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RUSSIAN INFORMATION WARFARE AND THE U.S. PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION OF 2016: REFLECTIONS ON LUKE HARDING'S BOOK *COLLUSION*



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Zusammenfassung:

RUSSLANDS INFORMATIONSKRIEGSFÜHRUNG UND DIE US-PRÄSIDENTSCHAFTSWAHL 2016: GEDANKEN ZU LUKE HARDINGS BUCH *COLLUSION*

Die amerikanischen Präsidentschaftswahlen 2016 schockierten mit ihrem Ergebnis sowohl die unterlegenen Demokraten als auch die NATO-Verbündeten der USA. Für den siegreichen Donald Trump und den Kreml bedeutete der Wahlausgang eine Überraschung. Selbst republikanische Unterstützer Trumps und Mitarbeiter des Weißen Hauses haben den Präsidenten in einer Weise charakterisiert, die in der amerikanischen politischen Kultur wenige oder gar keine Parallelen hat; hierbei fielen Begriffe wie: Idiot, Trottel, Schwachkopf und Kindergärtner. Dieser Artikel wertet Luke Hardings Buch *Collusion* aus und möchte so die entscheidende Frage beantworten: Wie konnte der am wenigsten geeignete Kandidat die Wahl gewinnen und Präsident der Vereinigten Staaten werden? Der Autor rezensiert und würdigt das genannte Buch, fügt ihm aber auch Informationen hinzu, die erst nach seiner Veröffentlichung bekanntgeworden sind.

The 2016 presidential election in the United States shocked not only the defeated candidate Hillary Clinton, but also the victorious Donald Trump, and America's NATO allies and partners. The election also surprised the Kremlin. At midnight on 8 November 2016, Election Day, the semi-official *Izvestia* announced with a resigned tone that Hillary Clinton had won. The outcome, the paper asserted, was preordained, as the whole campaign was skewed in her favor; Trump's candidacy was tolerated merely to create the illusion of democracy. Of course, this view had to be revised as soon as the news of Trump's triumph reached Moscow. It was greeted with unadulterated joy: the Duma deputies stood up and applauded. Dmitry Peskov, the Russian presidential spokesman,

evaluated Trump's first speech as president-elect in glowing terms. He thought that Trump's and Putin's views were "absolutely, phenomenally in line."¹ Boris Chernyshev, a Duma deputy leader, celebrated the outcome with champagne and a short statement containing a curiously chosen pronoun: "Yes, we did!" Margarita Simon'yan, editor-in-chief of the RT News channel, tweeted that she planned to drive around Moscow with a U.S. flag attached to her car. When a friendly TV journalist asked Peskov whether it was true that Vladimir Putin and his entourage celebrated Trump's victory, he answered with surprising openness. The party in the Kremlin, he laughed, had lasted for three days. "They ripped their accordions", he added with a smirk.²

A CONFUSING OUTCOME OF THE PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS IN 2016

Although the president has been in the White House for nearly two years, many Americans are still confused as to how it came about. It is not hard to understand why the result of the election appalled Trump's critics on the left, e.g. Noam Chomsky or Paul Krugman. It is more complicated to comprehend the electoral outcome when we consider the views of those who would have been natural ideological allies of the president. Rand Paul, a libertarian senator from Kentucky, had dismissed Trump as "a delusional narcissist and an orange-faced windbag. A speck of dust is way more qualified to be president." Lindsey Graham, a Republican from South Carolina, sounded equally contemptuous when he characterized Trump as "a kook" before concluding that he was "unfit" for the office of president.³

Some might minimize the significance of the senators' harsh words. After all, they were and remain Trump's rivals within the Republican Party. But even people who work for the president paint a skeptical picture of his ability to govern. For instance the former National Security Advisor H. R. McMaster stated that President Trump was an "idiot", a "dope" and had the brains of a "kindergartener". CIA Director Mike Pompeo, now Trump's secretary of state, did not engage in such name calling but admitted that he had to cut "huge amounts of text" from his intelligence briefings and replace them with "killer graphics" because that is how his chief "can best understand the information we're trying to communicate."⁴ Perhaps the most notorious evaluation of Donald Trump came from his then secretary of state. Rex Tillerson stated in front of numerous witnesses during a high-level briefing inside the secure "tank" in the Pentagon that the president was a "fucking moron."⁵ Even Steve Bannon, Trump's former strategist, has grown bitter toward his erstwhile pupil. He charged that an encounter between members of Trump's team and a Kremlin cut-out was "treasonous" and "unpatriotic", he characterized Trump's financial dealings as "greasy" and predicted that Robert Mueller's investigators would follow the flow of money and indict Trump's son Donald Trump, Jr.⁶

Some of Trump's critics and political opponents in Congress escalated the conflict by questioning the president's mental stability. Bandy Lee, professor of psychiatry at Yale University, testified before a group

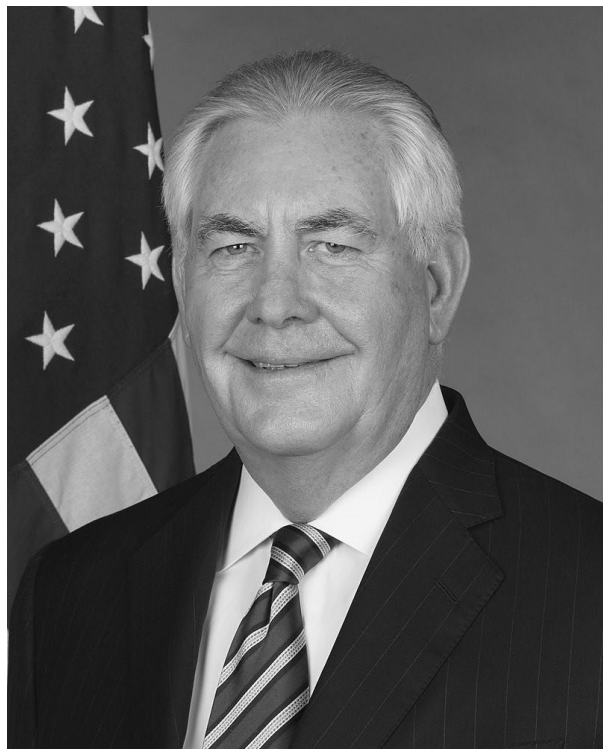


Fig. 1: Rex Tillerson, US Secretary of State, February 2017 to March 2018.

of democratic lawmakers that the president was from her point of view psychiatrically unwell and could "unravel" in the future.⁷ Trump unwittingly added to this assessment with a tweet asserting that becoming president of the United States "would qualify as not smart, but genius [...] and a very stable genius at that."⁸ Those who hold a dim view of Trump's ability to govern received a further bonus when the president announced that he had negotiated the sale of F-52s to Norway. It was noted that such planes exist in a popular video game but not in reality.⁹

Negative assessments of Donald Trump may satisfy his ideological opponents. But neither derision nor professionally questionable commentary from mental health specialists explain how a person held in such low esteem by his opponents and allies alike, could have defeated a rival who was experienced, well-funded, and enjoyed many advantages.

LUKE HARDING'S EXPLANATION

How could Trump have won the election in 2016 and become president of the United States? In his recent book *Collusion*, Luke Harding makes no effort to psychoanalyze Trump.¹⁰ He provides facts, documents, and expert testimony. When he speculates or when a source speaks with only approximate accuracy, Harding says so. His central argument, subsequently endorsed by the former Director of National Intel-



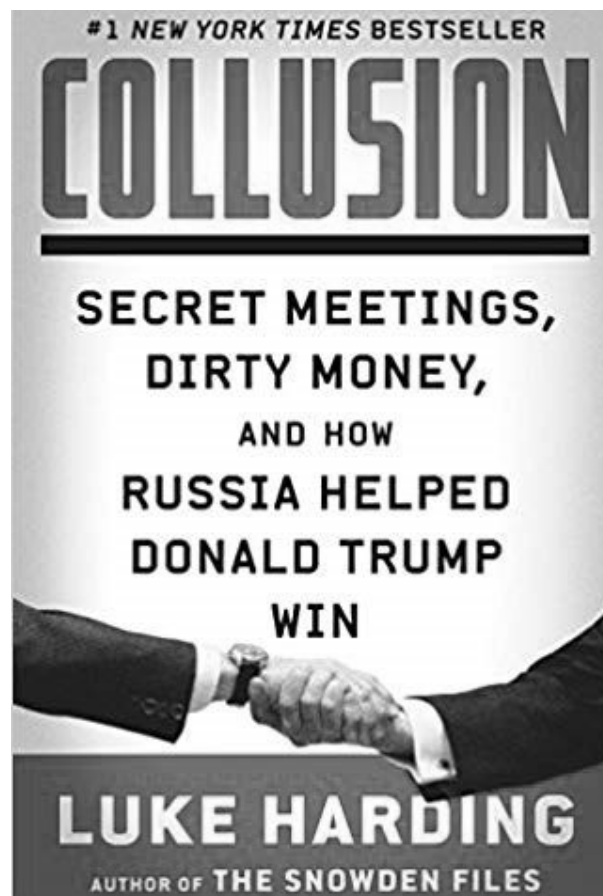
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Fig. 2: Luke Harding, author of *Collusion*.

ligence, James Clapper, and the former Director of Central Intelligence Agency, John Brennan, is that Russia conducted an intelligence operation in order to disrupt the presidential election in 2016 by supporting Donald Trump and undermining Hillary Clinton.

Harding notes a paradox: Trump is not afraid to be scathingly critical of others, resorting occasionally to crude monikers even for people in high places.¹¹ But there is one man who can do no wrong in his eyes. It is Vladimir Putin. CNN recorded that as presidential candidate Trump brought up Putin in various contexts no less than 80 times, occasionally praising him in unbridled terms. He has maintained this approach even as president.¹² What explains it? To provide an answer, Harding poses additional questions: was there collusion between members of the Trump team and the Kremlin? Is it true that Trump’s enterprises were able to avoid bankruptcy thanks to money from various post-Soviet republics and loans traceable to a Moscow bank controlled by Russian special services? Do they have kompromat on Trump in the Kremlin? Is the American president consequently vulnerable to blackmail? Has he tried to impede the FBI investigation?

According to Harding, the drama surrounding the last presidential election in the United States started at the end of 2015. The British GCHQ (Government Communications Headquarters) in Cheltenham had noticed that its Russian targets, “known Kremlin operatives already on the grid”, were in frequent



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Fig. 3: Cover of Luke Harding’s book *Collusion* (English edition).

communication with various persons associated with Trump’s presidential campaign.¹³ This was confirmed by findings of allied services in Germany, Sweden, France, Estonia, Poland, the Netherlands, and Australia. There was a strong consensus in the allied community that the Russian activities they had observed were aimed at disrupting the imminent U.S. presidential election. They agreed that this was potentially serious, and that Washington needed to hear about it. Some thought that the Americans were curiously blasé about the situation. This is why Robert Hannigan, the then chief of GCHQ, flew to the U.S. to brief the Americans who triggered a “major interagency investigation” of the British claims.¹⁴



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Fig. 4: Robert Peter Hannigan, Director of GCHQ, November 2014 until January 2017.

We now know that Hannigan was not the only visitor who came to Washington bearing gifts in the form of top secret and actionable intelligence. After Harding's book went to press, it was revealed that Rob Bertholee, chief of the Dutch General Intelligence and Security Service (AIVD) in Zoetermeer and Pieter Bindt, chief of its counterpart, Military Intelligence and Security Service of the Netherlands (MIVD), met with DNI Clapper and Michael Rogers of the NSA.¹⁵ They told them that their services had broken into the computer network of the Moscow-based team of government-sponsored hackers known as Cozy Bear (also known as APT29) who hacked into countless networks of foreign governments, corporations, and businesses. This allowed the Dutch – and subsequently the Americans – to watch in real time as the Russians hacked into the Democratic Party communications, copying and transferring a large volume of data, although the Americans were able to limit the breach.

The Dutch specialists not only broke into the Russians' online operations. They also seized control of the closed-circuit television cameras in the building. This enabled them to “get images of every person who entered the room and match them against known Russia intelligence agents and officials.” This is how they were able to determine once and for all that Cozy Bear was run and staffed by Russia's Foreign Intelligence Service (SVR), which was directly answerable to Putin.¹⁶ The information provided by the British, Dutch, and other allies was extremely sensitive. It was bad enough that a foreign power, Russia, was involved in a stratagem to undermine the election of 2016. It was even more problematic that, possibly, Donald Trump did not appear to be an unwitting participant in the scheme.

DEUTSCHE BANK

The FBI had been paying attention to Trump's financial machinations with Russian entities for some time. It was no secret that the New York entrepreneur had declared bankruptcy no less than six times in the 1990s. Given this record, by the end of the decade, he could not find an American financial institution that would extend credit to him. He finally managed in 2005 to persuade Deutsche Bank (DB) to loan him \$ 640 million after he accepted full personal responsibility for the obligation. When he failed three years later to pay the first installment, DB took him

to court for the sum he owed plus penalty. Trump surprised the Germans: he countersued the bank for \$ 3 billion, charging that DB was one of the banking institutions that had contributed to the economic crisis of 2008, which made it impossible for his enterprises to run at a profit. The court refused the argument as obviously frivolous. Trump's future seemed bleak. Harding shows that a sudden turn took place in 2010, when both sides unexpectedly reached an agreement. Trump started paying his debt to DB – with the use of new loans from DB! Despite the new loans, Trump was in no hurry to settle the debt: when he entered the White House, he still owed DB c. \$ 300 million. Why, Harding asks, did the Germans tolerate such behavior? Why did they advance additional tens of millions to a man who had violated lawful contracts, yet postured as a victim?¹⁷

Collusion suggests that in order to understand DB's seemingly irrational generosity we need to return to the mid-1990s. Spearheaded by Anshu Jain, who joined DB in 1995 and served as its co-CEO from 2012-2015, the German bank sought to establish itself in the volatile environment in Moscow. It succeeded when it entered into an alliance with Vneshtorgbank (VTB). This boutique bank, writes Harding, is closely connected with Russian special services – among its officers are the sons of the current and penultimate chiefs of the SVR (Foreign Intelligence Service of Russia) and the bank's manager is a Russian Intelligence official. Shortly after Jain had created the DB/VTB banking tandem in Moscow, the German institution started posting profits up to \$ 1 billion per annum. Financial crimes specialists in New York and London determined that the Russian VTB used DB as a tool for money laundering. The technique they used – called “mirror trading” – is surprisingly simple. DB enabled a client in Moscow to purchase shares of a company with rubles. Shortly thereafter the client would sell those shares in London for a sum in pounds sterling or dollars. Thus suspect rubles were cleaned and turned into hard currency, which promptly went to a bank in, for instance, Moldova whence it electronically traveled to Cyprus or some other location made desirable by its “bank secrecy” regulations. Banking examiners in New York and London calculated that DB had laundered c. \$ 10 billion for the Russians. This money, safe in various exotic destinations, was used to finance SVR global operations, including those the Russians have traditionally been so good at, namely, *aktivnye meropriyatiya*, i.e. active measures or political warfare.

One needs to know this, Harding argues, to understand why DB/VTB – despite Trump’s refusal to settle his debt and his provocative lawsuit against DB – reacted by extending further loans to Trump and family. No self-respecting bank would normally behave in this way. Many details remain hidden, but Harding speculates that DB might have sold Trump’s debt to another institution. Perhaps to VTB? If that is the case, then the Russian special services may have ordered VTB to pressure DB to help save the collapsing Trump enterprises as a reward for the money laundering scheme. Or it may have been an investment into the eccentric American who had been talking about running for president since the 1980s. It is piquant that ten days after Trump had become president, DB acknowledged its role in the money-laundering scheme and was fined \$ 475 million in New York and \$ 231 million in London.¹⁸

As intelligence professional, Putin would not put all his eggs in one basket. Russian money did not reach Trump’s coffers from only one source, i.e. via the DB/VTB channel. There was also the case of Trump’s real estate in New York and Florida. Many units in several luxury buildings that prominently bore the Trump name stood half empty, including, for instance, very expensive apartments in the Trump World Tower at 845 United Nations Plaza in New York City. Then, suddenly, says Debra Stotts who sold several units in the building, “We had big buyers from Russia, Ukraine, and Kazakhstan.” She estimates that a third of apartment owners come from the former Soviet Union.¹⁹ This was confirmed by Donald Trump, Jr., who stated in 2008 in Moscow that “Russians make a pretty disproportionate cross section of a lot of our assets. We see a lot of money pouring in from Russia.”²⁰ Money, of course, only rarely “pours” anywhere without an expectation of some future reward.

DMITRY RYBOLOVLEV

A similar situation has evolved with Trump properties in Florida. And not just apartments. In 2004 Trump purchased a residence in Palm Beach for \$ 41 million. Four years later he sold it to Dmitry Rybolovlev for \$ 95 million. The whole deal was rendered even more notable when it transpired that the new owner never set foot inside the residence, and had no desire to live in the United States.²¹ Originally from Perm, Russia, Rybolovlev clawed his way to riches by the



Fig. 5: Trump World Tower at 845 United Nations Plaza in New York City.

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exercise of sheer force, including the murder of his business partner, for which he spent only 11 months in prison. When Putin sent another oligarch, Mikhail Khodorkovsky, to Siberia for ten years, Rybolovlev understood the message, namely, that in Putin’s Russia it was easier to make money than to keep it.²² He read the signal accurately and made himself fully available to the Kremlin. Therefore, when Rybolovlev spent \$ 95 million for Trump’s mansion, he did so on behalf of the state and, possibly, with money drawn from the state’s coffers.

The above speculation that Rybolovlev might have been a channel for Moscow’s support for Trump is strengthened further by an episode reported by Harding. He notes that on 3 November 2016, five days before the presidential election, a vigilant limousine driver photographed a sleek Airbus A319 as it landed around 2 p.m. at Charlotte International Airport. The driver looked up the plane’s registration number and learned that it belonged to Rybolovlev. 20 minutes later another private jet landed and the driver, attracted by the giant letters TRUMP painted behind the cockpit, snapped another picture and posted both on her Twitter account. She observed as Trump and his entourage got into a motorcade that took them to the city. That same afternoon, before a crowd in Charlotte, Trump accused Hillary Clinton

of “far-reaching criminal conduct” and warned that her victory would lead to “an unprecedented constitutional crisis.”²³



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Fig. 6: Russian businessman and investor Dmitry Rybolovlev.



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Fig. 7: The Maison de L'Amitié in Palm Beach, Florida, which Trump sold to Dmitry Rybolovlev.

The driver never saw Rybolovlev emerge from his Airbus that stood parked a mere 300 feet from Trump's jet, but it prompted investigative journalists, quoted by Harding, to look up Rybolovlev's flight schedule in 2016/17. They discovered that the oligarch had made seven trips to New York City, “usually at a time when the candidate was there.” He also “flew twice to Miami when Trump was at Mar-a-Lago.” And seven times to Moscow, “mostly preceding or following flights to Florida or New York.” Harding sought to interview Rybolovlev about his flight patterns and why his “jet was often in the same place as Donald's.” His spokesman dismissed the inquiry

by noting that his boss travels frequently. And why, inquired Harding, did he purchase Trump's mansion for \$ 95 million, although he never set foot there? The answer was that the investment was “good enough.”²⁴

It is unclear whether the FBI had been paying attention to Trump's financial shenanigans with the Russians, but the warnings from GCHQ, the Dutch services, and possibly other allies must have caused much anxiety inside the U.S. Intelligence Community. The notion that one of the candidates for presidency of the United States might have been caught in a Russian stratagem seemed like a bad script for a remake of the “Manchurian Candidate”. The CIA, NSA, and FBI must be strictly apolitical. If president Barack Obama, a Democrat, had revealed some of the impossible-to-prove allegations regarding Russia's involvement in support of the Republican candidate, American voters could have interpreted it as an attempted coup d'état. There was also reason to fear that releasing reports based on top-secret sources would put their lives in danger. This is why Obama chose to do nothing in the summer of 2016, and the public remained in the dark regarding Trump's dealings with Russia.

PAPADOPOULOS, GOLDSTONE, VESELNITSKAYA ET AL.

Meanwhile, other events added to the brewing crisis. In May 2016, George Papadopoulos, one of Trump's top five foreign policy advisors, met in London with Alexander Downer, Australia's High Commissioner in the UK. The Australian was surprised that Papadopoulos was completely confident that Trump would defeat Clinton. The Russians, claimed Papadopoulos, possessed thousands of hacked emails of the Democratic National Committee and would release them at an opportune moment. Downer immediately grasped the relevant meaning of this event: only a person secretly cooperating with the Russians would be in a position to speak with such knowledge about their future actions. Once the hacked emails started floating about the Internet, and the Democratic candidate was forced into a defensive posture, the Australians brought up the matter with their American allies. Mr. Papadopoulos has pleaded guilty to lying to the FBI and is now a cooperating witness.²⁵ Harding does not mention the Downer-Papadopoulos encounter as it was revealed only after *Collusion* went to print. But it fits well within the pattern established by the book.



Fig. 8: George Papadopoulos, one of Trump's foreign policy advisors during the election campaign in 2016.

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Only a short time passed since the meeting in London, before another actor entered the stage. Rob Goldstone is an Englishman with extensive contacts in Russia and the post-Soviet republics in Central Asia. In early June 2016, he emailed Trump's older son with the news that Yuri Chai-ka, Russia's Prosecutor General, was prepared to share with the Trump campaign documents that would disadvantage Clinton and "would be very useful to your father."²⁶ This is the moment when the recipient should have alerted the FBI. Instead, he replied: "If it's what you say, I love it."²⁷ The meeting in the Trump Tower with the Kremlin cut-out Natalia Veselnitskaya and other Russians was attended by Donald Jr., the then chief of Trump's campaign Paul Manafort, Jared Kushner, and other Russian or post-Soviet individuals. Who said what has remained unclear so far. What we know is that all the participants failed to disclose the event to the FBI on the forms required for a security clearance. They remembered it only when the relevant email correspondence was published. The American participants' first line of defense, allegedly suggested by President Trump personally, was that the topic of the meeting involved the adoption of Russian children by U.S. citizens. When the record proved otherwise, they conceded that kompromat on Hillary was involved and attempted to close the affair by asserting that the meeting was boring, banal, and common in today's politics. This approach was well lampooned by Andrew Rosenthal: "Trump and his people never spoke to any Russians, and if they did, they either forgot about it or innocently failed to mention it because it was just normal socializing. And if it wasn't just socializing, then there was no discussion of the campaign, and if there was discussion of the campaign, it was perfectly appropriate."²⁸

THE STEELE DOSSIER

Three weeks had passed since the intervention by Goldstone, and Christopher David Steele sent his first memorandum dealing with Russia's role in the Trump campaign to Washington. Steele's involvement was initially funded by some of Trump's Republican rivals. After Trump had secured his GOP nomination, the Democrats became interested. They were represented by the international law firm Perkins Coie, based in Seattle, Washington, and by Fusion GPS, a firm established by a former Wall Street Journal journalist Glenn R. Simpson and colleagues in 2011. Analysis of Steele's memoranda, known collectively as "the Steele dossier", is a component of Harding's *Collusion*. It needs to be frankly acknowledged that we do not know how accurate the documents are. Steele estimates that his dossier is 70 to 90 percent accurate.²⁹ Harding and Steele met in person a few times but only professionally, and Harding writes about him with objectivity. Born in 1964, Steele graduated from Cambridge University and joined British Intelligence (SIS) in 1987. Three years later he was posted to the British Embassy in Moscow under a diplomatic cover. He obviously did well in Moscow and later in London because in 2006 he was promoted to a senior post at the SIS's Russia desk. Alex Younger, the current SIS chief, was Steele's teammate and friend. Harding quotes Steele's former colleagues, including Sir Andrew Wood, the former British Ambassador in Moscow, who described him as an honorable man and a cautious analyst with excellent sources in Russia.

When Steele retired from the SIS, he co-established Orbis Business Intelligence Ltd. The company did well. Harding notes that Steele was hired in 2009 by the English Football Association to report on corruption in FIFA, the international governing body of football. England was one of the candidates competing to host the 2018 or 2022 World Cup, and there was reason to worry that the countries competing against England intended to win by corrupting the decision. "His brief", writes Harding, "was to investigate the eight other bidding nations, with a particular focus on Russia." Even the cynics were astonished by Steele's final report. It found "global" corruption and prompted the Swiss police to carry out several pre-dawn raids of FIFA officials' residences. The U.S. Attorney General, Loretta Lynch said in December 2015 that the scale of corruption

uncovered by Steele was “unconscionable.”³⁰ Steele showed that FIFA officials had received bribes up to \$ 150 million and many officials were forced to resign. Nevertheless the next two world cups would be in Russia and Qatar.³¹

Steele’s work was of such high quality that it attracted the attention of the FBI’s section dealing with Russian organized crime. “Between 2014 and 2016”, writes Harding, “Steele authored more than a hundred reports on Russia and Ukraine. These were written for a private client but shared widely within the State Department and sent up to Secretary of State John Kerry and to Assistant Secretary of State Victoria Nuland [...] Many of Steele’s secret sources were the same sources who would supply information on Trump.”³² This is an important point to consider as we evaluate the veracity of the Steele memoranda. When Steele’s first report on Trump’s relationship with the Kremlin arrived in Washington on 20 June 2016, the author was not unknown to the Intelligence Community. He was a well-regarded colleague. Steele considered the possibility that Moscow was in a position to blackmail one of the candidates for the U.S. presidency so alarming that he met with FBI agents in Rome, gave them a full briefing and shared his findings and the dossier. As intelligence professionals, they did not need to be reminded that gathering information in Russia was a difficult – and dangerous – undertaking, and that the quality of the final analytical product depended to a great extent on the quality of sources. The FBI agents were horrified by what they learned from Steele about the links between Russia and Trump. Nevertheless, they told Steele openly that it was unlikely that his information would be acted upon because the matter was too politically explosive. This may explain why Steele did not seem to object, speculates Harding, when Fusion GPS started circulating its analyses around Washington. It has been further alleged after Harding’s book was published that, frustrated with the apparent failure of his dossier to trigger a call to action in Washington, Steele himself may have leaked his findings regarding what he saw as collusion between the Kremlin and the Trump organization to Yahoo news. It is further alleged that the FBI had severed its contacts with him for that reason.³³

STEELE’S SUMMARY

Harding quotes Steele’s executive summary of his dossier: 1. Russia “has been cultivating, supporting and assisting TRUMP for at least 5 years.” Its objective is to “encourage splits and divisions in the western alliance.” 2. Trump and his team “have accepted a regular flow of intelligence from the Kremlin on his [...] political rivals.” 3. Former Russian intelligence officers told Steele that the “FSB has compromised TRUMP” during his trip to Russia in 2013. It can blackmail him because “his conduct in Moscow has included perverted sexual acts which have been arranged/monitored by the FSB.” 4. The Russians have a file of materials on Hillary Clinton, mostly derived from bugged telephone conversations “rather than any embarrassing conduct.” It has not been distributed so far to anyone.³⁴ According to Harding, Steele saw Putin’s strategic objectives as including the breakup of the Transatlantic Alliance and the European Union, and the weakening of NATO, especially regarding its commitments in Eastern Europe and the Baltic countries. Russia hoped that the next president would abolish the sanctions imposed after the occupation of Crimea and the military intervention in Eastern Ukraine.³⁵

Events proved that the Steele assessment was correct. According to Harding, in July 2016 the Russians summoned Carter Page, one of Trump’s foreign policy advisors, to Moscow. They showed him a carrot but also a whip. Page was told that Moscow had considered inviting the Americans to take part in the planned privatization of Rosneft, one of the world’s largest publically traded petroleum companies. That was the carrot. But then Page got to see the whip.³⁶ He was reminded that “the Russian leadership had damaging material” on Trump and he should remember this “in his dealings with Moscow.”³⁷ The message could not have been more explicit.

The FBI was familiar with Carter Page, a former Moscow-based investment banker who later moved to New York. They noticed him first when they saw him dealing with Victor Podobny, Igor Sporyshev, both SVR operatives under a diplomatic cover, and Evgeny Buryakov, an SVR spy posing as a New York banker. The FBI believed that the Russians tried to recruit Page in 2013. He was never formally charged with espionage but his Russian contacts Podobny and Sporyshev were banned from the United States; Buryakov went to prison on the carefully negotiated

charge of having acted as an unregistered foreign agent. Page denied any wrongdoing and defended his Russian contacts as innocent diplomats. He complained that the Obama Administration “had persecuted Podobny, Sporyshev, and him ‘in accordance with Cold War tradition’.”³⁸ The FBI did not think so, and the United States Foreign Surveillance Court (FISA) agreed with the Bureau. It granted the FBI legal permission for surveillance of Page under the Obama Administration, and the permit was subsequently renewed even under the Trump presidency.³⁹ It is remarkable that FISA “saw reason to believe that [...] Carter Page was acting as a Russian agent” even when Trump was in the White House and Jeff Sessions was the Attorney General.⁴⁰ FISA renewed the FBI application for surveillance of Page no less than three times. On each occasion the law enforcement had to demonstrate to the secret tribunal that the previous wiretap had produced relevant and useful intelligence.

The FBI could see that the Trump campaign had ignored Crimea and Eastern Ukraine and focused instead on the unfairness of America’s share of responsibility for the NATO budget. Such themes happened to correspond with the points made by Steele’s sources, namely, that the Kremlin wanted Trump to be silent about Ukraine and to weaken U.S. commitments toward its NATO allies in the Baltics and Eastern Europe.⁴¹

Events surrounding the formulation of the Republican Party platform in Cleveland, Ohio, on 18 July 2016 are consistent with Steele’s memoranda. The original draft of the platform had been formulated a week in advance. It stated that the Ukrainians resisting the Russian forces deserved “our admiration and support” and called on the United States to provide “lethal defensive weapons”. But Trump campaign officials changed the final version to say merely that Ukraine deserved “appropriate assistance”. At that point Trump had been already saying that NATO was obsolete and too expensive. He also suggested he might legally recognize Crimea as Russian territory de jure. Newt Gingrich, Trump’s advisor stated publicly that Estonia was a suburb of St. Petersburg and he, Gingrich, would certainly hesitate to go to war in order to defend it.⁴²

As predicted by Trump’s advisor Papadopoulos in July 2016, emails stolen from the DNC began circulating on the Internet. Google, FaceBook, and Twitter have subsequently determined that Russia

used their platforms to manipulate the public during the presidential race. Twitter told the U.S. Senate Committee on the Judiciary in January 2018, after *Collusion* had been published, that it had identified 50,258 automated accounts with ties to Russia that “sent more than 2 million election-related tweets between September 1 and November 5, 2016.” In addition, Twitter located 3,814 accounts created by the Internet Research Agency, a Russian government agency in St. Petersburg directly accountable to the Kremlin. It employs c. 1,000 specialists who poison the discourse on social media with carefully crafted lies and well-designed dezinformatsia as directed by the country leadership. Finally, Twitter acknowledged that some 12 percent of its accounts were opened with the use of a Virtual Private Network, which would make the task of identifying the true location and identity of a user extremely hard.⁴³

CIA’S INTELLIGENCE BOMBSHELL

By early August 2016, writes Harding, the Obama Administration had received proof from the Intelligence Community regarding Russia’s previous hacks against the White House, the NSA, and the Joint Chiefs of Staff. In addition, there was now clear evidence involving Russia’s responsibility behind the DNC hacks. CIA Director John Brennan therefore contacted his Russian opposite number and asked him to stop. According to Harding: “Bortnikov conceded nothing but said he would pass the message to Putin.”⁴⁴ Later in August a courier from the CIA hand-delivered an envelope with a report to the White House that was designated “eyes only”. It was to be read by Obama and three of his senior aides only, and then immediately returned to the Agency. The report was, writes *Washington Post*, “an intelligence bombshell, a report drawn from sourcing deep inside the Russian government.” It provided details regarding “Putin’s direct involvement in a cyber campaign to disrupt and discredit the U.S. presidential race.” The CIA source or sources “captured Putin’s specific instructions on the operation’s audacious objectives – defeat or at least damage the Democratic nominee, Hillary Clinton, and help elect her opponent, Donald Trump.” The material was based on sources so sensitive it was kept out of the president’s Daily Brief. What Putin had ordered, wrote *The Washington Post*, amounted to “the crime of the century, an unprecedented and largely successful destabilizing attack on American democracy.”⁴⁵

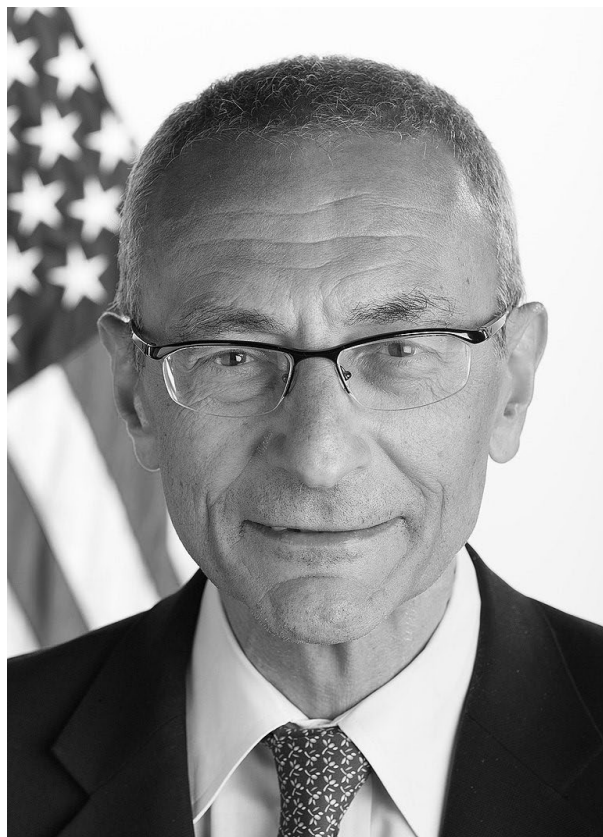
HUMINT from inside the Kremlin sistema could not be ignored. Since the Russians had refused to concede anything at the level of intelligence chiefs, the White House decided to take the matter up directly with the Kremlin boss. Obama's meeting with Putin in China during the G-20 summit in September 2016 was described as "blunt". Obama "urged Mr. Putin not to let cyberspace become the 'wild, wild west' and issued a stark warning that America had 'more capacity than anybody, both offensively and defensively'."⁴⁶ But when Obama brought up Russia's involvement in the U.S. presidential contest, Putin demanded proof, then he rejected Obama's claim and charged the United States with manipulating Russian politics.⁴⁷ It was clear that seeking to resolve the situation by quietly pleading with the Russian leadership was not going to be productive.

DISUNITED CONGRESS, UNINFORMED ELECTORATE

The problem was that no one had found any other way. It was obvious that for Democratic Party officials, or for Obama, or for the Intelligence Community, to charge the Kremlin with seeking to bring about Donald Trump's presidency could lead to a serious domestic upheaval. What was needed was bi-partisan unity in Congress in the face of a national security threat. But when the Intelligence Community presented its finding to congressional leaders, each party reacted differently. The Democrats wanted to "tell the public". The Republicans argued that to do so "would further Russia's aim of sapping confidence in the system." It would have brought about exactly what the Russians had tried to achieve, i.e. a decline of faith in the integrity of the democratic political system in the United States. Moreover, some of the leading Republicans, including Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell, said they were skeptical about the evidence.⁴⁸

In late September 2016, 17 U.S. intelligence agencies unanimously agreed with the assessment that "the interference was a Russian operation directed by Putin" and said so to the president. On 7 October 2016, with Obama's cautious approval, a short statement was released announcing that the "U.S. intelligence community is confident that the Russian government directed the recent compromises of emails from U.S. persons and institutions." It concluded that "based on the scope and sensitivity

of these efforts, only Russia's most senior officials could have authorized these activities." The statement was issued at 3:30 p.m. But only 30 minutes later the world's attention was diverted by the so-called "Access Hollywood" tape with Trump's crude comments about women. And another 30 minutes later, WikiLeaks made available emails from John Podesta, Clinton's campaign chairman. Of course, the timing may have been a coincidence. In any case, the Intelligence Community's statement about the Russian interference in the coming election was drowned in the salacious details from the tape and gossip about Podesta's private emails.⁴⁹



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Fig. 9: John Podesta, Hillary Clinton's campaign chairman in 2016.

Consequently, the intelligence from Christopher Steele and information from all other sources regarding the Russian meddling in the election of 2016 was known to the White House, leaders in Congress and the Intelligence Community; the Steele dossier was known to all the major media. But as the Americans cast their ballots on 8 November 2016, they knew little or nothing at all. They had no idea why Trump had been so sharply critical of so many but had only flattery for Putin. The public had not heard about the Russian money in Trump's coffers. They did not know why he was so dismissive of NATO and tentative regarding its commitments. Or why the Russian occupation of Crimea and military

intervention in Eastern Ukraine were not discussed in his campaign.

It was only in December 2016 that the Obama Administration decided to retaliate by expelling 35 known Russian intelligence operatives. Even supporters of the president were forced to admit that this was a belated half-measure. His political opponents and enemies had harsher words. President-Elect Trump tweeted his approval of Putin's last-minute decision not to retaliate: "Great move on delay (by V. Putin) – I always knew he was very smart!"⁵⁰ Naturally, Putin saw no need for an aggressive response because he believed that the Trump administration would repeal the sanctions, the Magnitsky Law, and usher in a new era in U.S.-Russian relations.

GIVING PUTIN A PASS

Since Trump's inauguration, DNI James Clapper and CIA John Brennan have addressed the topic of Russia's meddling in the 2016 election explicitly. Clapper summed up the situation in particularly dark colors: "The threat posed by Russia is manifest and obvious. To try to paint it in any other way is, I think, astounding, and in fact, poses a peril to this country." Both Clapper and Brennan agreed that President Trump was "giving Putin a pass" when he denied or obfuscated Russia's "efforts to disrupt the presidential election."⁵¹ Clapper even charged that Putin handled Trump "like a Russian asset."⁵² These were unprecedented words from a recent chief of the U.S. Intelligence Community directed at a serving president of the United States. Why is it that Clapper and Brennan decided to speak with such Biblical clarity? Harding was among the first to reveal that the Intelligence Community had – in addition to assistance provided by the allied services and the Steele dossier – also human source or sources inside the FSB. He writes that on 5 December 2016, Colonel Sergei Mikhailov, second operational director of the Information Security Center (TsIB) of the FSB and a "senior spy working on the electronic front line", was arrested during a high level meeting. This dramatic event – the arresting team approached its prey stealthily from behind and placed a black bag over his head – was not isolated.⁵³ Arrested were also Major Dmitri Dokuchaev, Mikhailov's deputy, possibly two other FSB cyber officers, and others, including Ruslav Stoyanov, Head of Investigations at Kaspersky Lab. Mikhailov's overall chief at the

TsIB was allowed quietly to resign in January 2017.⁵⁴ It could be that Mikhailov and his comrades were among the sources the CIA included in its report that was hand-delivered to the Obama White House in August 2016.

Donald Trump used to say that he believed Putin's denials of Russian interference in the U.S. election of 2016. He also suggested that – if there in fact was any interference – the hacker may have been from China or New Jersey. The president viewed the claim that Moscow sought to disrupt and discredit the American political system and tip the scales in his favor as a hoax. Whoever advanced it, Trump asserted, was engaged in spreading fake news and conducting a political witch-hunt. This will not do any longer.

Having secured two guilty pleas, one from the former national security advisor Michael Flynn and another from the former foreign policy advisor Carter Page, the special counsel Robert S. Mueller III presented on 16 February 2018 a detailed case against 13 Russians and three Russian organizations that was delivered to Trump by the FBI director and his deputy. The 37-page document charges that Russia conducted a sophisticated "active measures" operation against the United States: "From in or around 2014 to the present [...] Defendants, together with others known and unknown to the Grand Jury, knowingly and intentionally conspired to defraud the United States by impairing, obstructing, and defeating the lawful functions of the Federal Election Commission, the U.S. Department of Justice, and the U.S. Department of State." The operation's purpose was to deepen political divisions in American society, and from the beginning of 2016 to help Trump in his contest with Clinton for the office of President of the United States.

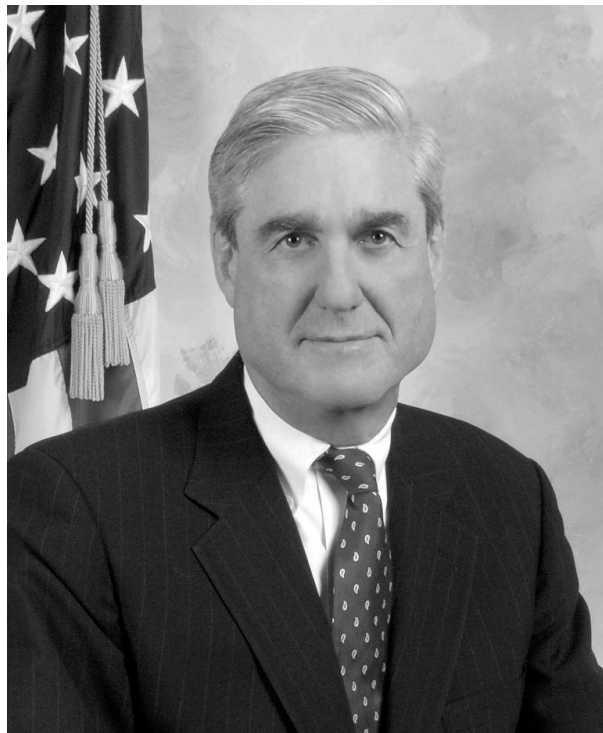
The indictment names Russians who in advance of the election traveled to the U.S. on tourist visas obtained under false pretenses. They visited the crucial "purple" states, where – posing as U.S. citizens – they opened bank accounts, used stolen social security numbers with corresponding dates of birth, and purchased equipment "such as cameras, SIM cards, and drop phones". The subsequent campaign launched by Russia on YouTube, Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and other social media platforms presented Hillary Clinton as a believer in Sharia Law who belonged in prison, and Donald Trump as a savior of America threatened by Muslims, terrorists,

hordes from the South and exploited by the rest of the world. The disruptive campaign continued even after Trump's victory. The indictment notes that on 12 November 2016 the Russians staged two political rallies in New York City. One was for and another was against the president-elect.

Putin's foreign minister Sergey Lavrov, speaking at the Munich Security Conference, rejected the Mueller indictment of Russia's interference in the U.S. election of 2016 out of hand: "Until we see facts, everything else is just blabber."⁵⁵ He sounded quixotic because the document is brimming with facts. Ignoring them is not going to make them disappear. Speaking from the same podium only moments after Lavrov, Trump's then national security advisor H. R. McMaster stated that regarding Russia's meddling "the evidence is now incontrovertible and available in the public domain."⁵⁶ Moscow will not win this fight in the realm of facts. But will Washington fight to win?

There is progress: on 13 July 2018, Special Counsel Mueller presented another indictment. This one is 29-pages long and charges 12 officers of the G.R.U. (Russian military intelligence, now renamed G.U.) with meddling in the 2016 U.S. presidential elections by hacking into the servers of the Democratic Party. It goes so far as to list the digital designations of their cyber warfare units (26165 and 74455) and to list their full address (20 Komsomolskiy Prospect, Moscow).⁵⁷

On the same day, Dan Coats, Director of National Intelligence, recalled that prior to the terrorist attacks



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Fig. 10: Robert S. Mueller III, head of the Special Counsel investigation of Russian interference in the 2016 United States elections.

on America in 2001 the "system was blinking red". "I am here to say", stated Coats before an audience at The Hudson Institute, "that the warning lights are blinking red again. It is why I believe we are at a critical point."⁵⁸ America has the tools and the know-how to defeat and deter all attempts to compromise the digital infrastructure of the West. But to deploy those assets requires a political decision. Will Trump rise to the challenge? The ball is in his court.⁵⁹

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