businesses where the health of the Russian state is the health of the firm—where, in fact, the state and the firm are deeply entangled. The campaign isn't just one man with an aesthetic affinity for Putin and commercial interests in Russia; his sentiments are reinforced and amplified by an organization rife with financial ties to the Kremlin.

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Is Putin already meddling in this campaign? In his chilly way, he has signaled his rooting interest. He praised Trump as "very talented." His mouthpieces are more effusive. Vladimir Yakunin, the former chairman of Russian Railways, has said of Trump, "He is addressing some internal failings of the American people." The Kremlin doesn't seem much bothered to disguise its help. Soon after the discovery of Russian intelligence hacking into Clinton servers, documents suddenly materialized on the web: a PDF of the DNC's opposition research file and a trove of spreadsheets, including a list of donors to the Clinton Foundation.

Foreign intelligence agencies often go fishing for information on American political campaigns. Chinese hackers tapped Mitt Romney's servers in search of useful nuggets. But the Russians have made an art of publicizing the material they have filched to injure their adversaries. The locus classicus of this method was a recording of a blunt call between State Department official Toria Nuland and the American ambassador to Kiev, Geoffrey Pyatt. The Russians allegedly planted the recording on YouTube and then tweeted a link to it—and from there it became international news. Though they never claimed credit for the leak, few doubted the White House's contention that Russia was the source.

We can only speculate about the documents the Russians have in their possession and how they might use them. The material they have released thus far is relatively innocuous, but it may just be a hint of leaks to come—as they experiment with unfurling their material and gauging the reactions to leaks. The Clinton Foundation is, after all, a pretty juicy target to have hit—a place with an **ethically borderline** approach to fundraising and already a primary object of Trump campaign fusillades. One of the sites that has posted purloined material is called **Guccifer 2.0**, which strenuously protests that it is the work of a lone hacker. The site features a warning that it has released only a small smattering of documents from the “many thousands I extracted.” He is not the only one sitting on a pile of damaging material. **Julian Assange**, who hosted a show on *Russia Today*, warned, “We have emails relating to Hillary Clinton which are pending publication.”

Donald Trump's ego compounds his naïveté. He's vulnerable to flattery; his confidence in himself exceeds his intellectual capacities. All of this makes him particularly susceptible to exploitation, an easy mark. For this reason, dubious figures have always gravitated to him. (Please read David Cay Johnston's **persuasive account** of Trump's long ties to organized crime.) It seems the Russian president has noticed this, too. To quote Trump on Putin, “A guy calls me a genius and they want me to renounce him? I'm not going to renounce him.”

In the end, we only have circumstantial evidence about the Russian efforts to shape this election—a series of disparate data points and a history of past interference in similar contests. But the pattern is troubling, and so is the premise. If Putin wanted to concoct the ideal candidate to serve his purposes, his laboratory creation would look like Donald Trump. The Republican nominee wants to shatter our military alliances in Europe; he cheers the destruction of the European Union; he favors ratcheting down tensions with Russia over Ukraine and Syria, both as a matter of foreign policy and in service of his own pecuniary interests. A Trump presidency would weaken Putin's greatest geo-strategic competitor. By stoking racial hatred, Trump will shred the fabric of American society. He advertises his willingness to dismantle constitutional limits on executive power. In his desire to renegotiate debt payments, he would ruin the full faith and credit of the United States. One pro-Kremlin blogger **summed up** his government's interest in this election with clarifying bluntness: “Trump will smash America as we know it, we've got nothing to lose.”

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