

U.S. Senator Sheldon Whitehouse

Opening Remarks as *Prepared for Delivery*

Russian Interference in the 2016 United States Election, May 8 Hearing

Thank you Chairman Graham, for the important work this subcommittee is doing investigating the threat of Russian interference in our elections.

In January, America's intelligence community disclosed that the Russian government, on the orders of Vladimir Putin, engaged in an election influence campaign throughout 2016.

In March, FBI Director Comey confirmed that “the FBI, as part of [its] counterintelligence mission, is investigating the Russian government’s efforts to interfere in the 2016 election, and that includes investigating the nature of any links between individuals associated with the Trump campaign and the Russian government, and whether there was any coordination between the campaign and Russia’s efforts.”

The FBI and the intelligence community’s work is, appropriately, taking place outside the public eye. Our inquiry serves broader aims: to give a thorough public accounting of the known facts, to pose the questions that still need answers, and to help us determine how best to protect the integrity and proper functioning of our government.

At this subcommittee’s first hearing, on March 15, we heard from expert witnesses about the Russian toolbox for interfering in the politics of other countries. Now we can ask, which of these tools were used against us by the Russians in 2016?

Here's a checklist.

Propaganda, fake news, trolls and bots: As Clint Watts told the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence in March, Russian state-sponsored media outlets RT and Sputnik in the lead-up to the election “churned out manipulated truths, false news stories and conspiracies,” providing a weaponized fake news effort openly supporting Donald Trump’s candidacy, “while consistently offering negative coverage of Secretary Clinton.” This was, to again quote Watts, “a deliberate, well organized, well resourced, well funded, wide ranging effort” by Russia, using trolls and bots to amplify its messages, particularly across social media. These facts are not disputed by any serious person, so this is a yes on the checklist.

Hacking and theft of political information: Throughout 2015 and 2016, Russian intelligence services and state-sponsored hackers conducted cyber operations against U.S. political targets including state and local election boards, penetrating networks, probing for vulnerabilities, and stealing private information and emails. Attribution of these crimes to Russian actors was confirmed in our last hearing, and by many other sources. (I emphasize here the word "crimes.") This is another yes.

Timed leaks of damaging material: Russian intelligence fronts, cut-outs, and sympathetic organizations like Guccifer 2.0, DCLeaks.com, and Wikileaks then time the release of stolen victim data to maximize its political effect, manipulate public opinion, and thereby influence the outcome of the 2016 presidential election. Longtime Trump associate Roger Stone admits to having interacted with Guccifer 2.0, and he foreshadowed releases of stolen data on Twitter in August and October 2016. Timing can matter: on October 7, just hours after the damaging “Access Hollywood” tapes of Donald Trump’s offensive comments were made public, Wikileaks began publishing emails stolen from Clinton campaign manager John Podesta. So yes again.

Assassination and political violence: Last October, Russian military intelligence reportedly conspired to assassinate the then-prime minister of Montenegro as part of a coup attempt. In 2004, former Ukrainian prime minister Viktor Yushchenko was disfigured when he was poisoned in a suspected assassination attempt by Russian agents. Russian opposition figures are routinely the targets of state-directed political violence: Vladimir Kara-Murza has survived two recent poisonings, while Boris Nemtsov was brazenly murdered near the Kremlin in 2015. Thankfully, we have no evidence yet of that happening here.

Investment control in key economic sectors: We learned from Heather Conley’s testimony in our last hearing that the Kremlin playbook seeks to manipulate other countries through economic penetration, heavily investing in critical sectors of the target country’s economy to create political leverage. Putin’s petro-politics uses Russia’s control of natural gas to create political pressure. But no as to that tactic here, so far.

Shady business and financial ties: Russia exploits the dark shadows of economic and political systems. FBI Director Comey testified last week that the United States is becoming the last big haven for shell corporations, where the opacity of the corporate form allows the concealment of criminal funds, and can allow foreign money to directly and indirectly influence our political system. Since the Citizens United decision, we’ve seen unprecedented dark money flow in our elections from 501(c)(4) organizations. We don’t know who’s behind that dark money, or what they’re demanding in return.

Using shell corporations and other devices, Russia establishes illicit financial relationships to develop leverage against prominent figures, through the carrot of continued bribery or the stick of threatened disclosure. How about here?

President Trump himself has long pursued business deals in Russia. He is reported to have done or sought to do business there since the mid-1990s. As he chased deals in Russia throughout the 2000s, Trump reportedly deputized a colorful character named Felix Sater to develop real-estate projects there under the Trump name. Sater’s family

has links to Russian organized crime, and Felix himself has had difficulties with the law. Sater said in a 2008 deposition that he would pitch business ideas directly to Trump and his team “on a constant basis.” As recently as 2010, Sater had a Trump Organization business card and an office in Trump Tower.

Donald Trump Jr. said in September 2008 that he’d made half a dozen trips to the country in the preceding 18 months, noting that Russian investors were heavily involved in Trump’s New York real estate projects. “We see a lot of money pouring in from Russia,” he said. One Trump property in mid-town Manhattan had become, within a few years of opening, “a prominent depository of Russian money,” according to a report in Bloomberg Businessweek.

So here there are still big questions. Of course, President Trump could clarify questions about Russian financial entanglements by releasing his business and personal tax returns.

Corrupting and compromising politicians: In testimony before the Judiciary Committee last Wednesday, Director Comey acknowledged that financial leverage has been exploited by Russian intelligence “over many decades.” Back to the days of Joe Alsop, they use *kompromat*, or compromising material, to pressure and manipulate targeted individuals with the prospect of damaging disclosures. Has Russia compromised, corrupted, cultivated, or exerted improper influence on individuals associated with President Trump, his administration, his transition team, his campaign, or his businesses?

Another big question mark.

We know that President Trump has had in his orbit a number of very Russia-friendly figures. In August 2015, Trump first met informally with Michael Flynn, who as director of the Defense Intelligence Agency had developed strong professional relationships with Russian military intelligence officials. In December of that year, Flynn traveled to Moscow for a paid speaking appearance at an anniversary gala for RT, where he was briefly seated next to Vladimir Putin -- quite a seat for a retired American three-star general. Two months after that trip, Flynn was reportedly serving as an informal national security advisor to Trump.

Trump identified a little-known energy investor named Carter Page as one of his foreign policy advisors. In late March 2016, Page told Bloomberg Politics that friends and associates had been hurt by U.S. sanctions against Russia, and that “there’s a lot of excitement in terms of the possibilities for creating a better situation.”

On April 27, 2016, Trump and several of his advisors, including Jeff Sessions, met Sergei Kislyak, Russia’s ambassador to the United States before a campaign speech.

The speech, which was hosted by the Center for the National Interest, had been arranged by Trump son-in-law Jared Kushner. Kislyak attended the Trump Republican convention, and he told the *Washington Post* that he had multiple contacts with the Trump campaign both before and after the election. (In the days after the November election, Russia's deputy foreign minister confirmed that his government had communicated with the Trump team during the campaign.)

And we know Michael Flynn spoke with Ambassador Kislyak on December 29, the same day President Obama announced punitive sanctions against Russia for its interference in the 2016 election. Trump transition and administration officials thereafter made false statements to the media and the public about the content of Flynn's conversations with Kislyak, apparently as a result of Flynn having misled them. This eventually led President Trump to ask for Flynn's resignation, something I'm hoping Ms. Yates can shed some light on in her testimony today.

The President and his administration have yet to take responsibility for or explain these and other troubling Russia links, dismissing facts as "fake news," and downplaying the significance of individuals involved. More than 100 days into the Trump administration and nearly two years since President Trump declared his candidacy for President, only one person has been held accountable for improper contacts with Russia: Michael Flynn. Even then, the Trump administration has maintained that Flynn's communications with the ambassador were not, in fact, improper – he simply lost the confidence of the President. We need a more thorough accounting of the facts. At best, the Trump administration has displayed serious errors of judgment. At worst this saga may reflect efforts at compromise or corruption by Russian intelligence. My sincere hope is that this hearing and those to come will help us to find out.