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## Russia Is Buying Politicians in Europe. Is It Happening Here Too?

A former CIA officer explains how a vast, pro-Putin corruption network uncovered in Europe is a warning sign for the U.S.



Democrats for years have warned about Russian influence in the Republican Party under Donald Trump. But now even some prominent GOP members of Congress are sounding the alarm.

“I think Russian propaganda has made its way into the United States, unfortunately, and it’s infected a good chunk of my party’s base,” Representative Michael McCaul, chairman of the House Foreign Affairs Committee, told Puck’s Julia Ioffe last week. Representative Mike Turner, chairman of the House Intelligence Committee, went further, telling CNN’s Jake Tapper a few days later, “We see directly coming from Russia attempts to mask communications that are anti-Ukraine and pro-Russia messages, some of which we even hear being uttered on the House floor.”

Which Republicans might they be referring to? Representative Ken Buck didn’t hesitate to point a finger at Representative Marjorie Taylor Greene, saying on Monday, “Moscow Marjorie is focused now on this Ukraine issue and getting her talking points from the Kremlin and making sure that she is popular and she is getting a lot of coverage.”

They’re saying aloud what they once whispered behind closed doors. Back in 2016, when he was a Republican congressman but not yet House speaker, Kevin McCarthy said in a private meeting with GOP leaders, “There’s two people, I think, Putin pays: [Representative Dana] Rohrabacher and Trump ... swear to God.” (Rohrabacher, once dubbed “Putin’s favorite congressman,” lost his seat in 2018.)

McCarthy, confronted with the leaked audio in 2017, claimed it was a joke. But anyone paying attention to how Russian intelligence services run influence operations—which I do, as a former CIA officer—knows it is anything but. It raises a legitimate, and deadly serious, question: Have Russian operatives paid any Republican officials?

Consider the news last week that authorities in several European countries had uncovered a vast corruption network, in which European politicians were paid to spread anti-Ukraine and pro-Russia propaganda. The network, according to intelligence sources cited by Czech media and confirmed by the country's prime minister, was orchestrated by pro-Russia Ukrainian oligarch Viktor Medvedchuk. Politicians from Germany, France, Poland, Belgium, the Netherlands, and Hungary were allegedly paid directly with cash or through cryptocurrency exchanges.

The case highlights an important misunderstanding that arose during Trump's first presidential campaign, about how malign influence operations work: They are not simply, or even primarily, bot or troll networks on social media that amplify lies and propaganda. They're human intelligence operations too—not unlike what you might see in a Hollywood film. Operatives of Russia's security services meet with politicians, journalists, activists, and other influencers and pay them to carry out certain tasks.

The idea is to push narratives and policies that help Russia but to mask them behind a local face. (In the aforementioned case, the popular website Voice of Europe was allegedly used to push the propaganda and to facilitate payments.) This provides Russia plausible deniability, but it also makes it more likely that audiences will trust the messages. It serves a purpose within Russia too, as domestic propaganda purportedly showing that people in other countries agree

with the Kremlin's positions. The Voice of Europe scandal is merely the latest example of Russian influence on the continent. Last year, the Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project revealed that politicians in Germany, Italy, and Cyprus were paid by Russian operatives to introduce legislation literally written by Russian intelligence officers. The OCCRP also uncovered examples of parliamentary staff members, party activists, and members of think tanks publishing articles in European press outlets under their name, while the articles were actually written by Russian handlers. One activist from Austria even complained to his handler about the quality of one article that had been coordinated with the Kremlin. "I am not a robot," he said. Nevertheless, he published the article under his name in a Swiss media outlet.

It is naïve to think the same pattern does not exist in the United States, given the ample evidence of coordinated pro-Russian talking points from several Republican politicians. Just this week, Marjorie Taylor Greene spoke to Steve Bannon about Ukraine's persecution of Christians, which is a Kremlin talking point aimed at boosting the pro-Moscow wing of Ukraine's Orthodox Church. The U.S. should be spending money on the border with Mexico, not on Ukraine aid? That's a Kremlin talking point. Russia invaded Ukraine to defend itself against an expanding NATO? That's a Kremlin talking point. Call for a cease-fire, and give Russia Crimea and eastern Ukraine? That's a Kremlin talking point.

While we cannot say for sure if any Republican officials are on the Russian payroll in ways similar to their European counterparts, we can be sure that they've been approached. As the director of national intelligence wrote in 2021, Russian intelligence operatives and their proxies “sought to use prominent US persons and media conduits to launder their narratives to US officials and audiences. These Russian proxies met with and provided materials to Trump administration-linked US persons to advocate for formal investigations; hired a US firm to petition US officials; and attempted to make contact with several senior US officials. They also made contact with established US media figures.”

As for payments, we've seen a disturbing pattern. In 2017, Andrew Intrater donated \$250,000 to Trump's inauguration fund and, a few months later, donated \$35,000 to Trump's reelection campaign. Intrater is a cousin of Viktor Vekselberg, a Russian oligarch who was sanctioned by the U.S. in 2018 for his connections to Putin. We know that oligarchs play an integral role in funding Russian influence operations. One oligarch revealed to special counsel Robert Mueller that Putin held quarterly meetings with his oligarchs to discuss strategic spending.

In 2018, a Texas-based firm donated money to House Speaker Mike Johnson. That firm is 88 percent owned by three Russians. And last week, we learned that Trump Media received loans from a Russian bank to help the company stay afloat before it went public and at a time when no U.S. bank would lend to Trump.

Any donations that might have been made through anonymous LLCs to PACs—perhaps with attached quid pro quos—are likely to remain opaque, due to the Supreme Court’s *Citizens United* decision. And we cannot say if the financial transactions we do know about are nefarious. But the pattern paints a disturbing picture, particularly given many House Republicans’ rabid opposition to Ukraine aid and Trump’s reported Ukraine peace plan, which would cede Crimea and parts of eastern Ukraine to Russia. A similar plan was floated by Paul Manafort, Trump’s 2016 campaign chairman, and his partner Konstantin Kilimnik, a Russian intelligence operative, during the 2016 election.

Among the entities promoted by the Voice of Europe propaganda network was Hungary’s Center for Fundamental Rights, which “considers preserving national identity, sovereignty, and Judeo-Christian social traditions as its primary mission.” CFR is funded by the government of Viktor Orbán and has twice organized a conference in Budapest for the Conservative Political Action Committee, which helps shape policy on the American right. The Heritage Foundation—which has spearheaded Project 2025, the authoritarian blueprint for a future Republican administration—has become increasingly cozy with Hungary, and even hosted Orbán privately last month. It is quite possible, perhaps even likely, that some people who are on the Russian payroll were at the Heritage event, their role to influence and build support for pro-Russian policies.

We now have overwhelming evidence of vast pro-Russian influence operations throughout Europe that seek to exploit politicians, media personalities, and others—and some of these efforts have been successful. Here in the United States, while a pattern has emerged, we don't know the full extent of the influence yet. But it would be foolish, not to mention dangerous, to think we are immune.

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