
TRUMP'S RUSSIA NIGHTMARE FOLLOWS HIM TO EUROPE

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Russia may have been removed from the official agenda as members of the NATO alliance, anxious to indulge Donald Trump, meet Thursday in Brussels, but questions about Moscow still loomed over the second leg of the presidents European tour, following his trip to the Middle East. People are confused and suspicious, Anders Fogh Rasmussen, who served as NATOs secretary general until 2014, told Politico. What is needed is a clearly formulated American policy on Russia. The reason why people are preoccupied by all the investigations [in Washington] is that there is no clear Russia policy. Trump did his best to keep things that way during a meeting with Donald Tusk, the president of the European Council, and Jean-Claude Juncker, the president of the European Commission, reportedly ignoring journalists questions about Russia before heading off to a lunch with French President Emmanuel Macron.

But while Trump diligently endeavored to ignore questions about his campaigns ties to Russia, new developments in the Kremlingate scandal remain inescapable back in Washington, where administration staffers are racing to wall off a deluge of damaging revelations following former F.B.I. director Robert Muellers appointment as special counsel overseeing the case. White House Chief of Staff Reince Priebus and chief strategist Stephen Bannon both cut short their trip to Europe with Trump to return to the West Wing, reportedly to help coordinate a response. They are back trying to get this under control, one person familiar with the situation told Politico. Trump is not happy about all of this. Everyone knows it. They arent sitting around working on the budget all day.

With the G.O.P. agenda stalled amid investigations by the F.B.I., House, and Senate into Russian interference in the 2016 election, Bannon and Priebus have reportedly been contacting outside consultants and lawyers to put together a crisis-management team. Trump himself has reportedly lawyered up, retaining Marc Kasowitz, his longtime lawyer and a close associate, to represent him on all things Russia.

Despite their best efforts to quarantine the Russia scandal, a torrent of new headlines continue to lash the White House. On Wednesday, the New York Times reported that U.S. intelligence agencies surfaced evidence last summer that senior Russian intelligence and political officials discussed influencing Trump through his then [REDACTED] advisers, Mike Flynn and Paul Manafort. (Flynn declined to comment on the Times story, but in a statement to the outlet, Manafort said, If there ever was any effort by Russians to influence me, I was unaware, and they would have failed.) That squares with testimony on Tuesday by former C.I.A. Director John Brennan, who told Congress that contacts between Russian officials and associates of the president raised questions in my mind about whether Russia was able to gain the cooperation of those individuals.

Flynn and Manafort have been recurring characters in the Russian melodrama captivating Washington and are subjects in the ongoing F.B.I. probe. In February, Flynn resigned amid scandal as Trumps former national security adviser when The Washington Post revealed that he misled White House officials [REDACTED] Vice President Mike Pence [REDACTED] discussing the election-related sanctions against Moscow with Russian ambassador Sergey Kislyak before Trumps inauguration. More recently, Flynn has come under fire for a \$45,000 paid appearance at an event hosted by RT, a state sponsored Russian media outlet, and for \$500,000 worth of lobbying work he did on behalf of the Turkish government, which he failed to disclose before taking the job in the Trump administration. On Monday, Flynn invoked his Fifth Amendment rights when he refused to cooperate with a Senate Intelligence Committee subpoena for documents related to its inquiry into Russias interference in the 2016 election.

Manafort served as Trumps campaign manager until the end of last summer when his ties to the Russian and Ukrainian governments came under intense scrutiny. In August, the Times reported that Manafort, a former lobbyist, was allegedly designated to receive \$12.7 million in off-the-books cash payments from former Ukrainian president and Russian ally Viktor Yanukovych, according to a secret ledger belonging to Yanukovychs pro-Russian political party, the Party of Regions. While the extent of the Russian interference in the election was not yet public at the time, Manafort resigned mere days after the Times report was published. Manafort has previously denied the accusations.

But, according to a new Politico report, Manafort remained in contact with the Trump campaign. After the publication of an unverified intelligence dossier that alleged Trump and his associates were compromised by Russia, Manafort reached out to Priebus to defend himself. On the day that the dossier came out in the press, Paul called Reince, as a responsible ally of the president would do, and said this story about me is garbage, and a bunch of the other stuff in there seems implausible, a person close to Manafort told Politico. According to two sources, Priebus did inform Trump of Manaforts call, but characterized the conversation as brief. The only thing discussed was that the dossier was incorrect, full of lies, and was a joke. They never discussed ways to push back on it, the source said. Manafort said if you want any additional details, give me a call, and Reince never called him back.

In another blow to the White House, CNN reported on Wednesday that Attorney General Jeff Sessions did not disclose his multiple meetings with Kislyak last year when he applied for his security clearance to work in the Trump administration. According to the network, Sessions didnt list those interactions on a form requiring him to list any contact he or his family had with a foreign government or its representatives over the past seven years. A spokesperson for Sessions

defended the omission to CNN, saying that Sessions was instructed by an F.B.I. investigator not to include the meetings with Kislyak, and that Sessions had likely had hundreds or even thousands of meetings with foreign officials in his capacity as a senator, and it would have been impossible to list them all.

Still, this marks the third time the Sessions has come under fire for failing to disclose his interactions with the Russian ambassador. During his Senate confirmation process, Sessions didnt disclose two meetings he had with Kislyak prior to the election in both a written response and while under oath in his Senate confirmation hearing. The revelation ultimately forced the attorney general to recuse himself from the Justice Department investigation into the Trump campaigns ties to Russia amid mounting political pressure.

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