

who spent some of the fortune he'd acquired in Russian oil buying up American assets, including control of CIFC, one of the US's largest managers of collateralised loan obligations, which managed \$14 billion in private debt, making it a vehicle of potentially untold leverage and influence over indebted American businessmen. 'Each one of the top ten Russian businessmen is doing something,' said a former close associate of one Russian billionaire. 'They have so much cash. They can buy anyone. The US was swanning around about how they have Bill Gates and how they have Mark Zuckerberg, and Russia came along and just destroyed [the illusion]. The Russians are always cleverer. On a cold level, Putin is doing a fantastic job for Russia. Any way they can get around the rules, they do. They always have three or four different stories, and then it all just gets lost in the noise.' Putin's people, he said, had long been active on multiple levels. 'For them, it's not big money if you give \$3 million to Idaho for a health centre and help get a guy elected. It's cheap.'

Dmitry Peskov, Putin's powerful press secretary who'd previously served abroad as a diplomat, had once boasted that the efforts of Robert Mueller, the special counsel appointed to investigate Trump's ties to Russia, would never get anywhere. 'In Russian, it's called passing water through a sieve,' he said. 'That's exactly what the process looks like.'<sup>174</sup> He turned out to be pretty much right. Former KGB officer Yury Shvets had nothing but scorn for the published results of the Mueller investigation. 'It was no more than a collection of interviews,' he said. What was published contained zero counterintelligence. 'How can you investigate Trump without this?'

The Mueller investigation, in the public pronouncements of Trump and the Republican Party, appeared to have fizzled out. But it became clear that parts of the same network of Moscow money men were continuing to operate. As the 2020 US presidential election approached, some of them appeared still to be attempting to steer things Trump's way. Sapir's business partner and Tchigirinsky associate, Sam Kislin, had forged close relations with Rudy Giuliani, the former New York mayor who by that time was acting as Trump's personal attorney. Kislin liked to boast of his friendly relations with Trump, and he'd funnelled substantial donations to Giuliani's mayoral campaign in the

nineties.<sup>176</sup> By 2019 he was urging Giuliani to investigate allegations of corruption in Ukraine,<sup>177</sup> and was calling for Trump's administration to investigate the former Ukrainian president Pyotr Poroshenko, who'd led the country through its bitter war with the Kremlin-backed separatists and Russia's annexation of Crimea. He was doing so at a crucial time, when Giuliani was actively seeking dirt in Ukraine against Trump's potential Democratic rival in the 2020 presidential race, Joe Biden – and Kislin appeared to be opening doors for him there.<sup>178</sup>

Then there were two Soviet-born businessmen, Igor Fruman and Lev Parnas, eventually arrested on charges of conspiring to circumvent laws against foreign influence, who had also befriended Giuliani and – one of them claimed – Trump.<sup>179</sup> They'd acted as middlemen, introducing Giuliani to three current and former Ukrainian prosecutors with information about corruption allegations surrounding a Ukrainian gas company, Burisma, on the board of which Joe Biden's son Hunter had sat.<sup>180</sup> At the same time, they also began trawling for anything that might amplify a pet theory peddled by Trump that Ukraine had worked with the Democrats in 2016 to stir up the Kremlin-Trump campaign collusion claims.<sup>181</sup>

The two men, who splurged tens of thousands of dollars on limousine services and stays at Trump hotels, and funnelled hundreds of thousands into Trump-aligned super PACs, turned out to have been working for Dmitry Firtash,<sup>182</sup> the gas tycoon who'd taken over the Turkmenistan-Russia-Ukraine gas trade with the backing of the Kremlin and Mogilevich, creating a slush fund that corrupted a series of Ukrainian presidents. By then, Firtash had been under house arrest in Vienna ever since 2014 as the US sought his extradition on bribery charges. But still his reach stretched far – first into Europe and then into the US, where Parnas had begun working in 2019 as an interpreter for him. The two men boasted Firtash was funding their lavish lifestyle<sup>183</sup> while federal prosecutors in Chicago had noticed Parnas and Fruman during their investigation into the Firtash bribery case.<sup>184</sup> ✕ The Russian black-cash networks seemed to be digging in ever deeper. Their activities, combined with Trump's disregard for the institutions and codes of US democracy, were leading to a systemic standoff. When Trump was caught on a July 27 2019 telephone call