

**Politics** • Analysis

# The web of relationships between Team Trump and Russia

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By **Philip Bump** March 3

In the most abstract sense, there is nothing noteworthy about a government official meeting with an ambassador from a foreign country. When such an interaction becomes important is when that official is an ally of a presidential campaign that's got a complex set of possibly inappropriate relationships with other representatives of that ambassador's country — and when that official while under oath says he did not have communications with representatives of that country.

What we're going to endeavor to do here is to parse out that complex set of relationships, using the information we have at hand. In this case, as you've hopefully ascertained, the country at issue is Russia and the campaign is that of President Trump. The official, of course, is Attorney General Jeff Sessions. And the ambassador is, at this point, the linchpin of a lot of the interactions between Trump and the rest of his team.

We'll consider three Russian entities.

- *Ambassador Sergey Kislyak*. Russia's man in Washington.
- *The Russian government*. Kislyak is part of this government, of course, but we'll use this as a shorthand for interactions with President Vladimir Putin or other government agencies (who may or may not be known). Included here is RT, the Russia-backed and -based television network.
- *Russian business interests*. This encompasses everything from Rosneft, the Russian oil giant, to sketchy Russian oligarchs.

As for the American side, let's start at the top and move outward through Trump's network.

The web of relationships between Team Trump and Russian business interests are murky, thanks to his decision not to release his tax returns during the campaign. We know that the Miss Universe pageant was hosted in Moscow when Trump owned it and that he earned millions of dollars for doing so. We know, too, that he's repeatedly explored real estate deals in the country. It's not clear whether Trump has met Kislyak, though the ambassador attended a foreign policy speech Trump gave last spring and the reception that preceded it. We know now that Trump has been in communication with Putin — but he also claimed to have been in contact with representatives of the Russian president (and Putin himself) before the campaign.

**Jeff Sessions, attorney general.** Sessions's relationship with Kislyak is well-established by now. This is a good point at which to note, though, that the existence of that relationship does not in any way imply wrongdoing by Sessions. It's just part of the network we're establishing.

**Jared Kushner, adviser.** Trump's son-in-law (Ivanka's husband) also met with Kislyak during the period between Election Day and the inauguration, according to the New York Times. Kushner also has some loose connections to Russian business interests, according to the Times, including an investment from tech investor Yuri Milner in a real estate investment company and a friendship with the wife of oligarch Roman Abramovich. (She was invited to the inauguration as Ivanka Trump's guest.)

**Michael Flynn, former national security adviser.** Flynn had a number of contacts with Kislyak after Election Day, including attending that meeting between the ambassador and Kushner. (Flynn was forced to resign his position after it was revealed that his comments about the content of those meetings to Vice President Pence were falsehoods.) After resigning from the Defense Intelligence Agency in 2014, Flynn was invited to give a paid speech at a celebration of RT. He did so and joined Putin's table for a related banquet.

**Donald Trump Jr., son.** The younger Trump visited France last October to speak to an obscure Russian group. In 2008, Don Jr., who works for the Trump Organization, famously told a real estate conference that "Russians make up a pretty disproportionate cross-section of a lot of our assets" and that "we see a lot of money pouring in from Russia."

**Paul Manafort, former campaign manager.** Manafort's links to Russian interests are well established. New revelations that emerged during the campaign prompted Trump to demand Manafort's resignation. Manafort is one of the Trump campaign staffers who reportedly made contact with Russian interests during the campaign.

**Rex Tillerson, secretary of state.** Before he was confirmed to serve as the head of the State Department, even Republicans questioned Tillerson's relationship to Putin. As the head of ExxonMobil, Tillerson helped negotiate a massive agreement between the Russian government and ExxonMobil, Rosneft, a partnership between the two companies. Tillerson was subsequently awarded the "Order of

**Wilbur Ross, secretary of commerce.** Ross's connections to Russian business interests are less obvious than Tillerson's. During the Clinton administration, Ross served on the board of the U.S.-Russia Investment Fund, an effort to bolster businesses in post-Cold-War Russia. During his confirmation, questions arose about his ownership of a bank on Cyprus that, in the words of McClatchy's Kevin Hall, "caters to wealthy Russians."

**Roger Stone, longtime adviser.** Stone's connection to Russia is murky. During the campaign, he drew attention for seeming to have inside knowledge on the WikiLeaks document releases — releases that have been linked to Russian interests by the government. More directly, the Times reports that Stone is possibly under investigation by the U.S. government for his links to Russia.

**Carter Page, former adviser.** Page is included in that alleged investigation as well, but his links to Russia are more clear. Page pretty clearly met with Kislyak last year during the Republican convention in Cleveland, as he admitted to MSNBC's Chris Hayes on Thursday night. He also has repeatedly addressed Russian business groups in that country, including twice in 2016. Over a decade ago, he worked in Russia as an investment banker.

**J.D. Gordon, former adviser.** Page is far in the outer orbit of Trump's circle, serving briefly as part of Trump's national security advisory team. He's joined there by Gordon, a onetime Pentagon spokesman who also served as an adviser to the campaign. Gordon, like Page, reportedly spoke with Kislyak in Cleveland.

This document should be considered a work in progress. As more information is released, it (and the graphic) will be updated. Again, none of the relationships above are intended to show misbehavior by those involved. The broad question at stake is the extent to which Russia sought to interfere in the 2016 election and, if it did, the extent to which it may have leveraged relationships with Trump's team to that end. That much-bigger question is much harder to evaluate.

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