

## Before the Comey Testimony: Four Points on Trump and Russia

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On 8 June the former FBI director James B. Comey will testify publicly in the Senate about his conversations with President Trump. Fired FBI director James Comey plans to testify publicly in the Senate about his conversations with President Trump and whether there were improper contacts between one of Trump's top advisers and Russian officials. Whatever the outcome of this testimonial will be, there are four conclusions we can already draw.

### 1) There was unquestionably Russian interference in the US presidential election.

If one had any doubts beforehand about the existence of a Russian interference in the US presidential election, these doubts will probably have dissolved in the last few days. While the intelligence community's [public assessment](#) of Russian interference received some well-deserved [criticism](#) for its superficiality, a lot of information has been published since its release in January. For example, a leaked document from the classified version of the [NSA report](#), citing Russian attempts to literally hack the election system via software and hardware.

Currently, there are at least five of Trump's current or former close colleagues under FBI investigation for having questionable ties with Russia. Paul Manafort, who, before he worked for the campaign, [had business links](#) with oligarch Oleg Deripaska who is close to Putin and to the ex-Ukrainian prime minister Viktor Yanukovich. Michael Flynn, who was fired by the director of the National Security Council after [discussing](#) the international sanctions on Russia with the Russian ambassador – he even accepted Russian state money, which he [failed to report](#). The latter two gentlemen were [mentioned](#) as possible (witting or unwitting) agents by Russian top officials. There are two other ex-advisors from the Trump team who had suspicious ties with Russia: Carter Page, who was even [targeted](#) by Russian spies, and Roger Stone, who communicated with two players that seemed to have crucial roles in the [leaks](#) against Hillary Clinton (that she miraculously had information on, in advance: Julian Assange and Guccifer 2.0). And there are not only ex-colleagues that came under scrutiny: Jared Kushner, Trump's son-in law of, is currently in the [centre of investigations](#) for his alleged attempts to set up a secret communication channel between Trump and Putin, and chief prosecutor Sessions, appointed by Trump, for [having private discussions](#) with the Russian ambassador, which he later denied. The links are so extensive that beside the FBI and other federal bodies there are [four congressional committees](#) investigating them.

And if all this wasn't enough, Putin's remarks last week about Russian '[patriotic hackers](#)' and his early warning concerning [fabricated proofs](#) on interference are practically equal to a confession.

### 2) Putin can be partially satisfied with the result.

What is still a bit unclear, though, is beside the obvious goal of undermining the legitimacy of the electoral procedure in general and sow chaos ([well-illustrated](#) by an earlier remark of Putin on the electoral college: 'no democracy in USA'), how strong Russia's attempt has been to specifically help Donald Trump. Also, we do not know how much this influence mattered:



despite the general belief that Trump could win because Russia helped him, there is no proof for this assessment – and even theoretically, it is impossible to prove.

But what is sure is that the chaos and scandals around the current US administration is playing in Putin's hands. Unpopular president, weak, divided administration paralysed by the ongoing scandals and investigations, fights between the president and the establishment, a fired FBI-director, question marks behind the possible role of NATO, and the realisation in Brussels, Berlin and Paris that with an increasingly unreliable United States the alliance is weakened. Furthermore, because of the general view that Russia orchestrated the US election, Putin seems to be stronger and more strategic than he really is.

### **3) Putin can be partially dissatisfied with the result.**

While Putin needs an enemy in Washington, he is not happy with his current state of diplomatic isolation in the West. For this reason, he and his colleagues could have high hopes for a real, substantial re-set between the US and Russia after his re-election.

But no US presidents had less chance to substantially improve the relations with Russia in light of the ongoing investigations than Trump does. In fact, he has to prove repeatedly that he is not a puppet of Putin – e.g. by appointing anti-Russia hawks such as McMaster, Mattis or Fiona Hill, or fueling the conflict – e.g. in the case of the Syrian rocket launch. The pressure on Trump because of his Russia ties, from this perspective, has a good influence on the policy output. Raising the sanctions is off the table. Trump has not so much time left to deal with foreign affairs – and the administration, in most of the cases, follows the Washington consensus in Russia-related decisions.

### **4) Impeachment is a possibility, but should not be taken for granted.**

While the Congressional hearing of the fired FBI director, James Comey (a bar in Washington DC [provides](#) vodka shots beside livestreaming the hearing) can be a game-changer, the widespread hopes on the liberal side for the upcoming impeachment of Donald Trump might be too early. Trump's approval rating is on its lowest level since his inauguration: 39% approve and 55% disapprove of him, according to FiveThirtyEight's aggregated [figures](#). But this is not that dramatically low: Bill Clinton's popularity was a similarly low level in the middle of the Monica Lewinsky affair and his impeachment (that did not lead to his removal from office).

Despite some [indications](#) that a part of the Republican camp's confidence in Trump is eroding after sacking Comey and in light of the Russia investigations, he can still keep the majority of his voter base happy, which is not the majority of Americans – but was enough for his election in the first place. A bizarre, probably unprecedented thing is happening in US politics as a consequence of the investigations: the supporters of the Republican president are much more sceptical about claims of Russian wrongdoing than the democrats. And, even more importantly: Trump can sell the current Russia investigation story as fitting perfectly in his narrative: the Establishment Strikes Back, because he wants to 'drain the swamp'. The decision over the impeachment will only be taken if a substantial part of the Republicans in the congress think that their re-election chances are totally ruined by Trump. This point has not been reached yet.