

THE PAULIE PLOT IN UKRAINE

Last weekend, the UK formally released an intelligence assessment that part of Russia's plans in Ukraine involve a plot to replace Volodymyr Zelenskyy with a pro-Kremlin functionary.

The NYT version of the story noted that the four people named in the alleged plot all have ties to Paul Manafort.

All four of the other Ukrainians named in the communiqué once held senior positions in the Ukrainian government and worked in proximity to Paul Manafort, former President Donald J. Trump's campaign manager, when he worked as a political adviser to Ukraine's former Russian-backed president, Viktor F. Yanukovich. After Mr. Yanukovich's government fell in 2014, they fled to Russia.

It also claimed that, because of a division of labor within the Five Eyes, this intelligence came from the UK.

In Washington, officials said they believe the British intelligence is correct. Two officials said it had been collected by British intelligence services. Within the informal intelligence alliance known as "Five Eyes," Britain has primary responsibility for intercepting Russian communications, which is why it played a major role in exposing Russian interference in the 2016 elections.

I noted that you might make such a claim if the collection point (reflected in the Manafort tie) were not a legal NSA target to the US.

Indeed, NBC's Ken Dilanian explained (but did

not include in his story) that this was US intelligence announced by the UK.

It would make sense that this kind of intelligence came from the US – though if it did, it might well come from the FBI, not NSA.

When Manafort traded campaign strategy to Russia for relief from his debt to Oleg Deripaska on August 2, 2016, his cooperation in a series of similar efforts to install a Russian functionary to head Ukraine was part of the deal. Citing numerous documents obtained from Manafort's devices, Mueller made public Manafort's participation in the effort through the time he went to jail in 2018.

We can be certain that FBI has continued its investigation of such issues. We can be sure of that because we know (in part from Treasury's increasing focus on Kilimnik) that FBI has developed a better understanding of Konstantin Kilimnik's role in both 2016 and his ongoing efforts to undermine US democracy in 2020. We know that because DOJ continues to protect large swaths of Mueller's files on Kilimnik's *other* American partner, Sam Patten, which significantly focused on who was who in Ukraine and the various tools Russia used to manage the country via client politicians. The same is true of Rick Gates' interviews. But we also know that, thanks in part to Trump's continued ties to anti-democratic efforts in Ukraine, the FBI has continued to investigate what has been going on in Ukraine. Not only has EDNY conducted an investigation into Andrii Derkach, but Special Master Barbara Jones just handed over a bunch of Rudy Giuliani's communications involving such issues to the FBI.

One thing we learned from all those investigations was that Paul Manafort was the guy Oleg Deripaska had employed, for years, to use the tools of modern campaigning, leavened by a great deal of corruption, to install puppet governments who would cater to Deripaska's business interests. In 2016, Russia deployed Manafort to the United States to do the same

thing in the US.

With the distance of almost six years, it may be safe to say that Russia succeeded in their 2016 attempt to interfere in the US election not so much from a failure of US intelligence collection in Russia (after all, the FBI warned the DNC it was being hacked in real time). It was – in addition to a misunderstanding of the WikiLeaks operation – a failure of US intelligence collection *in Ukraine*, whence the human side of the operation was significantly launched. The US has dedicated a good deal of energy to addressing that failure in recent years, though Russia continued to use Ukraine as a platform from which to undermine US democracy through the 2020 election.

Ukraine was then, as now, the test ground for Russia's larger efforts to either subject "democracy" to the whims of kleptocracy or discredit democracy beyond the ability to govern. Among the things Russia tested on that ground was the 2017 NotPetya attack, which did devastating damage to a slew of companies who did nothing more than do business with Ukraine; I would be surprised if Putin hadn't at least entertained similar efforts in the months ahead.

Before 2016, the US had the hubris to believe its own democracy was immune from such efforts (and that its tolerance for money laundering would not, in fact, foster kleptocracies on the other side of the world that could damage the US in turn).

Amid debates about how (or whether) the US should respond to Russia's aggression, some have raised real questions whether, in the wake of January 6, the US has any place lecturing Ukraine about its democracy and whether the US wouldn't be better, instead, putting its own house in order. It's a fair question. But it misunderstands how 2016 led directly to January 6. It also misunderstands Russia's project in Ukraine and beyond, which is of a piece with its earlier attack on American democracy.

We may not have a NATO commitment to defend Ukraine from Russia's assault (though we do have a NATO commitment to defend NATO allies that Russia has likewise threatened). But we've recently seen that attacks on Ukraine are just the prototype for larger attacks elsewhere.

Update: Both Jonathan Swan and Jonathan Weisman have pieces out today attempting to explain why Tucker Carlson and Marjorie Greene Taylor are rooting for Putin in his aggression against Ukraine that don't mention that Putin helped get Trump elected.

The backstory: Two observable shifts have happened in the GOP electorate over the past 15 years. The first is a growing skepticism about foreign intervention in general – frustration and anger still fueled by the disastrous wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.

- *The second is a more recent warming towards Russia – initiated by the party's most powerful figure, Donald Trump.*
- *Trump's rhetoric about Putin was a far cry from 2012 when the GOP presidential nominee Mitt Romney warned that Russia was America's "number one geopolitical foe." (Prominent Democrats mocked Romney at the time but in the age of Trump endorsed his view and apologized).*