

immediately made clear his deference to Putin and his circle. In an unprecedented Oval Office meeting at the start of his presidency he told Russia's foreign minister, Sergei Lavrov, and Russia's ambassador to the US, Sergei Kislyak, that he was not worried about the US intelligence community's claims of Russian interference in the presidential election, since America did the same elsewhere.¹⁶¹ Soon he began to pick away at the Western order, at the stable alliances that had dominated since the end of the Cold War. During his campaign he'd argued that NATO was obsolete, while suggesting that he might recognise Crimea's annexation by Russia. Following his election, he actively encouraged Britain's prime minister Theresa May – and then her successor Boris Johnson – to deepen the UK's split from Europe, threatening to withhold a trade agreement with the US unless they did so. He constantly badgered NATO member states with complaints that they were not paying their dues. His relations with German chancellor Angela Merkel, a bastion of the global liberal order, were testy at best, and he criticised her over her immigration policy. In 2019 he would withdraw US troops from Syria, a devastating move that abandoned the US's Kurdish ally and left Russia and Iran to fill the resulting power vacuum. He was erratic, unpredictable, and his every statement seemed to undermine American leadership. Under his watch US democratic institutions were eroded, and US society became ever more divided. Foreign policy was deployed as an instrument to trade Trump's own political interests. The former US ambassador to Ukraine, recalled from her post by Trump, said the State Department was being 'attacked and hollowed out from within.'¹⁶² By 2019 Trump was even publicly lobbying for Russia's reinstatement in the G8.

Shalva Tchigirinsky, for one, was delighted by Trump's effectiveness. 'Everything he's promised he's doing,' he said when we met in May 2018. He found it almost impossible not to gloat. An old Soviet dream that Europe, left without US military support, would dissolve into battle between its nation states, could even become reality. 'Then there will be nothing left but for the Russians to come and take all the women,' he laughed.¹⁶³

Tchigirinsky, who remained in contact with senior Russian

foreign-intelligence figures such as former foreign minister Igor Ivanov, seemed to be joking, of course. But there was an edge to his laughter. The world was suddenly in a dissonant new reality, where everything seemed to be turned on its head. When Trump finally met Putin, for their first summit in Helsinki in July 2018, many who'd dismissed as media hoopla the allegations that the Putin regime had some kind of hold over him were confronted by a stark picture. There was the US president before the whole world, apparently scraping to Putin, full of praise for how he'd conducted the recently-concluded football World Cup, kowtowing to the Russian leader as a 'good competitor'. There was Trump directly contradicting the conclusions of his own intelligence agencies about Russian interference in the 2016 presidential election, preferring what he called Putin's 'extremely strong and powerful' denial.¹⁶⁴ Facing a packed press hall, a smiling and at times smirking Putin took the lead in almost everything. Questioned about Russia's attempts to influence the US election, he shrugged them off as the actions of 'private individuals', pointing in particular to the indictment by US prosecutors of a close ally of his, a former caterer nicknamed 'Putin's chef', Yevgeny Prigozhin, and his Concord Management company. Prigozhin was accused of running an internet troll factory that had been behind a sweeping online effort to influence American voters to support Trump. 'They do not represent the Russian state,' Putin claimed. 'This is a matter of private individuals, not the state . . . You have many people, including those with fortunes worth billions, Mr Soros, for example, and they are meddling everywhere. And is this the position of the American state? No. It is the position of a private individual. It's the same here.'¹⁶⁵

Putin was being facetious. The use of the term 'private individuals' was a typical KGB tactic that allowed plausible deniability for any Kremlin involvement, and it went to the heart of how Putin's regime operated. By then under his KGB capitalism, all of Russia's significant so-called 'private' businessmen had become agents of the state. Since Mikhail Khodorkovsky's arrest in 2003, their independence had increasingly been taken away from them. The financial crisis of 2008 had deepened the process, with many of the country's billionaires