

THE MOSCOW PROJECT

Moscow Mitch and the Party of Putin

“I was stunned because [Sen. Ted Cruz is] a Russia hawk. He spent the entire week showcasing his hawkishness on Russia ... And I really naively thought, maybe he wants to remind people that with Russia [and blaming Ukraine] this is getting ridiculous. And it turned out not to be the case.”

— [Chuck Todd](#)

To protect President Donald Trump, Senate Republicans have been pushing the [debunked conspiracy theory](#) that Ukraine interfered in the 2016 election in order to help Trump’s opponent Hillary Clinton. This isn’t just a lie; it’s Russian disinformation, designed to deflect criticism and cast doubt over Russia’s 2016 interference campaign. Russian President Vladimir Putin, unable to suppress his glee that the Republican Party has adopted his line, even [told a crowd](#) in November: “Thank God. No one is accusing us of interfering in the U.S. elections anymore; now they’re accusing Ukraine.”

Spreading disinformation and shifting blame are standard operating procedures for the Kremlin. Unfortunately, Ukraine, which Putin has long sought to dominate, has been a frequent target. After Russian soldiers shot down the MH17 plane in Ukraine, killing nearly [200 Dutch citizens](#), Russia reportedly [bombaraded](#) the Netherlands with disinformation, including allegations that Ukraine was actually behind the crash. And after Russian operatives attempted to assassinate former Russian military officer Sergei Skripal in the United Kingdom, the Kremlin put out [at least 15 alternate explanations](#), many contradictory, again including allegations that Ukraine was the real culprit.

Under the leadership of President Trump and Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell (R-KY), the Republican Party has become an active participant in Russia’s disinformation operation.

Top Senate Republicans are going out of their way to spread the conspiracy theory that Ukraine, not Russia, interfered in the 2016 election.

- Sen. Ted Cruz (R-TX) [claimed](#) on “Meet the Press” that Ukraine “blatantly interfered in our election,” suggesting that there was a media conspiracy to downplay the evidence.
- Sen. John Kennedy (R-LA) has repeatedly [pushed this conspiracy theory](#), even after being directly confronted by evidence that the allegations were not only false but also part of a Russian disinformation campaign.
- Senate Intelligence Chairman Richard Burr (R-NC), whose own committee [investigated](#) allegations of Ukrainian interference and found no evidence, falsely [claimed](#): “Every

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elected official in the Ukraine was for Hillary Clinton. Is that very different than the Russians being for Donald Trump?”

- Senate President Pro Tempore Chuck Grassley (R-IA) [requested documents](#) from the Obama administration in hopes of substantiating a conspiracy theory that the administration and the Democratic National Committee coordinated with Ukraine to undermine Trump.
- Senate Judiciary Committee Chairman Lindsey Graham (R-SC) is [opening an investigation](#) into the president’s other dubious allegation—that former Vice President Joe Biden pressured Ukraine to fire its top prosecutor to protect his son—even after Trump’s own special envoy to Ukraine [dismissed it](#) as a “conspiracy theory.”
- Sen. Ron Johnson (R-WI)—no stranger to [spreading Russian propaganda](#)—[told ABC News](#) that there are “legitimate questions” about whether Ukraine interfered against Trump in 2016, while dismissing the Russia investigation as a “hoax.”
- The list goes on: Senators from [John Cornyn](#) (R-TX) to [John Barrasso](#) (R-WY) to [Roger Wicker](#) (R-MS) have all gone on the record claiming evidence of a nonexistent Ukrainian plot to undermine Trump and help Clinton.

The U.S. intelligence and national security communities have made clear that this is Russian disinformation, and the senators spreading this disinformation have repeatedly been told so.

Key witnesses in the House impeachment hearings testified that the allegations against both Ukraine and the Bidens were conspiracy theories.

- Trump’s former adviser Fiona Hill [began her public testimony](#) with a memorable warning: “Based on questions and statements I have heard, some of you on this committee appear to believe that Russia and its security services did not conduct a campaign against our country—and that perhaps, somehow, for some reason, Ukraine did. This is a fictional narrative that has been perpetrated and propagated by the Russian security services themselves ... I refuse to be part of an effort to legitimize an alternate narrative that the Ukrainian government is a U.S. adversary, and that Ukraine—not Russia—attacked us in 2016.”
- Ambassador Marie Yovanovitch, who was recalled from Ukraine amid a smear campaign orchestrated by Trump’s personal lawyer Rudy Giuliani and corrupt Ukrainian officials, [testified](#) that she did not believe that there was “a plan or a plot by the Ukrainian government to work against President Trump or anyone else.” She also [testified](#) about Putin’s motivations to “throw off the scent” of Russian interference in 2016 by pushing the “alternative narrative” that Ukraine was the real culprit.

Additional Trump administration officials have also clearly and vocally dismissed Ukrainian interference as a hoax.

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- FBI Director Christopher Wray, who Trump appointed to head the bureau after firing James Comey, [says](#) there is “no information to indicate that Ukraine interfered with the 2016 presidential election.”
- Tom Bossert, Trump’s former homeland security adviser, [said](#) Ukrainian interference is “not only a conspiracy [theory], it is completely debunked ... it has no validity.”
- According to *The New York Times*, the intelligence community even [briefed senators](#) that the allegations were part of a Russian disinformation campaign—although this does not appear to have deterred them from continuing to spread the conspiracy theory.

And that’s not to mention the many journalists who have reported on the Russian origins of the disinformation efforts—for example, *The Washington Post’s* [report](#) that many of the same Russian social media accounts involved in attacking the 2016 election were also pushing Ukrainian interference. Others have [rebutted the conspiracy theories](#) in live interviews.

It’s increasingly clear that Trump and congressional Republicans got the disinformation idea directly from Russian intelligence.

In December, Lindsey Graham even acknowledged that the allegations against Biden and Ukraine were Russian disinformation, saying that Giuliani should [scrub his dirt](#) on the Bidens for evidence of the Kremlin’s propaganda before presenting it to Congress. But take away Russian disinformation, and there’s nothing left to this story.

- One of Giuliani’s main sources for his message is [Andriy Derkach](#), a parliamentarian who trained to be a KGB agent.
 - Derkach was a [member of the Party of Regions](#), best known as the pro-Russian party of exiled Ukrainian President—and longtime Paul Manafort patron—Viktor Yanukovich.
- Trump himself appears to have picked up the conspiracy theory from Russia.
 - According to records from the Mueller investigation, the “Ukrainian interference” message [first reached Trump](#) through Paul Manafort and Konstantin Kilimnik, an indicted associate of Manafort who the FBI has said has ties to Russian intelligence.
 - The timeline of Trump’s conversations with Putin and Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky also [strongly suggests](#) that Trump picked up his anti-Ukraine rhetoric from not only Putin but also Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, one of Putin’s top allies in Eastern Europe.
 - That evidence reportedly includes Trump’s own words: According to at least one administration official, Trump specifically [said](#) he believed Ukraine attempted to undermine him in 2016 because “Putin told me.”

The disinformation has spread to become congressional Republicans' main defense of Trump.

The Russian disinformation narrative was on full display during the first phase of impeachment as top Republicans in the House repeatedly tried to claim that Ukraine interfered against Trump in the 2016 election.

- During the hearings, House Intelligence Chairman Devin Nunes (R-CA) [said](#) that there are “several indicators of Ukrainian election meddling in 2016, all of which were aimed at the Trump campaign” [and that](#) “Trump had good reason to be wary of Ukrainian election meddling against his campaign.”
- Steve Castor, the Republicans' counsel during the hearings, [repeatedly asked witnesses](#) leading questions that appeared intended to validate these conspiracy theories and Trump's efforts to pressure Ukraine into investigating.
- Rep. Louie Gohmert (R-TX) took it a step further by [claiming](#) that the impeachment investigation was itself a corrupt ploy to block investigation into “the corruption of Ukrainian interference into the U.S. election in 2016.”

It's been clear for years that some Republicans have been in Putin's pocket.

- In 2016, House Minority Leader Kevin McCarthy (R-CA) himself [acknowledged](#) the possibility that some of his caucus may be beholden to Russia, telling colleagues, “There's two people I think Putin pays: [former Rep. Dana] Rohrabacher and Trump.” (Rohrabacher's spokesman [didn't dispute](#) his boss's closeness to Russia, but said he “doesn't need to be paid to come to such a necessary conclusion.”)
 - When *The Washington Post* first reported on the conversation, a spokesman for McCarthy first [claimed](#) it never happened. When presented with a recording of the moment, he instead claimed it was just a joke.
- In his efforts to protect Trump, Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell [earned the nickname](#) “Moscow Mitch” by repeatedly using his power in ways that have helped the Kremlin. For example, he [blocked](#) the Obama administration's efforts to warn the American public about Russian interference in 2016, [held up](#) election security legislation, and [cleared the way](#) for a Russian oligarch to invest in McConnell's native state of Kentucky.
- McConnell could put a stop to this. He's [declined to do so](#), instead letting his caucus spread Russian theories in defense of the president. There's a reason for that: McConnell will do anything to protect Trump, even if it means helping the Kremlin's attacks on American democracy.

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This concerning behavior from Republicans isn't happening in a vacuum; it's happening against a backdrop of serious, sustained Russian efforts to interfere in American democracy. According to *The New York Times*, the Kremlin is already [ramping up its disinformation campaign](#) for 2020 and is using even more sophisticated tactics to deceive the American public. But they may not even need to. Republicans in both the House and the Senate have shown that they will knowingly spread Russian propaganda to defend Trump.