Dmitry Firtash: The Oligarch at the Center of the Ukraine Scandal

Dmitry Firtash, sometimes spelled Dmytro, is a Ukrainian natural gas billionaire who is linked to numerous individuals who have been caught up in the Ukraine impeachment scandal, including Rudy Giuliani associates Lev Parnas and Igor Fruman. He also recently hired two lawyers close to President Donald Trump in an apparent attempt to curry favor with him as Firtash fights extradition to the United States.

Overview:

- The Department of Justice (DOJ) described Firtash as an “upper-echelon [associate] of Russian organized crime.” The State Department has linked him to notorious Russian mob boss Semion Mogilevich (sometimes spelled Semyon Mogilevich).
- Firtash was indicted in the United States in 2013 on charges related to bribery. Since being arrested in Austria in 2014, he has been living in Vienna and fighting extradition to the United States.
- Firtash is reportedly linked to Trump lawyer Rudy Giuliani’s campaign to dig up dirt in Ukraine on Trump’s political opponent. As he continues to battle extradition to the United States, Firtash appears to be using his connections to curry favor with the Trump administration.
- Firtash has firmly denied all allegations of wrongdoing and has not been found guilty of any crimes.

Beginning in 2004, Firtash began rising to prominence as a Ukrainian natural gas mogul, building connections to both the Russian and Ukrainian governments and allegedly to the Russian mob. Firtash made billions of dollars essentially acting as an intermediary in the natural gas industry between the Russian and Ukrainian governments. Through a deal with the Kremlin, Firtash was able to buy discounted gas from Russia and sell it to Ukraine. This made him both incredibly wealthy and a powerful figure, until the Ukrainian prime minister at the time, Yulia Tymoshenko, prioritized renegotiating a deal with Russia, and Firtash was cut out.

2004–2009: Firtash reportedly used proceeds from a lucrative natural gas deal to support the pro-Russia corrupt Ukrainian politician Viktor Yanukovych.

- Through RosUkrEnergo (RUE), a partnership between the Russian state-owned Gazprom and Firtash’s holding company, Firtash bought discounted gas in Russia from Gazprom and resold it to the Ukrainian state-owned Naftogaz.
- This deal demonstrates that Firtash had close ties to the Russian government and that he leveraged that relationship for personal profit, though he has never made any such claim.
- Firtash also developed alleged connections to Russian organized crime around this time—which he has strongly denied—including alleged connections to Russian mob boss Mogilevich, which the company denied.
  - Mogilevich may have been linked to the natural gas industry before Firtash’s involvement. Prior to RUE’s formation, the natural gas middleman between Russia and Ukraine had been a company “alleged to have links” to Mogilevich.
2008–2011: Firtash was cut out of the natural gas deal and reportedly considered going into business with Paul Manafort.

- In early 2009, then-Ukrainian Prime Minister Yulia Tymoshenko struck her own natural gas deal with Russian President Vladimir Putin. The complex and controversial maneuver essentially cut out Firtash as the middleman, “depriving Firtash of significant profits.”
- Around this same time, Firtash allegedly began his business relationship with the man who would one day be in charge of Trump’s presidential campaign: Paul Manafort. Firtash and Manafort reportedly considered collaborating on an $850 million real estate deal involving the Drake Hotel in New York that ultimately fell through.
  - Firtash denies ever having any business ties with Manafort and denies ever putting any money into the Drake deal.
- Prime Minister Tymoshenko decided to run for president against Viktor Yanukovych in the 2010 election. Firtash had backed Yanukovych for years and sought to help him win against Tymoshenko. These efforts included backing Paul Manafort, who had already been working as an image consultant to Yanukovych, to run Yanukovych’s campaign.
- After Yanukovych won the election, Firtash became a close ally to the new president, and his business thrived. Firtash also continued to support Yanukovych, including by purchasing a TV station in an apparent effort to help Yanukovych politically.
- Less than one year after Yanukovych won, Tymoshenko was imprisoned over the renegotiated gas deal, in what multiple U.S. lawmakers observed to be a politically motivated case. There is no indication that Firtash had an involvement in the case against Tymoshenko.
- Tymoshenko sued Firtash and Manafort in the United States, claiming that their planned Drake Hotel real estate project was part of a money laundering operation and alleging that Firtash used the money to “[support] pro-Russian politicians in Ukraine.” Manafort and Firtash denied all wrongdoing, and the case was ultimately dismissed.

Starting in 2013, Firtash’s fortunes shifted as he ran into serious legal and political troubles. He was indicted in the United States and subsequently began fighting extradition to the United States with the help of wealthy, Kremlin-connected Russians. Around the same time, the Maidan revolution overthrew Ukrainian President Yanukovych, whom Firtash had backed for years, and the new government in Kyiv proved far less friendly toward Firtash.

2013–2014: Firtash was indicted in the United States and arrested in Austria.

- Firtash was indicted in Illinois on federal racketeering charges, unrelated to the 2011 Tymoshenko lawsuit. Prosecutors argued that Firtash bribed Indian government officials $18.5 million to help him mine titanium to sell to Boeing and that some of these bribes went through U.S. banks. Firtash has denied these charges in court and in the media.
• In 2014, the DOJ unsealed the indictment and Firtash was arrested in Vienna.
• He posted bail with the assistance of Russian billionaire Vasily Anisimov, who is business partners with close Putin ally Arkady Rotenberg.
  o Firtash has longtime ties to Rotenberg and his brother Boris, as they had reportedly attended the same judo club in the 1960s.

**December 2015:** Firtash tried to return to Ukraine, but the new post-Yanukovych government worked to keep him out.
• Firtash had planned to return to Ukraine from Vienna. Due to his close ties to ousted former President Yanukovych, however, the new post-Maidan Ukrainian government made it clear that Firtash was not welcome back and that he would be arrested upon return.
• That same month, then-Vice President Joe Biden gave a speech to the Ukrainian parliament, where he criticized oligarchs.
  o Firtash has brought this speech up in an interview with the Daily Beast, calling Biden’s speech “horrible.”
  o According to the Daily Beast, gas reforms advocated for by the U.S. government may have cost Firtash “hundreds of millions of dollars.”

**February 2017:** Firtash ran into legal trouble in Spain.
• In February 2017, Austria cleared Firtash for extradition to the United States, but he was immediately rearrested on a Spanish warrant alleging that Firtash was involved in a scheme to launder around 10 million euros “through property deals and restaurants” using funds “from companies incorporated in Cyprus and the British Virgin Islands.”
  o These money laundering charges have been linked to activity in Catalonia. A 2018 Senate Foreign Relations Committee minority report noted that “Russia-based criminal organizations have reportedly been active in Catalonia for years,” alluding to “long-running efforts by Russian organized crime groups to set up shop in Catalonia.”
  o Austria rejected Spain’s request for extradition. Firtash has denied all Spanish charges and any involvement in the activities detailed above.

As Trump sought dirt on Biden, Firtash sought to curry favor with the Trump administration. Firtash hired two pro-Trump lawyers and eventually crossed paths with Lev Parnas and possibly Igor Fruman. As Trump and his associates made it clear that Trump wanted dirt on Biden, Firtash got the former prosecutor general of Ukraine to submit a signed statement making false claims against Biden.

**March 2019:**
• Soviet-born businessmen Lev Parnas and Igor Fruman reportedly advocated on Firtash’s behalf as they lobbied Naftogaz to replace its CEO with another individual whom they hoped would be amenable to “their plan to sell American natural gas to Ukraine.”
  o During this effort, Parnas reportedly indicated to a Naftogaz official that then-U.S. Ambassador to Ukraine Marie Yovanovitch would be replaced—long before Trump took that action. Parnas and Fruman have not commented on these allegations.
When trying to push this plan to Naftogaz, Parnas and Fruman reportedly "invoked Firtash’s name," saying that "Naftogaz should put aside financial disputes with Firtash, a decision that could provide a windfall of more than $1 billion for the tycoon." Firtash has denied any involvement in these negotiations.

June 2019:
- Firtash and Parnas allegedly met for the first time in June 2019 through a mutual friend.
- According to The New York Times, during this meeting, Firtash was offered “help with his Justice Department problems” if he hired Joe diGenova and Victoria Toensing as his attorneys.
- Parnas’ lawyer reportedly claimed that Parnas met with Firtash "at Mr. Giuliani’s direction" and "encouraged” Firtash to aid in the search for compromising dirt on Biden.
  - Firtash "said he had no information about the Bidens and had not financed the search for it.” Giuliani also claimed he had not asked Parnas “to do anything with Firtash.”

July 2019:
- Austria approved the extradition of Firtash to the United States, but it was immediately put on hold when Firtash’s legal team filed a motion to reopen the case.
- Firtash hired the pro-Trump legal team of diGenova and Toensing as his attorneys.
  - DiGenova and Toensing are longtime Trump supporters who regularly appear in conservative media to defend him. Trump even wanted to hire the pair for himself in early 2018 but ultimately decided against the move because of various conflicts of interest.
  - The New York Times reported that before Firtash made the decision to hire diGenova and Toensing, there was “a brief discussion about Mr. Giuliani’s taking on that role himself.” Instead, Giuliani allegedly tasked Parnas with convincing Firtash to hire diGenova and Toensing.
  - Prior to hiring diGenova and Toensing, Firtash had been working with Lanny Davis, who represented Trump’s former attorney Michael Cohen. Cohen had fallen out of favor with Trump after he provided information to law enforcement and Congress regarding Trump’s misconduct.
  - As Firtash’s lawyers, diGenova and Toensing reportedly met with U.S. Attorney General William Barr to discuss the case against Firtash. According to The Washington Post, "Barr declined to intercede.”
- Initial reports indicated that diGenova and Toensing reportedly hired Parnas as a translator and alleged that Firtash paid the lawyers $1 million—a strange move and a high price tag. Later reporting from The New York Times indicated that diGenova and Toensing’s initial contract with Firtash was a four-month, $300,000-a-month contract, with Parnas receiving a share of $200,000.
  - DiGenova and Toensing also represent John Solomon, a former columnist at The Hill, who has published numerous pieces about the Ukraine scandal that support Trump and Giuliani’s conspiracy theories. Solomon even reportedly passed along an unpublished draft of an article on the Ukraine conspiracy theories to diGenova, Toensing, and Parnas before publishing—allegedly for “fact-checking” purposes. Solomon has referred to Firtash as “a major target of the Soros group” and has
claimed that “key evidence that the DOJ used to indict Firtash on corruption charges in 2014 was falling apart.”

- According to Parnas’ lawyer, Parnas allegedly told Firtash that diGenova and Toensing “were interested in collecting information on the Bidens” and that he did so “per Giuliani’s instructions.”
- Reportedly around this time, “some of Firtash’s associates began to use his broad network of Ukraine contacts to get damaging information on Biden.”
- Both Parnas and Fruman allegedly “worked in an unspecified capacity for Firtash” before Parnas began his translator work. What’s more, a source was quoted as saying that Firtash was “financing” Fruman and Parnas’ activities, but it is unclear how much money Firtash paid, what these activities were, and when they occurred.
  - Firtash has denied any relationship with Parnas and Fruman and any contact with Giuliani. Giuliani has denied any relationship with Firtash. DiGenova and Toensing also claimed that Parnas has not been paid by Firtash.

September 2019:
- Firtash’s lawyers reportedly asked former Ukrainian Prosecutor General Viktor Shokin to submit a signed witness statement blaming Joe Biden for the Ukrainian government’s 2015 decision not to allow Firtash back in the country.
  - In this statement, Shokin repeated his disproven claim that he had been fired in direct retribution for investigating Hunter Biden and the natural gas company Burisma. Hunter Biden joined the board of Burisma in 2014 and has not been under investigation nor accused of any wrongdoing.
  - Multiple Western allies, including the United States, had been calling for Ukraine to fire Shokin over concerns about corruption. Joe Biden, in his capacity as U.S. vice president, was one of the officials pushing Ukraine on this issue. Shokin was eventually removed from his post in March 2016.
- The witness statement proved to be directly for the political benefit of Trump. Giuliani received access to this statement and later cited it during a TV appearance, claiming it was proof of wrongdoing by Biden.

October 2019:
- Parnas and Fruman were indicted for charges that include conspiracy and campaign finance violations. They were arrested at Dulles International Airport near Washington, D.C., with one-way tickets to Vienna, where Firtash had been fighting extradition. Giuliani had also planned a trip to Vienna at the same time, although he claimed that trip had nothing to do with Firtash.
  - The charges relate to Parnas and Fruman allegedly contributing $325,000 to a pro-Trump super PAC “to obtain access to exclusive political events and gain influence with politicians.” Both men have pleaded not guilty to the charges. Giuliani has denied any connection to Firtash.
- Congressional investigators have also raised questions about whether Firtash is the source of the funds that Parnas and Fruman were accused of illegally donating. Firtash has denied these allegations.
  - A Ukrainian government source quoted in Politico noted that if Firtash had funded Parnas and Fruman’s donations, “money from the gas corruption scheme in Ukraine is in
the U.S. political system.” According to The Washington Post, Firtash’s company has denied having “any special relationship” with the previous Ukrainian government.

- Reportedly, when Parnas and Fruman were arrested, the federal prosecutors working on Firtash’s extradition case in Chicago “took note.”
  - The prosecutors were reportedly aware of both Parnas and Fruman, and “suspect[ed] there might be a broader relationship among Firtash, Parnas and Fruman.”

Present: According to The Washington Post, Firtash’s case has reportedly been reopened in Austria, and his extradition is once again “on hold.”