

The Untold Story of 'Russiagate' and the Road to War in Ukraine

Russia's meddling in Trump-era politics was more directly connected to the current war than previously understood.



By Jim Rutenberg

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On the night of July 28, 2016, as Hillary Clinton was accepting the Democratic presidential nomination in Philadelphia, Donald J. Trump's campaign chairman, Paul Manafort, received an urgent email from Moscow. The sender was a friend and business associate named Konstantin Kilimnik. A Russian citizen born in Soviet Ukraine, Kilimnik ran the Kyiv office of Manafort's international consulting firm, known for bringing cutting-edge American campaign techniques to clients seeking to have their way with fragile democracies around the world.

Kilimnik didn't say much, only that he needed to talk, in person, as soon as possible. Exactly what he wanted to talk about was apparently too sensitive even for the tradecraft the men so fastidiously deployed — encrypted apps, the drafts folder of a shared email account and, when necessary, dedicated “bat phones.” But he had made coded reference — “caviar” — to an important former client, the deposed Ukrainian president Viktor Yanukovich, who had fled to Russia in 2014 after presiding over the massacre of scores of pro-democracy protesters. Manafort responded within minutes, and the plan was set for five days later.

Kilimnik cleared customs at Kennedy Airport at 7:43 p.m., only 77 minutes before the scheduled rendezvous at the Grand Havana Room, a Trump-world hangout atop 666 Fifth Avenue, the Manhattan office tower owned by the family of Trump's son-in-law, Jared Kushner. Shortly after the appointed hour, Kilimnik walked onto a perfectly put-up stage set for a caricature drama of furtive figures hatching covert schemes with questionable intent — a dark-lit cigar bar with mahogany-paneled walls and floor-to-ceiling windows columned in thick velvet drapes, its leather club chairs typically filled by large men with open collars sipping Scotch and drawing on parejos and figurados. Men, that is, like Paul Manafort, with his dyed-black pompadour and penchant for pinstripes. There, with the skyline shimmering through the cigar-smoke haze, Kilimnik shared a secret plan whose significance would only become clear six years later, as Vladimir V. Putin's invading Russian Army pushed into Ukraine.

Known loosely as the Mariupol plan, after the strategically vital port city, it called for the creation of an autonomous republic in Ukraine's east, giving Putin effective control of the country's industrial heartland, where Kremlin-armed, -funded and -directed “separatists” were waging a two-year-old shadow war that had left nearly 10,000 dead. The new republic's leader would be none other than Yanukovich. The trade-off: “peace” for a broken and subservient Ukraine.

The scheme cut against decades of American policy promoting a free and united Ukraine, and a President Clinton would no doubt maintain, or perhaps even harden, that stance. But Trump was already suggesting that he would upend the diplomatic status quo; if elected, Kilimnik believed, Trump could help make the Mariupol plan a reality. First, though, he would have to win, an unlikely proposition at best. Which brought the men to the second prong of their agenda that evening — internal campaign polling data tracing a path through battleground states to victory. Manafort's sharing of that information — the “eyes only” code guiding Trump's strategy — would have been unremarkable if not for one important piece of Kilimnik's biography: He was not simply a colleague; he was, U.S. officials would later assert, a Russian agent.

Their business concluded, the men left by separate routes to avoid detection, though they continued to text deep into the night, according to federal investigators. In the weeks that followed, operatives in Moscow and St. Petersburg would intensify their hacking and disinformation campaign to damage Clinton and help turn the election toward Trump, which

would form the core of the scandal known as Russiagate. The Mariupol plan would become a footnote, all but forgotten. But what the plan offered on paper is essentially what Putin — on the dangerous defensive after a raft of strategic miscalculations and mounting battlefield losses — is now trying to seize through sham referendums and illegal annexation. And Mariupol is shorthand for the horrors of his war, an occupied city in ruins after months of siege, its hulking steelworks spectral and silenced, countless citizens buried in mass graves.

Putin's assault on Ukraine and his attack on American democracy have until now been treated largely as two distinct story lines. Across the intervening years, Russia's election meddling has been viewed essentially as a closed chapter in America's political history — a perilous moment in which a foreign leader sought to set the United States against itself by exploiting and exacerbating its political divides.

Yet those two narratives came together that summer night at the Grand Havana Room. And the lesson of that meeting is that Putin's American adventure might be best understood as advance payment for a geopolitical grail closer to home: a vassal Ukrainian state. Thrumming beneath the whole election saga was another story — about Ukraine's efforts to establish a modern democracy and, as a result, its position as a hot zone of the new Cold War between Russia and the West, autocracy and democracy. To a remarkable degree, the long struggle for Ukraine was a bass note to the upheavals and scandals of the Trump years, from the earliest days of the 2016 campaign and then the presidential transition, through Trump's first impeachment and into the final days of the 2020 election. Even now, some influential voices in American politics, mostly but not entirely on the right, are suggesting that Ukraine make concessions of sovereignty similar to those contained in Kilimnik's plan, which the nation's leaders categorically reject.

This second draft of history emerges from a review of the hundreds of pages of documents produced by investigators for the special counsel, Robert S. Mueller III, and for the Republican-led Senate Select Committee on Intelligence; from impeachment-hearing transcripts and the recent crop of Russiagate memoirs; and from interviews with nearly 50 people in the United States and Ukraine, including four hourlong conversations with Manafort himself.

For Trump — who today is facing legal challenges involving the cache of classified documents at his Mar-a-Lago resort, his finances and his role in efforts to overturn his 2020 election defeat — the Russia investigation was the original sin, the first of many politically motivated “witch hunts,” since repurposed into weapons in his expansive arsenal of grievance. The Russia investigation and its offshoots never did prove coordination between the Trump campaign and Moscow, though they did document numerous connections. But to view the record left behind through the blood-filtered lens of Putin's war, now in its ninth month, is to discover a trail of underappreciated signals telegraphing the depth of his Ukrainian obsession — and the life-or-death stakes that America's domestic travails would have for some 45 million people nearly 5,000 miles away.

Among the episodes that emerge is the Grand Havana Room meeting, along with the persistent, surreptitious effort to bring the Mariupol plan to life. The plan was hardly the only effort to trade peace in Ukraine for concessions to Putin; many obstacles stood in its way. And its provenance remains unclear: Was it part of a Putin long game or an attempt by his ally, Yanukovich, to claw back power? Either way, the prosecutors who uncovered the plan would come to view it as potential payoff for the Russian president's election meddling.

The examination also brings into sharper relief the tricks of Putin's trade as he pressed his revanchist mission to cement his power by restoring the Russian empire and weakening democracy globally. He pursued that goal through the cunning co-optation of oligarchs and power brokers in the countries in his sights, while applying ever-evolving disinformation techniques to play to the fears and hatreds of their people.

No figure in the Trump era moved more adroitly through that world than Manafort, a political operative known for treating democracy as a tool as much as an idea. Though he insists that he was trying to stanch Russian influence in Ukraine, not enable it, he had achieved great riches by putting his political acumen to work for the country's Kremlin-aligned oligarchs, helping install a government that would prove pliant in the face of Putin's demands. Then he helped elect an American president whose open admiration of the Russian strongman muddied more than a half-century of policy promoting democracy.

In the end, Putin would not get out of a Trump presidency what he thought he had paid for, and democracy would bend but not yet break in both the United States and Ukraine. But that, as much as anything, would set the Russian leader on his march to war.



Photo illustration by Anthony Gerace

Long before the Trump-era investigations, Manafort had established himself in Washington and abroad as a grand master of the political dark arts. Together with Roger Stone, Manafort helped develop the slashing style of conservative politics, pushing “hot buttons” to rile up base voters and tar opponents. They served in Ronald Reagan’s presidential campaigns and started their own firm, taking on international clients seeking favor in Reagan’s Washington. The firm specialized in covering over the bloody records of dictators like Mobutu Sese Seko of Zaire and Ferdinand Marcos of the Philippines with copious coats of high-gloss spin, presenting them as freedom-loving democrats.

By 2005, Manafort had emerged as a central figure in Ukraine’s often-snakebit experiment in democracy. He was introduced to the country’s politics by one of Russia’s most powerful oligarchs, the aluminum magnate Oleg Deripaska. Oligarchs don’t survive in Putin’s Russia without continually proving themselves useful to the motherland. And when Putin had an urgent problem in Ukraine, Deripaska, who had various holdings there, stepped in to help: He brought in Manafort’s firm, which he had hired earlier to assist in overcoming a block on his U.S. visa, based on allegations that he had gained his position through ties to organized crime (which he denies).

What had Putin in a lather was a pro-Western and youth-led democracy movement that had caught fire just as Ukraine’s second post-Soviet leader, the dictatorial and Kremlin-aligned Leonid Kuchma, prepared to step down. To succeed him, the reformists had lined up behind a politician named Viktor Yushchenko. Pro-American and married to a former State Department official, Yushchenko vowed to join NATO and the European Union. To the Kremlin, as one influential Russian defense analyst put it at the time, a Yushchenko victory would represent “a catastrophic loss of Russian influence throughout the former Soviet Union, leading ultimately to Russia’s geopolitical isolation.”

Putin had gone all in for Kuchma’s handpicked successor, Yanukovich, who had risen to power in Ukraine’s eastern Donetsk region and had the backing of the country’s leading oligarchs. But working with some of Putin’s top political operatives, the Yanukovich campaign had gone horribly awry. First, an assassination attempt had left Yushchenko permanently scarred but very much alive. (A culprit was never identified; Yushchenko suspected the Kremlin.) Then the Yanukovich team resorted to an election heist worthy of Trump’s 2020 voter-fraud fantasia, with reports of ballot stuffing, disappearing ink and bused-in voters. With thousands protesting in Kyiv’s central Maidan square, Ukraine’s high court declared Yanukovich’s “victory” marred by “systemic and massive” election violations. Yushchenko then won in a new vote, a triumph of democracy known as the Orange Revolution.

Now Deripaska asked Manafort if he could restore Yanukovich’s political organization, the Party of Regions, to power. Manafort’s prescription is contained in a June 2005 memo to Deripaska that was quoted in the Senate Intelligence Committee’s report. Yanukovich and his party, he argued, should work to win elections legitimately by dressing up as democrats in a Western mold — using the tools of the West “in ways that the West believes is in concert with them,” even if they weren’t. By embracing the West, Yanukovich and his party would “restrict their options to ferment an atmosphere that gives hope to potential advocates of a different way.” In talking points that played to Putin, Manafort added, “We are now of the belief that this model can greatly benefit the Putin Government if employed at the correct levels with the appropriate commitment to success.”

Manafort insisted throughout our interviews that Putin would come to dislike him and his strategy, and that the memo was intended as a tutorial of sorts for Deripaska. “I was basically teaching him democracy,” he said. Deripaska’s office did not respond to an interview request. But in a failed libel suit against The Associated Press over a 2017 article that revealed their discussions about Ukraine, Deripaska said he hired Manafort solely for his own business interests and “never had any arrangement, whether contractual or otherwise, with Mr. Manafort to advance the interests of the Russian government.”

Regardless, with financing from Deripaska’s oligarch allies in Ukraine, Manafort began to put the plan into action. He brought in international elections consultants and American strategists from both sides of the partisan aisle. For local knowledge, Manafort brought in Kilimnik, who even then was trailed by suspicions that he was a Russian mole. Five feet tall with a disarmingly boyish mien, Kilimnik had last worked at the International Republican Institute, a democracy-promotion outfit affiliated with Senator John McCain of Arizona, who was a client of Manafort’s longtime partner, Rick Davis. Kilimnik had studied at a Soviet military language academy known for minting future intelligence officers and had served as a Russian Army translator. His colleagues at I.R.I. came to suspect he was passing secrets to Russian intelligence, and he was fired when the institute learned he was working for Yanukovich’s backers.

Under Manafort's tutelage, Yanukovych took on a new look, swapping out his blocky, gray apparatchik apparel for custom suits, Manafort-style, and taming his Soviet-vintage bouffant with a tighter-cropped cut. Then, from a new office just off Maidan square, Manafort worked up a Party of Regions platform promising to make Ukraine a "bridge" between Russia and the West — by striking an economic partnership with the European Union (popular in the west) but rejecting NATO membership (popular with Russian speakers in Ukraine's east). Skeptical American diplomats titled the Manafort project "Extreme Makeover."

For all the talk of extending a bridge to the West, Manafort soon began plying his battle-tested and poll-driven politics of division — exploiting fissures over culture, democracy and the very notion of nationhood to excite the Party of Regions base, the Russian-speaking voters in the east and south. Speech drafts and talking points, unearthed in Manafort's criminal cases, portrayed the Orange Revolution as a "coup" and the "orange illusion." They attacked the Yushchenko government's harder line toward Moscow and homed in on a simmering issue in Ukrainian politics — a regional split over whether to make Russian the second official language.

"In U.S. politics," says Tetiana Shevchuk, a lawyer with the Anti-Corruption Action Center, a reform group based in Kyiv, "it's called 'culture wars,' when they pick some issue which is not the high priority for society right now but can easily be made into something. He was pushing something like the idea that there are two types of Ukrainians — there are Ukrainian-speaking Ukrainians and Russian-speaking Ukrainians."

Over the course of our interviews, Manafort maintained that the reformers had forced the issue by pushing the pre-eminence of Ukrainian in a country where many primarily spoke Russian. If anything, he argued, his strategy gave Yanukovych the credibility with "ethnic Russian" voters needed to unite the country while turning it westward. (He says he is "strongly" on Ukraine's side in the war.) Still, Manafort's line of attack coincided with a budding Russian intelligence operation that was engaging in "manipulation of issues like the status of the Russian language" to stoke a separatist rebellion in the Crimean Peninsula and "prevent Ukraine's movement west into institutions like NATO and the E.U.," according to a leaked U.S. Embassy cable from the time. Nearly two decades later, Putin would employ similar messaging over language and national identity as justifications for his war and illegal annexations in the east.

The Manafort strategy was a smashing success. The Party of Regions won the parliamentary elections in 2006, and four years later Yanukovych reclaimed the presidency in elections that passed international muster. The Orange revolutionaries, or at least their elected leadership, had done much of the work themselves — alienating voters through paralyzing infighting and a failure to deliver reform. But Manafort won the credit, becoming as well known in Ukrainian political circles as Karl Rove or James Carville in America. He was living the oligarch's life, collecting jackets of python and ostrich skin, Alan Couture suits and properties in SoHo, the Hamptons, Trump Tower and brownstone Brooklyn. He was also growing closer to Yanukovych, playing grass-court tennis — always letting the client win — and soaking in the hot tub at the new president's 350-acre Mezhyhirya Residence, with its petting zoo, golf course and grotesquerie of a mansion, whose shambolic mix of architectural influences was known locally as "Donetsk Rococo."

It did not take long for Yanukovych to begin backsliding on his democracy pledges. He jailed his opponent, the former Orange leader Yulia Tymoshenko; ratcheted back press freedoms by criminalizing defamation and bringing trumped-up investigations of opposition media outlets; presided over the plundering of public funds; rigged the 2012 parliamentary elections; and reversed a plan to end Russia's lease on the Crimean port of Sevastopol, where its naval fleet was viewed as a stalking horse for a Putin takeover.

Soon several of Manafort's democracy consultants dropped out in disappointment. For his part, Manafort expanded his role with Yanukovych, becoming something of a shadow foreign-policy adviser and emissary to the West. He was also, prosecutors later charged, working as an unregistered foreign agent, running secret lobbying campaigns in Washington and Brussels to stave off sanctions over the Tymoshenko jailing while insisting that Yanukovych was still pursuing his economic deal with Europe.

But that tenuous bridge to the West could not hold. Under pressure from Putin, Yanukovych abruptly reversed course in late 2013, breaking off talks with Europe and deepening his economic commitment to Russia. By the tens of thousands, protesters again streamed into Maidan square. Weeks of standoff, punctuated by violence, came to a deadly denouement over three days in February 2014, when a government crackdown left dozens dead, mere yards from Manafort's office.

In the backlash, with his political coalition in pieces, Yanukovich fled to Russia. Within weeks, claiming Yanukovich had been ousted not in a homegrown swell of democracy but in a Western-backed coup, Putin moved on Crimea and the east. To this day, Manafort, too, maintains that Maidan was essentially a coup against a duly elected president. It was also a personal financial disaster — he had lost his cash cow. Still, he managed to find work, helping former Party of Regions members start a new party called Opposition Bloc and consulting on mayoral races.

The last one came in late 2015, in Mariupol. The port city, in Ukraine's southeast, was part of a potential land bridge for arms between occupied Crimea and the war-torn Donbas and would be a commercial hub for a Potemkin republic beholden to Moscow. It was also a fief of Ukraine's richest citizen, the metals and mining magnate Rinat Akhmetov, for whom both Russia and Europe were important markets. An early political godfather to Yanukovich, Akhmetov was also an original financier of Manafort's work for the Party of Regions.

With a concentration of industrial holdings in the Donbas, Akhmetov kept a tight hold over the region's politics, governance and media. Even as Putin's proxies advanced on Mariupol and held a sham independence referendum in 2014, Akhmetov struck a neutral-seeming posture that gave the "separatists" an opening to claim they had his support. "Rinat," read graffiti in Kyiv's Independence Square, "are you with Ukraine or the Kremlin?" Akhmetov ultimately came out harshly against the "separatist" violence, dispatching workers to patrol the streets and help repel Russia's proxies. But even then, his mixed messages continued to feed suspicion that he was hedging his bets. After "separatists" shelled a civilian area in early 2015, killing 30 people — the attack, it later became clear, was directed by Russian military officials — his largest news outlet, Segodnya, stood out for articles that avoided ascribing blame. "The impression was, 'It's not man-made shelling but some kind of earthquake; it just happened,'" Eugenia Kuznetsova, a Ukrainian media analyst who studied the coverage of the attack, told me.

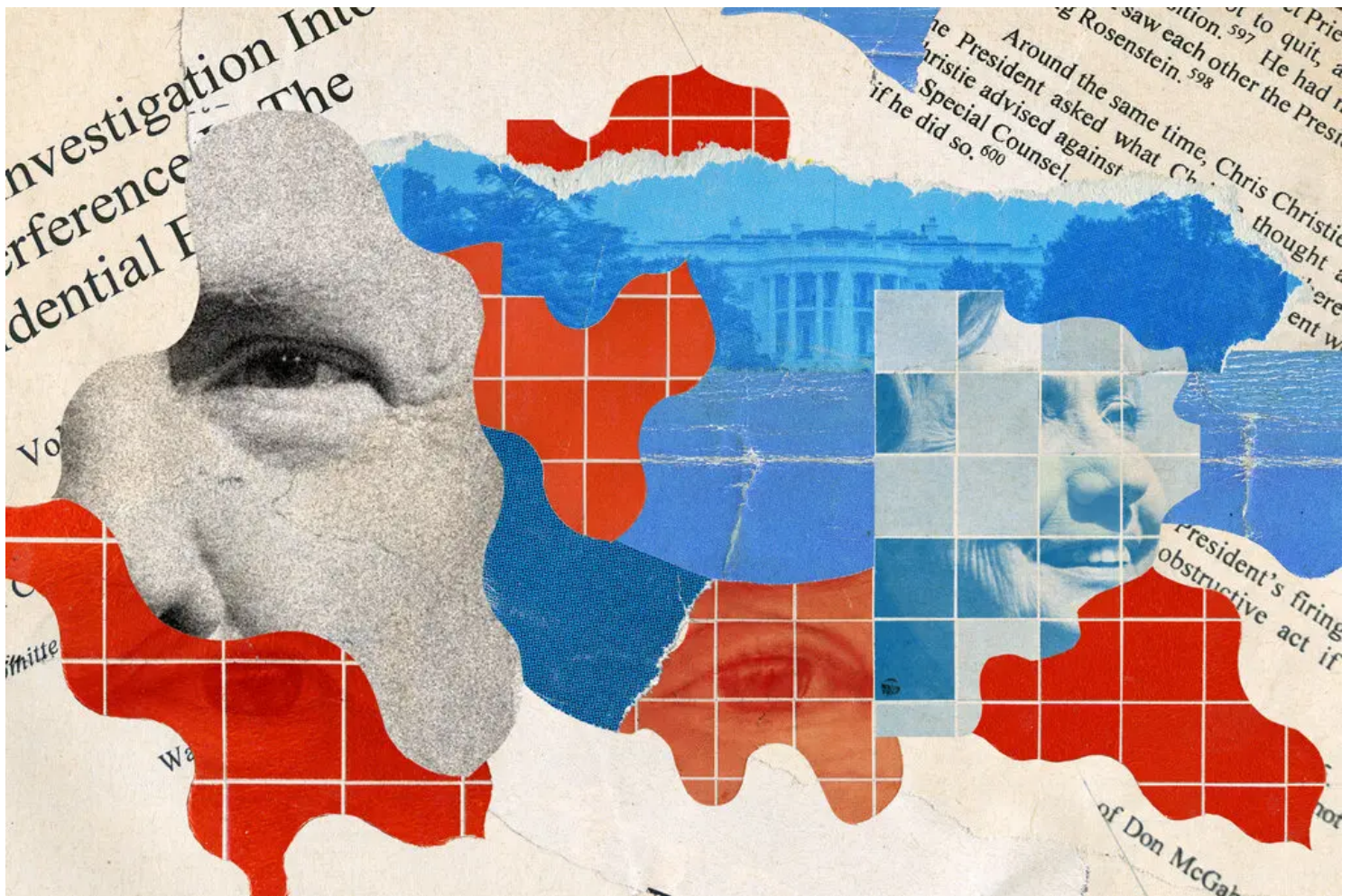


Photo illustration by Anthony Gerace

Jock Mendoza-Wilson, a spokesman for Akhmetov, said the oligarch had never been neutral and had always supported a united Ukraine. (Akhmetov is now suing Russia for destroying his largest steelworks in Mariupol, the site of Ukrainian soldiers' desperate 80-day holdout this year.) But to hold the country together, he said, Akhmetov believed at the time that "it would not be constructive to come out guns blazing" against Russia.

With the 2015 mayoral and City Council elections approaching, several insurgent candidates stepped forward, pledging to turn Mariupol more decisively against Russia and its proxies. Akhmetov's chosen mayoral candidate, a former executive with his steel company, Vadym Boychenko, was a clear advocate for the neutral status quo.

Manafort's hand in the campaign, revealed in an email unearthed by Senate investigators, was largely hidden; in interviews, he described his role as minor. One reformist candidate, Oleksandr Yaroshenko, was surprised to learn that Manafort had been involved, though, in retrospect, he did see hints of his presence. "The Americans came with little counts," he told me during a video interview in May that was occasionally interrupted by his efforts to coordinate evacuations from the besieged city. "They had technology: how many people we need to bring from each street, which percent." He saw it as so much window-dressing, given that Akhmetov's control of the city extended to the contract to print the ballots.

After Boychenko won, Yaroshenko organized a City Council campaign to force him to renew a proclamation declaring Russia an "aggressor country." The mayor shelved the measure.

Manafort's move to the Trump campaign, in March 2016, was a boon for the candidate, giving him one of the Republicans' savviest intramural strategists just as Senator Ted Cruz was beginning to cut into his delegate lead, spurring talk of a contested convention.

It was also a boon for Manafort, who was poor in cash if rich in luxury goods. He had wired a large portion of his Ukraine earnings — a total take of some \$60 million, investigators found — into his real estate, automobile and suit purchases from shell companies in Cyprus, part of what prosecutors said was a money-laundering scheme. A \$2.4 million bill to Akhmetov and another client remained unpaid. Financial threats loomed. He was being sued by Deripaska, who claimed that Manafort and his deputy, Rick Gates, had lost nearly \$20 million in a joint business venture gone bad.

Manafort went to great lengths to get the job with the Trump campaign, according to the Senate intelligence report. He lobbied Roger Stone and the fund-raiser Tom Barrack and clinched the deal, Barrack told prosecutors, by saying "the magic words" — he would work without pay. After all, Manafort reasoned, the job could be a way to get his back pay from Akhmetov and patch things up with Deripaska, who would no doubt see value in Manafort's association with a potential president. "How do we use to get whole," Manafort wrote to Kilimnik. Manafort told me he believed he would have greater influence with Trump as a supportive volunteer than as a member of his staff.

Manafort's new job also held promise for Putin. The inner circle of the leading Republican candidate for the American presidency now included an adviser who was the mastermind behind Ukraine's most successful Russia-friendly party and was close to a man, Kilimnik, whom American officials have identified as a Russian agent.

The day after the Trump campaign announced his appointment as chief convention strategist, Manafort worked with Gates and Kilimnik to send copies of the announcement to his main patrons in Ukraine, along with personal letters promising to keep them in the loop throughout the campaign. The recipients included Deripaska, Akhmetov and another wealthy Ukrainian, a former Yanukovich chief of staff named Sergiy Lyovochkin. A conduit for oligarchs' money to Manafort during the Party of Regions years, Lyovochkin also had a close working relationship with Kilimnik, according to Senate investigators.

As Manafort rose to become Trump's campaign chairman — and as Russian operatives were hacking Democratic Party servers — the candidate took stances on the region that were advantageous to Putin's ambitions for Ukraine. Ahead of the Republican National Convention in Cleveland in July, Trump shocked the American foreign-policy establishment by voicing only tepid support for NATO. He also told aides that he didn't believe it was worth risking "World War III" to defend Ukraine against Russia, according to the Senate intelligence report released in the summer of 2020.

That would be followed by the only platform fight of the convention. After a Texas delegate added a plank pledging “lethal defensive weapons” for Ukraine, a Trump national security adviser, J.D. Gordon, swept in to block it; it would be downgraded to a softer pledge of “appropriate assistance.” The Texas delegate would tell the Senate Intelligence Committee that Gordon had told her he was acting in consultation with “New York,” specifically with Trump. Gordon denied that, saying he acted on his own initiative because the “lethal aid” pledge appeared to contradict Trump’s position on Ukraine. Two other very invested players were on hand at the convention — the Ukrainian and Russian ambassadors to the United States; the Russian spoke with Gordon days after the plank was softened. In the end, investigators did not conclude that Russia was involved in the platform wrangling. Nor did they find any evidence to contradict Manafort’s insistence that he had been wholly removed from the process, though one campaign official later told investigators that Manafort had to “mollify” the “upset” Ukrainian ambassador.

The Ukrainians would have reason to be upset, and the Russians pleased, all over again a few days later, on July 27, when Trump, at a news conference, said he would consider recognizing Crimea as Russian territory, effectively ending Obama-administration sanctions and normalizing relations that had been strained since the illegal annexation. He also, famously, invited Russia to hack Hillary Clinton’s emails.

The following day, Kilimnik flew to Moscow, travel records obtained by Mueller’s office show. In his email to Manafort that night, he wrote that he had met with “the guy who gave you your biggest black caviar jar several years ago” — the guy being Yanukovich, who once gave Manafort \$30,000 worth of fine caviar. Kilimnik needed to meet in person. He had “a long caviar story to tell.”

At the Grand Havana Room, Kilimnik delivered Yanukovich’s urgent message: A “peace” plan for Ukraine was coming together that he hoped Manafort would help effect.

As described by Kilimnik in messages and memos over the next several months, the envisioned autonomous republic in the east would nominally remain part of Ukraine; with Yanukovich as its leader, it would then negotiate a settlement. But what became known as the Mariupol plan was, as Manafort later acknowledged to prosecutors, a “backdoor” route to Russian control of eastern Ukraine — remarkably similar to what Putin has now declared accomplished through his gun-barrel annexations.

The plan was based on Putin’s maximalist interpretation of accords, signed in the Belarusian capital, Minsk, in late 2014 and early 2015, that tied a cease-fire in the east to a new Ukrainian constitutional provision granting “special status” to the two main territories there. Russia interpreted that fuzzy term as giving the territories autonomy — under its proxies — with veto power over Ukraine’s foreign policy. Ukraine viewed it as a more limited expansion of local governance. Even then, a majority of Ukrainians saw the provision as capitulation, polls showed, and it struggled to gain acceptance in Parliament.

For the United States, which was not a party to the Minsk talks, any plan that gave the east outsize autonomy and influence ran counter to longstanding support for what William Taylor, a former American ambassador to Ukraine, described as “an independent, sovereign Ukraine within its internationally recognized borders.” “We’ve said that over and over and over,” he told me. Now, though, Trump’s rhetoric on Russia was suggesting a break from that policy.

In the Russia investigation, the meeting at the Grand Havana Room would become better known for the other piece of business conducted that night: the discussion of polling data that traced how Trump might achieve the position of power to make that momentous diplomatic break. Manafort and Gates had been passing that data to Kilimnik since the spring; produced by Manafort’s go-to pollster, Tony Fabrizio, it was among the campaign’s more closely held assets, according to the Senate intelligence report. Manafort and Gates have insisted that the data was only of the most basic sort, some of it publicly available. But it also showed exactly what the campaign was looking at as it formed its strategy and spread its message in new ways across social media. And as Manafort told Kilimnik at the club, according to testimony from Gates and another witness briefed on the meeting, the polling was picking up something that Clinton pollsters and mainstream prognosticators were not — a path to the White House through traditionally blue states like Michigan, Minnesota, Pennsylvania and Wisconsin. Of course, Manafort explained, that would require a relentless assault on Clinton’s public image.

By the end of summer, vicious anti-Clinton social-media operations were intensifying, not only by the Trump campaign and its American allies but also by Russian trolls posing as Americans, who spread a raft of conspiracy theories about Clinton's health and alleged criminality. The operations included the states that Manafort had identified as key, investigators found.

The polling data would become a major focus of the Mueller team and Senate investigators. Neither could directly link the Russian operations to the data; they reported only that Gates believed that Kilimnik was sharing it with Deripaska and his Ukrainian counterparts — an apparent fulfillment of Manafort's pledge to keep his patrons in the loop. But last year a Treasury Department communiqué concluded that Kilimnik had passed the data directly to Russian military intelligence, calling him a "known Russian agent."

The document provided no underlying evidence, and Manafort and Gates have used that to question the assessment and all that flows from it. As Gates told me, "If Kilimnik is a G.R.U. agent, show us the proof, and I'll be the first to say that's accurate." Kilimnik declined to speak with me, but in a text message, he dismissed his work on the Mariupol plan as "informal discussions" regarding "one of 10,000 various options of peace solution." (It was "not the right time to discuss these matters," he told me, given the "struggle of Ukrainians for their life and freedom.") Last year, Kilimnik told an interviewer with RealClearInvestigations that the assessment was "senseless and false," noting that he was a regular source of information for U.S. Embassy officials in Kyiv, which documents and former officials confirmed.

Of course, building trust inside a rival nation's embassy is what spies are supposed to do. One very plugged-in Westerner, a fixer who interacted with Kilimnik regularly in Kyiv, told me that while he harbored doubts about the intelligence assessment, he considered the question academic: As a Russian citizen with family in Russia and a history with the military, Kilimnik would have been under pressure to do Putin's bidding, and often seemed to. For that matter, emails obtained by Mueller showed Kilimnik referring to his interactions with high-level players in Moscow, including some with clear intelligence ties. Among them was a top Deripaska aide, Viktor Boyarkin, whom the U.S. Treasury Department has described as a former ranking official with the G.R.U., which took the lead in Putin's meddling operation.

Kilimnik's best connection to the Trump campaign would not be around as that operation came into full flower. Less than three weeks after the Grand Havana Room meeting, Manafort was out of a job. In mid-August, The New York Times had reported that a new Ukrainian anti-corruption agency had obtained a Party of Regions "black ledger," listing earmarked, off-the-books payments to Ukrainian officials — and to Manafort. A few days later, at a news conference in Kyiv, a former journalist turned reformist parliamentarian, Serhiy Leshchenko, highlighted 22 handwritten ledger entries listing \$12.7 million in payments designated for Manafort. With Clinton's campaign calling the ledger evidence of ties between the Trump campaign and Russia, Manafort resigned.

The discovery of the ledger seemed to have been lifted straight from the plot of a hit sitcom, "Servant of the People." A Ukrainian riff on "Mr. Smith Goes to Washington," it starred the comedic actor Volodymyr Zelensky as a humble and idealistic history teacher who is unexpectedly thrust into the presidency, constantly fighting off a Manafort-esque agent of the oligarchs trying to package and manage him. In the 2015 season finale, he finds a black ledger of secret payments kept by his predecessor and vows to cleanse the "off-the-book company called 'Ukraine'" of its endemic corruption.

Speaking with reporters, Leshchenko used similar rhetoric when discussing why he helped publicize the real-world ledger. He had another reason too. "The more exposure there is of Trump and Trump's circle," he told Tablet magazine several months later, "the more difficult it will be for Trump to conclude a separate deal with Putin, thereby selling out both Ukraine and the whole of Europe."

From the start of his presidential transition, Trump did appear to give Russia every indication that its political bet had paid off. He nominated as national security adviser a retired lieutenant general, Michael J. Flynn, who had accepted \$33,750 to speak at a 2015 Moscow celebration of Russia's state-financed propaganda outlet, RT. Even before taking office, Flynn was speaking with Putin's ambassador in Washington, in apparent violation of federal law, about lifting sanctions over election meddling. (Flynn twice pleaded guilty to charges of lying to the F.B.I. about those discussions but was pardoned by Trump.) The new secretary of state would be Rex W. Tillerson, who as Exxon Mobil's chief executive had criticized the Obama administration's decision to sanction Russia over Crimea and the shooting down of a Malaysia Airlines flight.

And in the days around the inauguration, promising signals came from across the Potomac in Virginia, where Manafort met with Kilimnik and Lyovochkin at the Westin Alexandria Old Town hotel. (The two men obtained inauguration tickets through a Manafort associate who would later plead guilty to failing to register as a foreign agent and illegally buying the tickets — a violation of rules against foreign political donations.) As most of their communications took place over encrypted messaging apps, investigators had little visibility into the agenda, but Manafort acknowledged one item to prosecutors: the Ukraine “peace” plan.

With no official position, Manafort continued to advise the Trump camp, according to the Senate report. At the same time, Kilimnik was shuttling between Moscow and Kyiv, working out the “peace” plan’s details. Communicating through a draft email in a shared account before the Virginia meeting, Kilimnik told Manafort that he and Yanukovich — code named BG for Big Guy — had met in Russia and discussed the plan. “Russians at the very top level are in principle not against this plan,” Kilimnik wrote, “and will work with the BG to start the process.” A public endorsement by Trump, he added, would overcome resistance in Kyiv. “All that is required to start the process is a very minor ‘wink’ (or slight push) from DT saying, ‘he wants peace in Ukraine and Donbass back in Ukraine’ and a decision to be a ‘special representative’ and manage this process,” Kilimnik wrote. Trump’s representative would apparently be Manafort, who, Yanukovich could guarantee, would have entree at “the very top level” in the Kremlin.

Manafort was hardly the only figure in the Trump orbit engaging with people who knew people in Moscow. The early months of the administration brought a head-spinning procession of disclosures. Flynn, the national security adviser, was fired over his back-channel conversations with the Russian ambassador. There was the revelation that a foreign-policy adviser to the campaign named George Papadopoulos, at a bar in London, had told an Australian diplomat that Russia had dirt on Clinton, weeks before Russia’s hacking of Clinton’s emails was publicly known. His loose talk sparked the first meddling investigation, which evolved into the Mueller inquiry. There was the news that Donald Trump Jr., Jared Kushner and Manafort met at Trump Tower in June 2016 with a well-connected Russian lawyer who, they were told, wanted to pass along incriminating information about Clinton as “part of Russia and its government’s support for Mr. Trump.” By all accounts, the lawyer, more interested in the lifting of sanctions, failed to deliver. And there was the Mueller team’s disclosure in court papers in the fall of 2017 that Kilimnik was “assessed to have ties to a Russian intelligence service.”

By then, though, Manafort had emerged as a primary target of the investigation, his interactions with Kilimnik, Deripaska and pro-Russian Ukrainians viewed as a potential link between the Kremlin and the Trump campaign. Yet even after his indictment in late October 2017, prosecutors reported, he and Kilimnik continued to seek the Trump administration’s “wink” for the Ukraine “peace” plan. To that end, as late as March 2018, he and Kilimnik were working on a survey of Ukrainians. A draft of the poll asked whether Donbas should stay under the governance of Kyiv in one of two alternative arrangements; break off as an autonomous region; or join Russia outright. Devised with input from the pollster Fabrizio, it also asked if Yanukovich could be accepted as a leader in the east.

But as Manafort and Kilimnik worked to refine the poll, prosecutors brought new criminal charges against Manafort. He was now facing two trials, one in Virginia and one in Washington. Then came news of a new star witness — Manafort’s deputy, Gates, who laid out in detail how Manafort used shell companies to hide millions of dollars in earnings from the tax collectors.

In August 2018, a Virginia jury found Manafort guilty of eight of 18 counts, including tax and bank fraud. With his second trial, for money laundering, looming in Washington, Manafort struck a deal to plead guilty and cooperate with the government, in hopes of receiving leniency at sentencing. (Manafort now says he did not believe his sworn admission of guilt, and entered it only because he did not think he would face a fair jury and wanted to protect family financial assets.) But at the last minute, the lead prosecutor, Andrew Weissmann, scuttled the deal. Manafort, he learned, had consistently lied “about one issue in particular: his interactions with Kilimnik, the Russian intelligence officer,” as the Senate report put it. Among those interactions: the maneuverings for the Mariupol plan.



Photo illustration by Anthony Gerace

Weissmann discovered the plan only after the Virginia trial, when the F.B.I. obtained a batch of Kilimnik's emails. Confronted with that new information, Manafort told the prosecutors that he had dismissed the plan out of hand when it first came up, at the Grand Havana Room in August 2016. He stuck to that insistence even after Weissmann disclosed he was in possession of the December 2016 correspondence discussing “the BG” and the desired “wink” of support from Trump — and again when presented with the emails about the poll in March 2018.

In our interviews and in his book, “Political Prisoner,” published this August, Manafort calls the idea that he supported the plan “crazy” and maintains that the poll was designed to help a Ukrainian presidential candidate he would not name. Though he does not deny that Kilimnik pushed the plan — at the behest of Yanukovich, not Putin, he says — he accuses Weissmann of crafting a “made-up narrative” from unconnected facts.

For Weissmann, the revelations made for an aha! moment. The partition plan, he realized, was the “quo” Putin wanted for the “quid” of helping Trump’s campaign. “On August 2, if not earlier,” he wrote in his 2020 memoir, “Russia had clearly revealed to Manafort — and, by extension, to the Trump campaign — what it wanted out of the United States: ‘a wink,’ a nod of approval from a President Donald Trump, as it took over Ukraine’s richest region.”

Putin has sought to justify his war in Ukraine with a barrage of propaganda — that Ukraine, with a Jewish president, is ruled by Nazis; that Russian atrocities, amply captured in photographs, videos and witness accounts, are Ukrainian false-flag attacks, staged to smear Russia; that Ukraine is preparing to detonate a “dirty bomb,” even as Moscow stokes global fears of a Russian nuclear attack. Putin’s propaganda forces, in fact, had been employing such fictions for years to sow division and confusion in Crimea and Donbas, as he road-tested a new doctrine of hybrid warfare, a mix of weapons and words.

That through-the-looking-glass messaging echoes in the fashioning and evolution of a counternarrative to the Russia investigation that took root in Trump's campaign and ultimately bled into his first impeachment: Ukraine, not Russia, had meddled in 2016.

According to the Mueller report, Kilimnik and Manafort began spinning the theory after news broke in June 2016 that a private cybersecurity firm called CrowdStrike had determined that Russian hackers had been responsible for breaching the Democratic National Committee's computer systems. Gates later told investigators that Manafort had told people inside the campaign that Ukraine was actually behind the hack. In doing so, Gates reported, Manafort had "parroted a narrative Kilimnik often supported," according to F.B.I. notes quoted in the Senate report. Manafort denies Gates's account.

After the disclosure of Manafort's name in the black ledger, Kilimnik mounted a reputational defense of his boss by surfacing a new iteration of the counternarrative — that Clinton's Ukrainian allies had fabricated the ledger to tar Manafort and undermine Trump. Like all effective disinformation, it had some thread-thin ties to reality — the view within the Ukrainian government that a Trump presidency would be potentially ruinous, and the admission that the ledger had not been fully authenticated and did not prove actual payments made to Manafort. An F.B.I. agent who viewed the ledger told me that its hundreds of pages of handwritten entries would have been prohibitively difficult to forge and were a worthwhile investigative tool if not court-ready evidence. (Manafort has denied receiving off-the-books payments and was never a subject of criminal inquiry by Ukrainian prosecutors, who were focused on investigating whether payments to Manafort and others had been improperly drawn from public funds.)

Kilimnik's initial foray was subtle, involving an August 2016 Financial Times article about prominent Ukrainians' picking sides in the American election, breaking with traditional neutrality to oppose the "pro-Putin Trump." Kilimnik had exchanged several emails with the reporter before publication, prosecutors learned, and the article included a quote from a "former Yanukovich loyalist" suggesting not only that the ledger had been leaked to harm Trump but also that journalists covering the leak had been "working in the interests of Hillary Clinton." Kilimnik sent the article to Gates with the hope that "DT sees it." Then, after three phone calls with Manafort, Roger Stone posted a link to the piece on Twitter. "The only interference in the US election is from Hillary's friends in Ukraine," he added as punctuation.

Several months later, Kilimnik helped make the case more plainly in an op-ed in U.S. News & World Report that he helped ghostwrite for his old associate, the Manafort patron Lyovochkin, now serving in Ukraine's Parliament as a member of the Party of Regions' successor, Opposition Bloc. Accusing anti-corruption officials of "manufacturing a case" against Manafort, the op-ed defended those proposing "painful concessions" in return for peace with Russia.

The counternarrative found a prominent amplifier at the Kremlin, which wasted no time using it to stoke Trump's ire against its foe. Noting how vital American sponsorship was to Ukraine's future, the Russian Foreign Ministry spokeswoman, Maria Zakharova, told reporters in Moscow during the transition, "It appears that keeping this sponsorship is a big challenge for the Kyiv authorities," who had been "uncivilized and rude towards President-elect Donald Trump" and had planted information about Manafort. Putin joined the chorus in February, asserting that the Ukrainian government had "adopted a unilateral position in favor of one candidate" — Clinton. "More than that," he added, without evidence, "certain oligarchs, certainly with the approval of the political leadership, funded this candidate, or female candidate, to be more precise."

Russia's online assets in Ukraine and America joined in. That July, CyberBerkut, a hacker group associated with Russian military intelligence — and active in Russia's earlier Ukraine propaganda efforts — elaborated on Putin's theory that Ukrainian oligarchs had secretly financed Clinton. The next day, a pro-Trump Twitter account based in St. Petersburg that was later identified as an asset in the 2016 meddling, @USA_Gunslinger, posted, "Where's the outrage over Clinton and her campaign team's collusion with Ukraine to interfere in the US election?"

In the months that followed, Trump's view of the Ukrainians seemed to grow only darker, as a more outlandish version of the theory flourished in the pro-Trump corners of the internet. Its proponents claimed that the cybersecurity company CrowdStrike was owned by a Ukrainian (it wasn't), and that the physical servers were hidden somewhere in the country (they weren't). In other words, much like the Russia investigation "hoax," it was all a Ukrainian campaign to frame

Trump and Russia. Trump nodded at the idea in his news conference with Putin in Helsinki in July 2018, when he said he accepted Putin's word that Russia had not been involved in the hacking. "Where are those servers?" he asked. "They're missing."

Trump's distrust was threatening to have deadly consequences for the Ukrainians. According to the memoir of his former national security adviser, John R. Bolton, when Russian sailors seized three Ukrainian naval vessels that November in a potentially escalatory move, Trump's first instinct was to suspect that Ukraine had provoked Russia.

That same month, prosecutors reported to a federal judge that Manafort had breached his plea deal by lying. The judge later sentenced him to a prison term of seven and a half years, to be served at the Federal Correctional Institution Loretto, in Pennsylvania, as Inmate No. 35207-016. What might have been Putin's best hope for a Trump-approved plan for a weakened and divided Ukraine seemed to have gone away with him. But in ways that played to the Russian leader's designs, Trump's festering grievance toward Ukraine would shape the next major scandal of his presidency.

Manafort might have been in prison, but, in search of a pardon, he still had something of value for the transactional president — his unparalleled knowledge of Ukrainian politics and government. He would effectively pass the baton to Trump's personal lawyer, the former New York mayor Rudolph W. Giuliani, who in the fall of 2018 was preparing an offensive to definitively cast the special-counsel investigation as a political hit job after its final report failed to prove "collusion."

Central to Giuliani's mission was an effort to build out the "Ukraine did it" counternarrative. Giuliani and Manafort did not speak directly but through Manafort's lawyers. When I asked Manafort exactly what he had passed along, he was vague, but he noted that Giuliani was "talking to some of the people in Ukraine who were my friends" and said his lawyers would have briefed Giuliani on the details of what he calls a plot to frame him. Giuliani declined to speak with me about their discussions, but he told *The Washington Post* in 2019 that his question for Manafort was, "Was there really a black book?" and the answer came back, "There wasn't a black book."

What happened from there is already exhaustively litigated Trump history, as Giuliani adventured across Europe spinning that original counternarrative into an ornate conspiracy theory that roped in the U.S. Embassy in Kyiv, its ambassador, Marie Yovanovitch, and Joe and Hunter Biden. In its simplest version, the impeachment case that followed was about presidential abuse of power — a scheme to condition essential military aid on a Ukrainian investigation into CrowdStrike, the "hidden servers" and the Bidens' purportedly corrupt dealings with the Ukrainian energy company Burisma. What was lost on the American audience, though, was the way Trump's pressure campaign and Giuliani's freelance diplomacy were buffeting a country that, whether it knew it or not, was careening toward war. Their machinations were playing directly into a soft-power contest over whether Ukraine would lay the true foundations of an independent Western-style democracy or remain in thrall to Moscow and its proxies.

That contest was hard to see through the fog of Ukrainian politics. Everyone I spoke with who had any experience in Kyiv — no matter their political persuasion — warned against seeing anything in black and white, good guys and bad. There was no telling how many seemingly contradictory agendas a major player in Ukraine might be juggling — the only reliable through-lines being the pursuit of money and power. It is in that spirit that the oligarchs most often characterized in the Western press as being "pro-Russian" reject the label. "I was never pro-Russian," the billionaire energy broker Dmitry Firtash told NBC News this year, "but you have to understand that I'm a businessman." In prewar Kyiv, pursuing money and power and serving Putin's interests could often mean the same thing.

"Americans were playing a basic game — 'Trump wants dirt on Biden,'" says Suriya Jayanti, chief of energy policy at the American Embassy in Kyiv at the time. "What was actually going on in Ukraine was this crazy web of shifting alliances and oligarch pockets and horse trading and back-stabbing, and in our American myopia we had limited understanding that if a tree falls in the forest and America is not there to hear it, it still falls."

If any place provided a relatively clear view of this seething panorama, it was the embassy, through the events that led to the firing of the ambassador, Yovanovitch. Something of a supporting character in Trump's first impeachment, Yovanovitch was central to the geopolitical competition playing out in Kyiv. In bottom-line terms, she represented American diplomatic resistance to everything Putin and his Ukrainian proxies wanted from Trump.

A strait-laced and driven career diplomat dispatched to Kyiv by Obama just months before Election Day, Yovanovitch was the daughter of émigrés whose families had fled the Soviets and the Nazis. She arrived in Ukraine at a precarious time. In the wake of the 2014 Maidan uprising, the popular will for democracy was proving irrepressible yet again. Billions of dollars flooded in from the West. But the efforts to nurture Ukraine's democracy were foundering as the new administration, like the post-Orange Revolution government, was failing to keep its promises of reform. The new president, Petro O. Poroshenko, left little doubt about the seriousness of his anti-Russian rhetoric as he pressed the Obama administration, unsuccessfully, for defensive weapons. But as an oligarch politician in the classic Ukrainian mold — he had made his fortune in the chocolate trade — he was also part of the system he was being asked to blow up.

Yovanovitch immediately set out to shore up the two pillars of the American democracy agenda: freeing Ukraine's economy from the grip of the oligarchs and its justice system from the corrupting imperatives of politics. That inexorably brought her into conflict with two powerful men.

One was the energy broker Firtash, the embodiment of the oligarchic system that had proved so beneficial to Putin. He had built extraordinary wealth through a partnership with Gazprom, Russia's leading energy concern: Gazprom sold deeply discounted gas to a middleman company that it owned with Firtash, which then resold it, at a considerable profit, to Ukraine and throughout Europe. Firtash, in turn, used some of those profits to support Russia-aligned politicians. He had been a major sponsor of the Party of Regions and, prosecutors believed, an important paymaster for Manafort. The men were also would-be business partners; a decade earlier, they discussed a deal to buy a hotel in Manhattan. (Firtash did not respond to questions sent to a representative.)

By the time Trump took office, Ukraine had cut Firtash's middleman out of the gas deal. Firtash himself was in Austria, fighting extradition to the United States on unrelated bribery charges that he denies. But he maintained lucrative ties to Ukraine's energy industry through ownership of regional distribution companies associated with the national gas concern, Naftogaz. Now, despite what she suspected was pressure from Firtash, Yovanovitch persuaded Poroshenko to hold to his vow to enact new rules that would disrupt "the Firtash business model," as the ambassador put it in her memoir.

Yovanovitch at first had hopes for Ukraine's chief law-enforcement official, the prosecutor general, Yuriy Lutsenko. But she almost immediately got crosswise with him as well. Lutsenko had been appointed in the spring of 2016, after Western allies pressed for the ouster of his predecessor, Viktor Shokin, for failing to prosecute corruption cases. One of the more egregious examples, cited frequently by the Americans, involved the energy company Burisma. It had escaped prosecution despite allegations, which it denied, that it embezzled public funds. As State Department officials called for an investigation into the handling of the case by the prosecutor general's office, Joe Biden, as vice president, delivered a forceful ultimatum: \$1 billion in loan guarantees would be contingent on the prosecutor general's firing. Biden was an imperfect messenger. The year before, Burisma had given a lucrative board seat to his son Hunter, who had a famous last name but no energy-industry experience. Even State Department officials worried, presciently, that his board position would pose the appearance of a conflict.

On paper, Lutsenko seemed the man to professionalize the justice system. Though he had no formal legal training, he had been a leader of the Orange Revolution, was then imprisoned by Yanukovych and emerged to join the 2014 Maidan protests. The black ledger would be one test of whether he would succeed where Shokin had failed, and he promised to support the investigations into its contents, which extended beyond Manafort to apparent bribes to judges and elections officials. Within months, though, reformers were complaining that Lutsenko's office appeared to be slow-walking the ledger-related investigations. One lead lawyer in the office publicly complained that the prosecutor general was prohibiting him from interviewing witnesses or issuing subpoenas in four cases relating to Manafort's work.

At the embassy, Yovanovitch was clashing with Lutsenko over his apparent lack of zeal for a range of corruption cases. She was furious, too, that he was working to undercut, if not disempower, a corps of independent anti-corruption prosecutors and investigators that the West had pushed Ukraine to create. As she lectured him about the need for a depoliticized justice system, they soon ceased regular communication. "We thought he would be different," she told me. "He wasn't."

When Trump won the presidency in 2016, the Ukrainians and the Russians believed that the American-led push for change in Kyiv would subside. But Trump, convinced that Ukraine was behind the Russia “hoax,” showed little interest in the country, leaving Yovanovitch free to stay the course.

That changed drastically as Giuliani entered the picture in late 2018. Firtash would provide a vital building block of Giuliani’s case against the Bidens — a sworn affidavit from Shokin in September 2019 asserting that Biden had forced his firing as part of a corrupt scheme to protect Burisma, with his son on the board, from scrutiny. Despite ample evidence that the case against Burisma lay dormant under his watch, Shokin maintained that he had, in fact, been pursuing a “wide-ranging” inquiry. Firtash had secured the affidavit as part of his own legal fight — in it, Shokin suggested that Firtash’s bribery case was politically motivated — and it apparently found its way to Giuliani through mutual associates. Firtash has said he never met Giuliani and did not authorize the affidavit’s use in his operation.

But that operation would not have been possible without Lutsenko, who carried it forward with an added twist implicating Yovanovitch in the supposed plot to help Clinton and hurt Trump.

Though Lutsenko had his own political ambitions, he owed his current position to Poroshenko, who wanted one thing above all else from Trump: more antitank missiles. People inside and outside Kyiv already suspected that was at play as the ledger investigations remained stalled and the United States delivered a first batch of missiles. As one Ukrainian official told The Times in 2018, the Poroshenko government had put the ledger inquiries in a “long-term box,” because “we shouldn’t spoil relations with the administration.” And in March 2019, after meeting with Giuliani at his Park Avenue office, Lutsenko appeared to give Trump at least some of what he wanted. He told the political publication The Hill that he was opening a new ledger investigation — into the allegations that anti-corruption activists and investigators had released it to help Clinton. He would then indicate that he had evidence of possible wrongdoing by the Bidens.

Yet for all that intrigue, there was one force that even the most cynical Kyiv hands never doubt — the sincerity of Ukrainian protesters’ calls for democracy, independent and uncorrupted. And on April 21, Poroshenko was voted out of office in favor of Zelensky, a political neophyte who fashioned himself in the reformist mold of the character he had played on television.

Suddenly Lutsenko was reversing course, announcing that he saw no evidence of wrongdoing by the Bidens. (He did not respond to attempts to reach him for comment.) The scheme was at a dead end. As Trump and Giuliani worked to get it back on track under the new administration in Kyiv, Trump finally forced out Yovanovitch, casting her as a central actor in the fantasy plot to defeat him in 2016. Now the president and his lawyer were trying to force a result that embodied everything the fallen ambassador had sought to vanquish in Ukraine: the rank politicization of the justice system, openly articulated in Trump’s “perfect phone call” asking Zelensky to trade a sham investigation for arms, which led to impeachment, only the third in American history.

In March 2021, U.S. intelligence services declassified a report detailing their consensus view that Kilimnik and others associated with Russian intelligence had used various Americans — among them, it strongly suggested, Giuliani — to promote the idea of the Bidens’ corruption in Ukraine to influence the 2020 campaign. The report assessed that Russian leaders viewed Biden’s potential election as “disadvantageous to Russian interests” — especially as it pertained to Ukraine.

Early in his presidency, Zelensky showed a willingness to compromise with Russia on autonomy in the east — the question at the center of the Mariupol plan. But after thousands of protesters streamed back into Maidan in late 2019, he refused Putin’s demands for concessions on Ukrainian sovereignty. Zelensky was already prioritizing efforts to join NATO and would sign legislation constraining the oligarchs.

Trump pardoned Manafort before leaving the White House. Had he remained in office, the former president said in a statement earlier this year, “the Ukraine desecration would not be happening.” But with Biden’s inauguration in January 2021, Putin was now facing a new American president who promised a tough line against his imperial designs on Ukraine — and with no obvious back channels through which to manipulate him or his policy.

Thirteen months later, Russian tanks crossed the Ukrainian frontier.

First illustration, source photographs: Ira L. Black/Corbis, via Getty Images (Trump); Eric Thayer for The New York Times (Manafort); Mikhail Svetlov/Getty Images (Putin).

Second illustration, source photographs: Mikhail Metzel/Getty Images (Putin); Brandon Bell/Getty Images (Trump); Damon Winter/The New York Times (Manafort); Tom Williams/CQ-Roll Call Inc., via Getty Images (Giuliani); Sergey Ponomarev for The New York Times (Yanukovych).

Third illustration, source photographs: Eva Hambach/AFP, via Getty Images (documents); Rick Friedman/Corbis, via Getty Images (Clinton); Yevgeny Biyatov/Sputnik/AFP, via Getty Images (Putin); Brandon Bell/Getty Images (Trump); David Everett Strickler/Unsplash (White House).

Fourth illustration, source photographs: Doug Mills/The New York Times (handshake); Evgeniy Maloletka/Associated Press (stretcher and explosion); Interim Archives/Getty Images (map); James Hill for The New York Times (protesters); Carlos Barria/Reuters (tanks); Carlo Allegri/Reuters (Manafort).