



## **The Asset – Season 2 Episode 2**

Producer:

Previously, on The Asset:

Max Bergmann:

On Wednesday morning, November 9, 2016, the Ukrainian capital of Kyiv woke up to terrifying news.

WOLF BLITZER:

Right now, a historic moment. We can now project the winner of the presidential race. CNN projects Donald Trump wins the presidency. The business tycoon and TV personality, capping his improbable political journey with an astounding upset victory. Donald J. Trump will become the 45th president of the United States.

Max Bergmann:

For Ukraine, the election of a pro-Russian American president was petrifying. The election of a pro-Russian American president, of Donald Trump, posed an existential threat to Ukraine's very survival.

DONALD TRUMP:

Getting along with Russia would be a good thing, not a bad thing, and just about everybody agrees to that except very stupid people.

Max Bergmann

Episode two: Scheming. On October 9, 2019, two Soviet-born Florida businessmen finished their drinks in the business lounge at Dulles airport just outside Washington, D.C. The pair had one-way tickets to Vienna. As they left the lounge and walked toward the gate, they were suddenly asked to provide their passports. After confirming their identities, suddenly, a phalanx of FBI agents and plain-clothed officers emerged and arrested the two men.

NEWSCASTER:

Two key figures are behind bars tonight. Both happen to be associates of Rudy Giuliani, President Trump's personal lawyer.

NEWSCASTER:

NBC News has just learned that two foreign-born Trump donors, who were part of Rudy Giuliani's efforts to investigate Joe Biden, have been arrested. They have been charged with campaign-finance violations and are set to appear in court in Virginia.



Max Bergmann

This was the first arrest of the Ukraine investigation: Lev Parnas and Igor Fruman. Both were associates of Rudy Giuliani who had been helping him in his quest to find dirt on the Bidens. And when the House of Representatives sought information from them just a few days earlier, their lawyer, Jon Dowd, fresh off of representing Donald Trump in the Russia investigation, responded with a letter, written in Comic Sans, that said he couldn't help them, because the information was protected under attorney–client privilege, because they had "assisted Mr. Giuliani in connection with his representation of President Trump." In other words: They were members of the president's legal team.

NEWSCASTER:

The men are both naturalized US citizens, one originally from Ukraine, the other originally from Belarus. Prosecutors charged them with illegally funneling foreign donations to political campaigns, including \$325,000 to a pro-Trump SuperPAC in a scheme to buy potential influence.

Max Bergmann

The story of Parnas and Fruman remains murky. How did they meet? When did they get into business together? Where did all their money come from? What were they up to, and why? And who were they working with, or for? As we go to tape, it still remains clouded, and reporters are busy digging on this question and trying to connect the many dots that sure look like they are all connected. But how they became key figures in Trump's extortion of Ukraine—that's something we do know, and their story offers a window into the corruption and chaos of the Trump White House, and how many people stood to benefit from their willingness to shake down the Ukrainian government. I'm Max Bergmann, and this is *The Asset*.

The biographies of Lev Parnas and Igor Fruman read like a mashup of some of the Russia scandal's most colorful characters. Both of them were born in the Soviet Union, Parnas in Ukraine and Fruman in Belarus. They both emigrated to the US with their families at an early age. The Frumans settled in Detroit, the Parnases ended up in Brooklyn, home to a Soviet emigre we talked a lot about last season, Felix Sater. That's where the first connection to Trumpworld emerges. Parnas reportedly sold Trump co-ops while working for a real-estate company in Brooklyn. We still don't know how the two met, but one thing is clear: Parnas and Fruman were hustlers. One Trump ally who interacted with them told *The Washington Post* that they were "always hustling." Their schemes varies. For instance, according to *Politico*, Parnas took out a \$350,000 loan in 2010 to finance a movie that he said was going to star Jack Nicholson. It never got made. His investors sued him to get the money back, and won. Parnas now owes \$500,000, which he still refuses to pay. Fruman owned a whole bunch of companies in the port city of Odessa Ukraine, including a luxury jewelry business, a car dealership, and a hotel. He also ran a beachfront club in Odessa called Mafia Rave, which a three-star review on



TripAdvisor from August 28 called "a boring place to spend an afternoon." If the name Mafia Rave wasn't enough of a clue, according to the Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project, Parnas also has personal connections to a shady local businessman, who has been described as "the most powerful guy in Odessa," and has ties to organized crime figures. At various points, they've flirted with brazen financial crime. Parnas created a company called Fraud Guarantee. Even people who helped him set it up couldn't quite explain what it was supposed to do. A conservative radio host who did consulting work for Parnas told *Politico*, "It was originally going to do something with data," but then, "morphed into an insurance-type play." Whatever it was, Fraud Guarantee collected a bunch of money from investors, then, surprise, surprise, appears to have defrauded them.

COLIN JOST:

Giuliani's two associates are also successful entrepreneurs. Igor, the handsome one, owns a club in Ukraine that's called Mafia Rave, which I think counts as a full confession, and then Lev, the shy one, owns a security business called, I swear to you, Fraud Guarantee.

Max Bergmann

Parnas even has his own version of Felix Sater's broken margarita glass story that we talked about in season one, episode four. According to *Politico*, in 2008, Parnas got into some trouble with a landlord who wanted to evict him. When the landlord threatened to call the cops, Parnas responded, "If you call the cops, they are not going to find you, ever." Three days later, Parnas took a different tactic. He allegedly pulled out a gun, held it to his landlord's head, and told him, "This is my last warning to you." Then he drove off. The landlord filed for a restraining order. The request was ultimately dismissed for lack of evidence, but not before police seized four guns from Parnas. Parnas and Fruman have also been popping up on the periphery of Trumpworld for a while now. There's a picture of Parnas with Trump at an event all the way back in 2014. But how did Parnas and Fruman, "two typical Brighton Beach thugs," as somebody who knew them in Florida called them, become key players in the Ukraine scandal? Exactly how you'd expect: money.

RACHEL MADDOW:

What we learned from today's indictment that these handsome men who were arrested last night were allegedly a key part of that plan. As was this gentleman: former Republican congressman Pete Sessions of Texas. According to today's indictment, the guys who got arrested last night, Giuliani's clients, they illegally funneled more than \$300,000 into a pro-Trump SuperPAC that among other things was supporting the reelection campaign of Congressman Pete Sessions in Texas. They also committed to raise \$20,000 for Congressman Sessions directly, and then they met with him to make their big ask. "At around the same time that Parnas and Fruman committed to raising those funds for Congressman 1," who we believe to be Congressman Pete Sessions, "Parnas met with Congressman Sessions in person, and



sought the Congressman's assistance in causing the U.S. government to remove or recall the then-U.S. ambassador to Ukraine, Marie Yovanovitch." So they give tons of money to this PAC that's supporting Sessions's reelection. They also pledged to raise tens of thousands of dollars for Sessions's reelection. They get a meeting with Sessions, and they say, "You gotta help us get this ambassador out of there."

Max Bergmann

In 2016, just after the "Access Hollywood" tape came out, less than a month before the election, Parnas donated \$50,000 to the Trump campaign and the Republican Party. *The Washington Post* reported that Parnas "appeared at a dark time in Donald Trump's presidential campaign. Less than a month before the election, major GOP donors had been spooked." *The Post* explained that "Parnas had never been a player in national Republican politics, but the one-time stockbroker chose that moment to deliver a \$50,000 donation to Trump's campaign and the Republican Party. This contribution opened doors for Parnas and Fruman, and, as *The Post* concluded, "led to an extraordinarily rapid rise into the upper echelon of Trump allies." That included Parnas getting invited to a party with Trump and his family and other top supporters like Erik Prince on election night in 2016. Over the next year, and by the spring of 2018, Parnas and Fruman had, according to *The Post*, dined with Trump, breakfasted with Donald Trump Jr., and attended exclusive events at Mar-a-Lago and the White House. They also were jet-setting around the world, staying at Trump hotels and spending lavishly. Parnas and Fruman were back for the 2018 election, and started pouring hundreds of thousands of dollars into the coffers of prominent Republican politicians. They donated to Kevin McCarthy, who at the time was House Majority Leader and a top candidate to become Speaker if Republicans kept the House. They donated \$50,000 to Ron DeSantis, who was campaigning for governor of Florida. And they funneled \$325,000 into America First, the main pro-Trump SuperPAC. According to campaign filings, they contributed at least \$630,000 to federal Republican candidates and PACs since 2016. The purpose of these donations, where the money came from, and why give to these politicians, are key questions in this unfolding scandal. But what appears to be happening, based on the indictment of Parnas and Fruman and some of the subsequent reporting, is that these two guys, who were "always hustling," discovered the murky world of campaign finance. It seems—and, repeat, it seems—that Parnas and Fruman had figured out how the US campaign-finance system worked, and how they could game it, and so at least, from the two cases laid out in the indictment, served essentially as middlemen for foreigners looking to influence US politics, either to advance their own business interests or to advance their political interests. Parnas and Fruman had gotten in good with the Trump team, and could now leverage that in our opaque campaign finance system to their benefit, and to the benefit of their foreign contacts. So key to this story is understanding how campaign finance works. And don't worry, this will only take a minute—ok, maybe two. Let's say you like a candidate, and you want to give money to that candidate, but you can only give so much. \$2,700, to be exact. And that donation gets recorded with the Federal Election Commission. Now, let's say



you're rich, and you really, really like a candidate. Well, you can spend way more than just the \$2,700. It turns out that, thanks to a 2010 Supreme Court decision called *Citizens United v. FEC*, corporations can spend unlimited money, as long as it's not a direct contribution to a candidate. Instead, you can donate to what's called a SuperPAC, which can spend as much money as it wants, as long as it doesn't explicitly coordinate with or tell you to vote for a political candidate. So all you really need to do to donate as much as you want is to route that money, often through a corporation, which isn't especially hard to start. That's how the Koch Brothers can donate tens of millions of dollars in any electino year. It's not \$2,700 to a whole bunch of candidates. It's much, much bigger expenditures through corporations and SuperPACs. Now, there are still some rules. Foreigners can't donate money, and you can't lie about where the money came from or hide its origins.

REPORTER:

Of course, it's illegal, as you and I have discussed on numerous occasions, it's illegal for somebody who is a foreign national to donate to a campaign. This would be the second time, if they are in fact foreign nationals, that a foreign national has donated to a Trump-related cause, and has faced charges, if that's the case here.

Max Bergmann:

But getting around those rules is actually pretty easy, and Parnas and Fruman are basically a case study in how to commit campaign-finance violations. See, Parnas and Fruman have figured out that money could buy them access, lots of it. *The Wall Street Journal* found Parnas's private Instagram account, and here's what they found.

NEWSCASTER:

A look through Lev Parnas's private Instagram account conducted by *The Wall Street Journal* reveals posts that put Parnas at a Trump campaign event in 2015 with various members of the Trump family, jet-setting with Rudy Giuliani to Warsaw and Paris and, perhaps the most jarring, on March 25, one day after Bill Barr released his summary of the Mueller report that the president viewed as a big win, Parnas posted a photo sitting at a dinner with the president's legal team, writing this: "Congratulations, Team Trump. Job well done."

Max Bergmann:

And there's more. Pictures from the last week of DeSantis's campaign for governor of Florida show Parnas at so many different events that analysts say he must have been flying on the official campaign plane. Parnas even attended George H.W. Bush's funeral alongside his new good pal, Rudy Giuliani. The Parnas and Fruman indictment shows how a little bit of money can really buy a lot of influence. Here we have Russian and Ukrainian money going into an American political campaign. And here's the thing: It was pretty easy for them to do it. All they needed to do was act as a middleman and create a front company, and then serve as a conduit for foreign



money. And if you're going back in your mind to remember the Mueller investigation, and you say, "hey, I don't really remember Mueller talking about Russian money coming into the Trump campaign," well, that's because Mueller unbelievably didn't investigate money flowing into the Trump campaign. He didn't look into the money. He didn't look into how the Trump campaign was funding itself. As we noted in the last season, if you're Russia, and you're looking to support the Trump campaign, the easiest way to do it is not to use your intelligence services to break into the Democratic Party, steal emails, and then strategically release them. It's not to create an online troll farm to then try to influence American voters. It's to fund it. It's to provide the Trump campaign with money. What do campaigns need most? They need money. It would've been very easy for Russia to simply funnel money into the Trump campaign. And the indictment of Parnas and Fruman show how easy that actually would be. So why didn't Mueller look into the money? Well, according to David Ignatius in *The Washington Post*, when Mueller sought to look into Trump's finances, Trump threatened to fire Mueller and Rosenstein, the deputy attorney general who was overseeing the investigation, blocked Mueller from investigating. Trump and Rosenstein effectively put the Mueller investigation in a box, and instead of using his power and his leverage, his ability to simply say, "hey, I'm not going to abide by that," Mueller abided. He operated within the confines that were set for him. And so what we're left with with the Mueller investigation is potentially missing this critical pillar of Russian influence, of Russian interference, of foreign interference, which is foreign money going into a campaign. How do you not look at the money, Bob? The case of Parnas and Fruman is therefore likely the tip of the iceberg. I seriously doubt that Parnas and Fruman are one-offs, that only they figured out that money matters in American politics, that it buys access and influence. And what's clear is that their money got them a lot of access and influence. And with the access came the schemes. One of their latest schemes was weed—yes, weed. The domestic marijuana industry is booming in the US states where it's been decriminalized. But one real challenge for marijuana producers is getting financing. Marijuana is illegal at the federal level, so US banks won't provide funding. So in step private financiers. And as we've talked a lot about in the early episodes of last season, Russian oligarchs and businessmen are eager to invest abroad, and especially in the US. Money has poured into real estate. But Russian money has also poured into weed, with Russian investors suffering from severe case of FOMO and scrambling to invest to not miss out. And so Parnas and Fruman, in the summer of 2018, along with two others, sought to work with a wealthy Russian investor on a scheme to make political donations to politicians in Nevada, New York, and other states to acquire marijuana licenses. Presumably, if you could get a license, you have a valuable foothold in a booming industry. However, the Russian investor did not want his identity to be known in the scheme because, according to one of the people indicted, his Russian roots and current political paranoia about it—and perhaps also because providing this money was illegal. The Russian transferred two payments of \$500,000 to a corporate bank account controlled by Fruman. That money was then used to donate to Nevada politicians in the run-up to the 2018 election. So in short, Parnas and Fruman were acting as a front to funnel money to American politicians on behalf of Russians, and this



scheme was one of the reasons why FBI agents were waiting for them at Dulles airport. That wasn't their only scheme. According to the indictment, Parnas and Fruman had a second illegal scheme. They also acted as what the Department of Justice calls "straw donors"—basically, false fronts for making illegal campaign contributions. They did this, again, by using a corporation. For example, they allegedly took money from a private lending transaction and turned it into that \$325,000 donation to the biggest Trump SuperPAC. They also took another \$15,000 to give to another conservative SuperPAC. But when they actually donated the money, they illegally hid its origins by claiming it came from a corporation they started called "Global Energy Producers." The indictment says they did this in part to hide the donations from creditors. In other words, if somebody owes you money and you see them giving away \$325,000 to a political campaign, you give that guy a call and say, "where's my money?" So if Parnas and Fruman owed people hundreds of thousands of dollars, where did they get hundreds of thousands of dollars to give to politicians? And so who Parnas and Fruman are connected to is a critical question, and it's particularly important when we talk about another one of their schemes, related to natural gas in Ukraine. Parnas and Fruman started a new natural gas venture with a Trump mega-donor named Harry Sargeant. According to a deep dive on the plan by the Associate Press, Parnas and Fruman were trying to swing a deal with Naftogaz, Ukraine's state-run oil and gas company. In March of this year, the two men flew on a private jet to attend a Houston energy conference, where they met with a senior Naftogaz executive, Andrew Favorov, and tried to convince him to enter into a partnership so they could export US liquified natural gas to Ukraine. There was just one problem: Naftogaz just wasn't interested. There was nothing about Parnas and Fruman that suggested they would make good partners on a big energy deal. They had no real history in this business. So Parnas and Fruman reportedly started pushing for Naftogaz to change its board, replacing executives who had balked with ones who would green light their get-rich-quick schemes. In the process, they liberally name-dropped their connections in the US, so much so that one of their contacts on Naftogaz's board later compared a conversation he had with Harry Sargeant to a mafia-style shakedown. Right as Parnas and Fruman were ramping up their push to change Naftogaz's leadership, Energy Secretary Rick Perry was trying to install one of his favorite donors on the same Naftogaz board. We don't know if Parnas and Fruman were working with Perry, or if they just happened to be pursuing the same goals around the same time. But the board of Naftogaz is controlled by the Ukrainian president, and the board, after the Maidan Revolution in 2014, has seats on it filled by the United States and the EU. Why? To stop corruption. So, to get their deal, they needed to change the board—specifically, the US members of the board. And to do that, they needed the Ukrainian president and the US government to agree. So they needed the US ambassador, Marie Yovanovitch, to get on board, to agree with their plan, and to push the Ukrainian government to change the US members on the board. But Yovanovitch is a professional diplomat, a career foreign-service officer, and her role was to fight corruption in Ukraine, not further it. So she likely opposed this scheme. And so Parnas and Fruman plotted to get her removed. Now, Yovanovitch's anti-corruption efforts made her some enemies in



Ukraine—specifically, among those who are corrupt, and in particular, Ukraine's prosecutor general, Yuri Lutsenko, who she, along with many of our European allies, criticized for not doing enough about corruption in Ukraine. And so, Lutsenko, being a little bit corrupt, worked with Parnas and Fruman to try to get her removed as ambassador. And this is according to the Department of Justice indictment, which says that "Parnas's efforts to remove the ambassador were conducted, at least in part, at the request of one or more Ukrainian government officials."

DOJ OFFICIAL:

As alleged in the indictment, the defendants broke the law to gain political influence while avoiding disclosure of who was actually making the donations and where the money was coming from. They sought political influence not only to advance their own financial interests but to advance the political interests of at least one foreign officials, a Ukrainian government official who sought the dismissal of the US ambassador to Ukraine. Now, as a result, Parnas and Fruman had several meetings with Congressman One and at these meetings Parnas, on behalf of the Ukrainian government official, lobbied Congressman One to advocate for the removal of the then-US ambassador to Ukraine.

Max Bergmann:

And this began not in 2019, but back in 2018, when Parnas and Fruman gave money to then-US congressman Pete Sessions of Texas. They met with Sessions in June of 2018, and told Sessions that Yovanovitch was anti-Trump and needed to be removed from her position. And then Sessions quickly complies, and writes a letter to the Trump administration saying he's heard that Yovanovitch is anti-Trump and needs to be removed from office. And at that Houston energy conference in March of 2019, an American who does a lot of business in Ukraine was so concerned by the efforts to remove the ambassador that he wrote a letter to the US embassy in Ukraine documenting his plot and documenting his concerns. So what we have with Parnas and Fruman are guys that are scheming in just about every way. Trying to funnel Russian money into the weed industry. Running clubs called Mafia Rave. And working on behalf of Ukrainian officials trying to influence the US government. But one sort of big mystery at the center of all of this: Where are Parnas and Fruman getting all of their money? We don't know for sure, but a lot of clues have pointed towards one man: A Ukrainian oligarch named Dmitry Firtash.

If you listened to Season One of our podcast, and you really should, because it's kind of great, you'll remember a lot of talk about Russian oligarchs. In episode three, we walked through how the oligarch class was born, how these obscenely wealthy men captured all of Russia's wealth, and how Putin brought them under state control. Here's a quick reminder from the late political scientist Karen Dawisha, the author of *Putin's Kleptocracy*:

KAREN DAWISHA:





The Putin system, I write in the book, operates by nationalizing the risk and privatizing the reward. If you are part of the inner group, you will be rewarded by not being arrested. You will be rewarded by not having your funds taken. You might have to pay some of those riches to others in the group, but it is a pattern, a tribute system, that is quite significant.

Max Bergmann:

The oligarchs are a corrupt class. They spend their money all over the world, but they're always under the thumb of Putin. And therefore, they're always potentially working to advance his interests, or with his implicit permission. Often they have links to organized crime, and they represent an informal structure, a way for the Russian government to spread its influence outside of the usual channels. Where the Russian government can't go, a rich oligarch often can. In the Russia investigation, we saw over and over and over again how Trump was linked up with these figures. They bought Trump's real estate and hid their money in his towers. They met with members of the Trump team and showed up at inauguration events. Manafort had deep business ties to Oleg Deripaska.

NEWSCASTER:

According to the documents obtained by the Associated Press, in 2006, Manafort was paid \$10 million by Russian billionaire Oleg Deripaska to, as Manafort described it, "greatly benefit the Putin government by lobbying and influencing news coverage in the United States, Europe, and the former Soviet republics."

Max Bergmann:

We saw this pattern again and again: Russian oligarchs using their money to push an agenda and advance interests, often Putin's interests. So it should come as no surprise that a Kremlin-connected Ukrainian oligarch has made headlines for his alleged involvement in this scandal.

RACHEL MADDOW:

Some new breaking news from *The Washington Post*: "Prosecutors flagged possible ties between Ukrainian gas tycoon and Giuliani associates." Huh, tell me more. The Ukrainian gas tycoon in question here is the subject of chapter 19 of my new book. Boy, I didn't know it was going to be this relevant. He's a man named Dmitry Firtash. He's a Putin-connected oligarch who federal prosecutors say has high-level ties to Russian organized crime. He has been indicted in the United States as fighting an effort to extradite him here to face charges in a criminal bribery scheme. Firtash has also turned up in the impeachment story because he also appears to have connections, including financial ties, with these two guys who Rudy Giuliani was apparently working with to dig up dirt for President Trump in Ukraine to help him get reelected.

Max Bergmann:



Dmitry Firtash is a Ukrainian natural gas mogul who rose to prominence in the early 2000s as he built connections to both the Russian and Ukrainian governments. He's also been referred to by the Department of Justice as a "upper-echelon associate of organized crime." Before we get too far into Firtash, it's important to note a few things. Firtash is a rich oligarch who doesn't hesitate to sue people when they say things he disputes. So, we want to state for the record, really strongly, that Firtash denies pretty much everything we're about to talk about. He has never been convicted of a crime and denies every allegation of wrongdoing that anyone has ever charged him with. We'll talk more about which particular relationships he disputes, but we wanted to get that out up front. Firtash denies it all. And this message was brought to you by our lawyers.

To understand Firtash, you have to go back to the winter of 2005. Russia was trying to turn the screws on the new reformist government of Ukraine that was ushered into office by the Orange Revolution. And so they decided to drive a hard bargain on the price of gas. See, Russia is basically a big, giant gas tank of the country. It provides much of the natural gas that goes to power Europe. And its main pipeline providing gas to western Europe runs through Ukraine. So at first Ukrainians thought the Kremlin was just engaging in routine haggling. They wouldn't cut off the gas to Europe. Then, on January 1, 2006, they did. Russia cut off gas to Ukraine in the dead of winter, and things got real. The price of gas spiked in Europe, and people started to panic. You need gas to heat your homes, and in winter in Ukraine, it's really cold. But Russia the next day turned the spigot back on. But they had sent a message. A new deal needed to be made, and it was going to be made on Russia's terms.

NEWSCASTER:

For decades, Russia gave Ukraine cheap gas. Last month, Gazprom, the Russian gas giant backed by the Kremlin, demanded a four-fold price hike. The US Secretary of State, Condoleezza Rice, pronounced it "politically-motivated," Yushchenko's punishment for veering westwards.

Max Bergmann:

And a key piece of the deal involved a mystery company called RUE.

NEWSCASTER:

But a controversial gas deal signed after Russia threatened to cut supplies in the new year has turned Ukraine's president Viktor Yushchenko from hero to villain, accused of failing to stand up against Russia and the corrupt business mafia allegedly running his country. In an exclusive interview, he's told Channel 4 News the deal was a success, ending Ukraine's feudal subservience to mother Russia. But questions remain, not least about the company that acted as a middleman in the new gas contract.



Max Bergmann:

And RUE basically secured the deal of a lifetime.

NEWSCASTER:

Yulia Tymoshenko showed me the confidential contract which the government wanted to keep secret. She claims it was cooked up in a Moscow hotel by unelected officials, an alleged Russian mafia boss, and a shadowy company called RosUkrEnergo, a joint venture between unknown Ukrainians and a subsidiary of Russia's Gazprom.

Max Bergmann:

In this deal, Russia, for some reason, would sell the gas to RUE at a discounted price, and then RUE had the exclusive rights to sell the gas on to Ukraine and Europe. If you think that sounds extremely lucrative, you would be right. But if you're thinking, "Why wouldn't Russia just keep the rights itself? I mean, it has gas companies, like Gazprom," well, that's because you haven't listened to me, and you haven't gone back and listened to episode three in Season One. Putin's Russia is a kleptocracy. It takes the wealth of Russia and its people and it transfers it to private individuals, to oligarchs. So whoever was behind that mystery company basically just got paid by the Kremlin.

YUSHCHENKO:

[Translated] Two years ago, the founders of RosUkrEnergo could've been anyone. Anyone.

NEWSCASTER:

We don't know who they are. There are many rumors about them. We don't know. That is unsatisfactory now, because this organization has become relatively powerful, and potentially very rich indeed.

Max Bergmann:

And the guy behind that company was Dmitry Firtash. So when you want to know what it means to be a Kremlin-connected oligarch, look no further than Dmitry Firtash, who got insanely rich just because the Kremlin wanted him to have a lot of money. And what did he do with that money? Well, he invested in a lot of other things, a lot of other businesses. But he also used some of that money to support politicians in Ukraine, politicians like Viktor Yanukovich, the former corrupt president that was aligned with the Kremlin. But why would the Kremlin want to provide money to Firtash? Well, somewhere along the way, either earlier in his business dealings or once he broke into the gas industry, he came into contact with a very, very dangerous man, Semyon Mogilevich, a top Russian mob boss and one of the FBI's most Russian men, although Mogilevich has denied links to organized crime. A CNN story on Mogilevich quoted an FBI agent as saying he was "more powerful than John Gotti." He's been accused of participating in a multi-million-dollar fraud scheme, which he's denied, and a



different FBI agent said that Mogilevich has allegedly been involved in "weapons trafficking, contract murders, extortion, drug trafficking, and prostitution on an international scale." "Victims don't mean anything to him," said another FBI agent.

REPORTER:

Some groups use a sniper rifle to take out their enemies. Some use a machine gun. Some use a pistol. The group with which Mr. Mogilevich is associated, their signature is the car bomb.

Max Bergmann:

We know about Firtash's connections to Mogilevich in part because Firtash actually said it—allegedly. In 2010, WikiLeaks released a classified cable that had been written two years earlier by then-US Ambassador to Ukraine William Taylor. And if his name sounds familiar, that's because he's currently the top US diplomat in Ukraine and just testified before Congress. And one of the things we've learned about Bill Taylor is he takes notes. He takes a lot of notes. And those notes are accurate. And the cable from 2008 is Taylor's notes from his meeting with Firtash. And in that cable, in Bill Taylor's notes, it says that Firtash "acknowledged ties to Russian organized crime figure Semyon Mogilevich, stating he had needed Mogilevich's approval to get into business in the first place." Taylor went on: "Firtash acknowledged that he needed and received permission from Mogilevich when he established various businesses, but he denied any close relationship to him." Now, of course, Firtash has strongly and repeatedly denied any ties to Mogilevich or Russian organized crime, but let's put this in context. A Reuters investigation found that bankers close to Putin granted credit lines of up to \$11 billion to Firtash, and, Reuters found, "by granting special cheap deals to Firtash, Gazprom missed out on about \$2 billion in revenue." Billion, with a b. \$2 billion. Why are you giving this guy \$2 billion? This incredibly lucrative sweetheart deal with Firtash wasn't going to last, however, and in 2009, Firtash and his company were maneuvered out. But by this time, he was a billionaire, and he maintained a prominent role in Ukraine's gas industry, and he would proceed to do very well when, the following year, in 2010, Viktor Yanukovich would become president with the help of a guy named Paul Manafort.

NEWSCASTER:

Court documents from the US Department of Justice appear to tie former Trump campaign manager Paul Manafort to a Ukrainian associate of Russian mobsters. The documents were filed this week in a case involving Dmitry Firtash. The headline from NBC News reads, "DOJ: Ex-Manafort associate Firtash is top-tier comrade of Russian mobsters." The article goes on to say, "The Department of Justice has identified a former business associate of former Trump campaign manager Paul Manafort as an upper-echelon associate of Russian organized crime."

Max Bergmann:



A Firtash company was reportedly in talks with Manafort to buy the Drake Hotel in New York for \$850 million. The deal never happened, and Firtash denies ever having any business ties with Manafort. But the Ukrainian politician Yulia Tymoshenko, who was later imprisoned by Yanukovich, sued Manafort and Firtash, claiming the deal was part of a vast money-laundering scheme. And Firtash today still remains enmeshed in the Ukrainian gas industry. So when Parnas and Fruman were pushing their deal to try to replace the board of Naftogaz, there is also a potential link to Firtash. According to reports, at that Houston energy conference in March, Parnas and Fruman allegedly dropped Firtash's name, saying that Naftogaz should "put aside financial disputes with Firtash." And let's be clear: Doing that would be a huge win for Firtash, and potentially very lucrative. We're talking, like, hundreds of millions of dollars. Sources have also said that, prior to the summer of 2019, both men were working for Firtash or being financed by him in some way, although we still don't have anything concrete about that. But the question of what kind of work were they doing for him, and what kind of financing were they getting, what prior business links to Firtash did they have, how did it benefit them to advocate for Firtash and Naftogaz—we don't know the answers to any of those questions, yet. But here's the thing. Parnas and Fruman aren't just two random guys. Remember, they're part of President Trump's legal team, according to Jon Dowd, who's Rudy Giuliani's lawyer. So we have Firtash connected to Trump's legal team.

#### REPORTER:

Their attorney Jon Dowd, the president's former attorney, told Congress that they were officially part of Trump's legal team, that they were working on behalf of Rudy Giuliani. And what it looks more and more like what they were doing is working overseas with this Ukrainian oligarch Dmitry Firtash, who has been indicted by the US Justice Department and is in Austria trying to fight his extradition, it looks like they were trying to work with him to manufacture dirt on Joe Biden for Rudy Giuliani and for the president. In return, they went to work with Firtash, working with a separate team of lawyers who are close to Giuliani and are close to the president, although they don't represent him, and were trying to get Firtash's indictment dismissed. And so I think the questions going forward for them and for Rudy Giuliani is, did Giuliani ever talk with the president about some relief on behalf of the Ukrainian oligarch, who was helping him manufacture dirt on Biden? Did he talk to the Justice Department? We know he had this meeting with Justice Department officials that they have been trying very much to distance themselves from since it happened. So I think there are a lot of questions going forward, and it's really just another layer of this, this scheme that the president and Giuliani were perpetrating to get dirt overseas in Ukraine that they could use against political opponents back here in the United States.

#### Max Bergmann:

We also have to remember that Parnas and Fruman were indicted for massive campaign finance violations, for effectively acting as a conduit for foreign money to influence American



politics. And probably the most telling link between Parnas, Fruman, and Firtash is that, when Parnas and Fruman were arrested, prosecutors in New York who were working their case got a call from federal prosecutors in Chicago, who said, "hey, we know those guys," the Chicago prosecutors said. "We know them because we've been working on the Firtash extradition case." In 2013, Firtash ran into serious legal trouble in the US when he was indicted in a Chicago federal court on charges involving racketeering. Prosecutors argued that Firtash bribed Indian government officials to help him mine titanium to sell to Boeing, and that some of these bribes went through US banks. Firtash, of course, denies all of this. The Justice Department didn't unseal the indictment until a month after the Maidan Revolution in April 2014.

#### NEWSCASTER:

He posted a record-breaking bail of more than \$170 million to get out of the police cell where he was held for more than a week. But he must stay here in Austria until a court decides if he should be extradited to the United States to face charges of alleged bribery and corruption.

#### FIRTASH:

[Translated] I am absolutely innocent.

#### Max Bergmann:

Firtash was immediately arrested in Vienna, where he quickly posted bail with the help of a Russian billionaire. At one point in 2015, he even tried to return home to Ukraine, but he thought better of it when the Ukrainian Interior Minister threatened to send a group of far-right fighters to the airport to arrest him. But that's not all. Firtash was also arrested on a Spanish warrant that related to money-laundering charges, which he also denies. And so, Firtash has been trapped, living as a prisoner in Vienna, Austria, avoiding extradition to the US ever since. And if you're paying close attention while listening through this episode, you might think, "Wait, I've heard Vienna already mentioned before." It's because, at the top of this episode, we mentioned how Parnas and Fruman were arrested at Dulles airport with one-way tickets to Vienna. And who lives in Vienna? Dmitry Firtash. But this summer, Firtash's comfortable life in Vienna looked like it may be at an end. Austria decided it was going to move ahead with extraditing Firtash to the US. This is obviously not good for Firtash. So what does he do? He schemes. He changes course and tries to gain influence with the Trump team. In June 2019, Firtash and Parnas actually met, allegedly through a mutual friend. And the next month, in July, Firtash fired his lawyer Lanny Davis, who had previously worked for Bill Clinton and Michael Cohen, and hired two extremely pro-Trump lawyers, regulars on Fox News, Joe DiGenova and Victoria Toensing.

#### LOU DOBBS:



With Victoria Toensing, former deputy assistant attorney general for the criminal division of the Justice Department, and Joe DiGenova, a former US attorney for the District of Columbia, the founding partners of DiGenova and Toensing law firm. Great to have you here.

VICTORIA TOENSING:

Welcome to the swamp, Lou.

LOU DOBBS:

Thank you very much.

VICTORIA TOENSING:

So, what to do? Well, the Democrats know what to do. Let's file some false charges against Devin Nunes, and lickety-split, GPS helped research these false charges, absolutely false, against Devin.

JOE DIGENOVA:

Ethics committee charges.

VICTORIA TOENSING:

In the ethics committee, one after another.

JOE DIGENOVA:

What they've decided to do is, we have a legitimately elected president, under the Constitution. They never accepted the result. They have used governmental power, subpoena power, in an abusive, vindictive, and retributive way.

Max Bergmann:

This is pretty transparent. Firtash was hiring pro-Trump lawyers to try to convince the Trump administration to drop the charges against him. These lawyers then turned around and hired Parnas as a translator, which is weird, because Firtash has been fighting extradition, so far successfully, for years, and he definitely has people on his legal team who speak English. DiGenova and Toensing used their access, their connections to the Trump administration, right away. They even got a meeting with Attorney General Bill Barr in the summer of 2019 to push for the Department of Justice to drop the charges. But if you're Firtash, and you're trying to get the Trump administration to do something for you, well, you might need to do something for them. And this is where Dmitry Firtash is connected potentially to Rudy Giuliani, and the effort to dig up dirt on the Bidens.

In the previous episode, we talked about the huge amount of corruption in Ukraine. From 2015 to 2016, the Ukrainian prosecutor general was a man named Viktor Shokin. He was corrupt, and



everyone in the West knew it, and everyone wanted him out, and Joe Biden, who was vice president at the time, who was leading Ukraine policy, went to Ukraine and made this pretty clear for the Obama administration. He repeatedly asked Poroshenko to fire Shokin. And in December 2015, Biden went to Ukraine and threatened to withhold \$1 billion in aid if Ukraine didn't remove him. And so in March 2016, Poroshenko yielded. He did just that and removed Shokin from his job.

JOE BIDEN:

I went over, if I had to guess, the 12th, 13th time to Kyiv, and I was supposed to announce that there was another \$1 billion loan guarantee. And I had gotten a commitment from Poroshenko and from Yatsenyuk that they would take action against the state prosecutor, and they didn't. So they said, they were walking out to a press conference. I said, nah, I'm not going to—or, we're not going to give you the billion dollars. They said, you have no authority. You're not the president. The president said—I said, call him. I said, I'm telling you, you're not getting the billion dollars. I said, you're not getting the billion. I'm going to be leaving here in, I think it was about six hours. I looked at them and said: I'm leaving in six hours. If the prosecutor is not fired, you're not getting the money. Well, son of a bitch, he got fired. And they put in place someone who was solid.

Max Bergmann:

And it's this episode that has become the basis of Trump trying to dig up dirt on Biden, a guy who's running for president against him. The dirt that they were searching for stems from a conspiracy theory about Biden that was started by an opposition researcher named Peter Schweizer, who specializes in cobbling together vague allegations against top Democrats in hopes of torpedoing them right before they run for president. Before the 2016 election, he wrote a book called *Clinton Cash* that invented all these ominous-sounding scandals about Hillary Clinton, such as Uranium One, which was frantically pushed by Devin Nunes in November 2017, just after Manafort and Papadopoulos were indicted. These tend to be conspiracy theories that make your brain hurt, and that ultimately get totally debunked. But they serve their political purpose in kicking up a hell of a lot of dust and dirt during a political campaign. And so, in 2018, Schweitzer came out with a new book, called *Secret Empires*, laying out the theory that Hunter Biden had used his famous last name to get a seat on the board of Ukrainian oil-and-gas company called Burisma. The conspiracy theory holds that this company was under investigation for corruption by Shokin, who was just doing his job, when Joe Biden came in to protect his son and end the investigation. And so when Shokin was removed and was fired, the investigation was closed, and Hunter was free to go on making money off of his family's name. Now, this conspiracy theory has been totally debunked, and is totally factually wrong. Shokin wasn't some anti-corruption crusader fired for endangering a powerful person's son. According to Shokin's own deputy, the case against Burisma was shelved in 2014, before Biden started calling for Shokin's firing. In other words, there was no investigation into Burisma





at the time Shokin was fired. So if the guy wasn't investigating Burisma, then that's not why he's getting fired. In fact, the problem with Shokin was that he basically wasn't investigating corruption at all. And it's also worth pointing out that it wasn't just Biden pushing for Shokin's removal. It was also the US Ambassador to Ukraine, the International Monetary Fund, and anti-corruption activists on the ground in Ukraine. Plenty of people were independently pushing Poroshenko to fire Shokin, specifically because they felt like he wasn't doing enough about corruption in Ukraine. But that didn't stop the theory from catching on in Trumpworld, and one person who took particular interest was a columnist named John Solomon, who wrote for *The Hill*. Solomon has spent most of the Trump administration rehashing Trumpworld conspiracies attacking the Mueller investigation, and Solomon, it turns out, was connected to a lot of people we've just been talking about. DiGenova and Toensing were his lawyers, the same lawyers that would come to represent Dmitry Firtash, and he sent a draft of one of his early stories on the Biden conspiracy to them, as well as to Parnas. Trumpworld was actually pushing two different conspiracy theories at the same time: one about Biden and a second that was trying to prove that it was Democrats, that it was the Obama administration, that had colluded with the Ukrainian government during the 2016 election, and that the DNC had secretly worked with Ukrainian politicians to fabricate a "black ledger" implicating Paul Manafort. And if you're thinking, it's pretty insane for the Obama administration to be working with the Ukrainians to hack the Democratic Party and John Podesta and then leak those emails strategically during the election so that then they could blame it on Donald Trump after the election, well, you're right, none of that makes any sense, because it's totally crazy. It's totally insane. But what the Trump folks were after, and what they're desperately searching for, is to say, "Look, it was the Democrats that colluded in 2016, not us." And, if you're thinking that this might help a guy named Vladimir Putin in Russia, who can say, "Well, look, there's doubts about whether Russia even interfered in the election in 2016, maybe it was the Ukrainians. Look, the Trump White House is even suggesting the same thing," well, you would be right. This is hugely beneficial to Vladimir Putin. If you're starting to think, why are they pushing such ludicrous conspiracy theories, you have to understand what was happening at the time. They were getting desperate. And in fact, Trump was so desperate that he hired Rudy Giuliani. In April of 2018, Rudy became Trump's personal lawyer, right around the time the FBI raided the offices of Trump's previous personal lawyer, Michael Cohen. For months, it was unclear what Rudy was actually doing for the president, aside from going on television a lot to protect Trump in the Russia investigation. And every time he did that, it seemed like something he said actually made things worse for the president.

RUDY GIULIANI:

Colluding about Russians—which I don't even know if that's a crime, colluding about Russians—you start analyzing the crime, the hacking is the crimes.

NEWSCASTER:



Well, that certainly is the original crime, yes.

RUDY GIULIANI:

Well, the president didn't hack!

NEWSCASTER:

Of course not. That's the original crime.

RUDY GIULIANI:

He didn't pay them for hacking!

NEWSCASTER:

And as you know, it has led other places.

RUDY GIULIANI:

Aaaah. If you've got the hacked information from the Russians here in CNN and you played it, would you be in jeopardy of going to jail? Of course not.

RUDY GIULIANI:

They may have colluded with somebody else, or with themselves, a whole bunch of them, 13 of them, 14 of them, kind of, you've watched *The Americans*, you can watch the Russians collude. I mean, they do it for a living. And they also do other things. But he wasn't involved in it. The obstruction thing was crazy.

RUDY GIULIANI:

I never said there was no collusion between the campaign or between people in the campaign!

CHRIS CUOMO:

Yes you have.

RUDY GIULIANI:

I have no idea—I have not. I said the president of the United States. There is not a single bit of evidence the president of the United States committed the only crime you could commit here, conspired with the Russians to hack the DNC. Not to this day.

CHRIS CUOMO:

First of all, crime is not the bar of accountability for a president. It's about what you knew—

RUDY GIULIANI:



Well, he didn't collude—

CHRIS CUOMO:

—what was right, and what was wrong, and what did you deceive about.

RUDY GIULIANI:

The president didn't deceive.

CHRIS CUOMO:

Those are the major considerations.

RUDY GIULIANI:

The president did not deceive.

CHRIS CUOMO:

He said nobody had any contact. Tons of people had contact.

RUDY GIULIANI:

Whatever collusion is—

CHRIS CUOMO:

Nobody colluded? The guy running his campaign—

RUDY GIULIANI:

He didn't say nobody—

CHRIS CUOMO:

—was working on an issue at the same time as the convention.

RUDY GIULIANI:

—he said he didn't.

Max Bergmann:

But Giuliani wasn't just a talking head. It turns out his other job was to find oppo, to find dirt, to help shield Trump from the political fallout for Russia, and to help him in the potential impeachment fight and the fight to win reelection. Remember, for Trump, this is existential, that if he left office, he could very well be in legal jeopardy. He's literally fighting for his freedom here. So starting in around November 2018, Giuliani focused on Ukraine. Things at that time were looking very, very bad for Trump. Manafort appeared to flip. Michael Cohen, his personal lawyer, was charged and appeared to flip. Jeff Sessions was fired, and talk of potential



impeachment was growing.

NEWSCASTER:

You will chair the Judiciary Committee. The president just announced that Matt Whitaker will be the acting attorney general. Do you believe that appointment was legal?

JERRY NADLER:

I don't think it is legal because there is no advice and consent. But I'll go further: His appointment is simply part of an attack on the investigation by Robert Mueller, the special counsel. It's part of a pattern of interference by the president, part of a pattern of obstruction of that, attempted obstruction of that investigation. And that investigation is very important to assure that we know what happened when the Russians attempted to subvert our election with the alleged complicity of people in the Trump campaign.

Max Bergmann:

Mueller was coming. So in Rudy's desperate search for dirt, he turned to Parnas and Fruman. Now, it's unclear exactly how this happened, but according to Parnas, in late 2018, he was having lunch with Rudy, minding his own business, when Rudy was approached by someone with information related to Ukraine. Parnas's ears perked up, and said he could help. He then worked to connect Giuliani with Ukrainians that could help the dirt-digging effort. According to Parnas, he said, "me just being next to him, me being Russian-speaking, and having business there, and knowing the culture, and also knowing a lot of individuals, and having a lot of relationships, somehow basically steamrolled into me taking an active role as a patriotic duty. And here we are now." By November 2018, the pair were working closely with Giuliani, flying around the world and connecting him to Ukrainian officials to dig up dirt on Biden. And through this process, Giuliani was getting closer and closer with the two men. On December 5, just a few weeks after their first picture together on that private Instagram feed, Giuliani brought Parnas with him as a guest to George H.W.'s state funeral. That's not something you do with a casual acquaintance. And for some reason, Parnas and Fruman, despite doing work doing for Giuliani, were also paying Giuliani, giving him at least \$500,000 from that sketchy company called Fraud Guarantee. The justification was that Rudy claimed to know something about cybersecurity, and if you think that sounds dubious, that's because it is. Rudy left location geo-tracking on his Twitter account, meaning every single one of his tweets identified exactly where he was, which has been a godsend for reporters now trying to dig into Giuliani's whereabouts. NBC recently had a story about Rudy butt-dialing their reporters, who would find minute-long voice messages where Rudy was having a conversation with someone else. Here's some of the audio of that voice message that Giuliani left on a reporter's phone:

RUDY GIULIANI:



You know, Charles would have a hard time with a fraud case because he didn't do any due diligence. Tomorrow, I gotta get you to get on Bahrain. You gotta call—

SECOND PERSON:  
[Indistinct]

RUDY GIULIANI:

You gotta call Robert again tomorrow. Is Robert around? The problem is we need some money.

Max Bergmann:

And he also forgot his iPhone password and had to go to an Apple store so they could unlock his phone. This is the guy they're paying \$500,000 for cybersecurity advice for a company that doesn't really appear to do anything. And so this raises the question: Where are Parnas and Fruman getting their money? And this is perhaps where Dmitry Firtash comes back into play. One source alleged to *Bloomberg* that in the summer of 2019, "some of Firtash's associates began to use his broad network of Ukrainian contacts to get damaging information on Biden." Could these associates be Parnas and Fruman, whom Firtash has denied having any contact with? We don't know. Either way, one thing is clear, is that Firtash also hates Biden, because Biden and the US were backing the new reformist government of Ukraine, and the Poroshenko government was squeezing Firtash. They weren't letting him back into Ukraine, for instance. In a recent interview with *The Daily Beast*, Firtash went off about Biden's trip to Ukraine in December 2015, and his speech to the Ukrainian parliament: "I was ashamed just to look at this. It was so repulsive. He was behaving as the boss, the owner, the chief. It was just horrible." So what's clear is that Firtash has no love for Biden, and what's also clear is that Firtash is fighting extradition from Vienna. So he not only hires pro-Trump Fox News lawyers, who meet with Barr in the summer of 2019, but it also seems like Firtash gets in and helps the Giuliani effort to get dirt on Biden. In September 2019, Firtash's lawyers approached Shokin, the corrupt prosecutor general that Biden had pushed to get fired, and they approached him with an unusual request: They want him to produce a signed witness statement, an affidavit, that blames Biden for the fact that Firtash wasn't allowed back into Ukraine in 2015, which is ostensibly why Shokin wrote the affidavit for Firtash. But the affidavit also says that Shokin believes he was fired because Biden wanted him to be fired because he was investigating Burisma. And this witness statement, which seems like it was written for Firtash's defense team to use, somehow ends up in the hands of Rudy Giuliani, who waved it around on live TV, claiming that it proved the claims against Biden were true.

RUDY GIULIANI:

I also support everything I say with affidavits. I have an affidavit here that's been online for six months, that nobody bothered to read, from the gentleman who was fired, Viktor Shokin, the so-called corrupt prosecutor. The Biden people say that he wasn't investigating Hunter Biden at



the time. He says under oath that he was, "that the president of the Ukraine asked me to resign due to pressure from the US presidential administration. The truth is that I was forced out because I was leading a wide-ranging corruption probe into Burisma Holdings, and Joe Biden's son." That's under oath, by the prosecutor, who was handling the case, who they say is corrupt.

Max Bergmann:

By January 2019, Giuliani was meeting in his office in New York with Yuri Lutsenko, the replacement to Shokin, the current Ukrainian prosecutor general, the top cop of Ukraine, who it turned out was fairly shady and somewhat corrupt, and, as we mentioned, was working with Parnas and Fruman on a campaign to remove the US ambassador who was critical of him for not pursuing corruption. They kept in touch via phone and met up again in mid-February when Giuliani and Parnas met with Lutsenko in Warsaw. By March 2019, Giuliani's push appeared to be working. Lutsenko seemed to be considering reopening the years-old investigation into Burisma. John Solomon, that *Hill* columnist represented by Firtash's lawyers, actually even interviewed Lutsenko. And in this interview, Lutsenko played all the hits. Not only was he going to look at Burisma again, he was also investigating allegations that the Clinton campaign conspired with Ukrainian officials to frame Paul Manafort. And he said that he was given a do-not-prosecute list by the US ambassador, Marie Yovanovitch. In other words, she was working to protect Biden.

YURI LUTSENKO:

[Translated] Ambassador from any country represents this country's ambassador. Unfortunately, from the first meeting with the US ambassador in Kyiv, this ambassador gave me a list of people whom we should not prosecute. And my response to that is that it is inadmissible. Nobody in this country, neither our president nor our parliament nor our ambassador, will stop me from prosecuting whether there is a crime.

JOHN SOLOMON:

You're saying that our ambassador, Ms. Yovanovitch, came to you and told you people she did not want you to pursue, even if there was evidence of criminality. Is that correct?

YURI LUTSENKO:

[Translated] Yes.

Max Bergmann:

But it turns out this was an outright lie, and Lutsenko later admitted that that never happened. He never got a do-not-prosecute list. But what this showed was that Lutsenko, the Ukrainian prosecutor general, was willing to play ball, which meant the Poroshenko government, the Ukrainian government, as we talked about last episode, was doing whatever it took to stay in the good graces of the Trump administration, of the Trump White House. So they were playing



ball with Giuliani.

NEWSCASTER:

Ukraine's former chief prosecutor, Yuri Lutsenko, revealed to NBC News today he was in frequent contact with President Trump's lawyer Rudy Giuliani.

YURI LUTSENKO:

I have spoken with him maybe 10 times.

REPORTER:

And was Giuliani asking you about the Bidens?

YURI LUTSENKO:

Yes.

NEWSCASTER:

He says Giuliani wanted to work with Ukrainian officials to investigate Joe Biden and his son Hunter.

Max Bergmann:

Why would they do this? Well, the thing about schemes is that everyone always has an angle. Rudy and Trump wanted dirt. Lutsenko, the prosecutor general, wanted to help get rid of the ambassador blasting him. Shokin, the former prosecutor general, wanted to blast Biden, who got him fired. Parnas and Fruman had their gas scheme that was being opposed by Yovanovitch, the ambassador. Firtash hated Biden and needed to avoid extradition. And then there's the money, which all remains unclear and opaque but sure seems to be sloshing around, like the \$500,000 going to Rudy Giuliani. So Rudy's hunt for dirt, by March 2019, was going well. Everyone's interests seemed to align. In March, Donald Trump Jr. tweeted out an attack on Yovanovitch. Over at *The Hill*, John Solomon did his part, writing article after article rehashing the same allegations about the Bidens. And Trump himself told Hannity that his attorney general, who had just misrepresented and lied about the Mueller report, was about to open an investigation into the Clinton campaign's fake collusion with Ukraine.

SEAN HANNITY:

Mr. President, the Ukraine is offering this evidence to the United States. Would you like the United States, all this talk about collusion, they're saying they colluded on behalf of Hillary Clinton's campaign in 2016. Does America need to see that information, especially in light of all that, the attacks against you on collusion?

DONALD TRUMP:



Well, I think we do, and frankly, we have a great new attorney general who's done an unbelievable job in a very short period of time, and he's very smart and he's very tough, and I would certainly defer to him. But I would imagine he'd want to see this. People have been saying this, this whole, the concept of Ukraine, they've been talking about it actually for a long time, you know that. And I would certainly defer to the attorney general, and we'll see what he says about it. He calls them straight, that's one thing I can tell you.

Max Bergmann:

Everything seemed to be going great. They had a compliant government in Ukraine. Its attorney general-equivalent was doing what they wanted, just as the Mueller report was about to drop. On April 18, the Mueller report came out and it was devastating. It was an impeachment referral.

NEWSCASTER:

Let's be clear: The Mueller report is an impeachment referral. To quote another journalist who has covered Mueller for years, he is screaming in his own Mueller-like way for impeachment proceedings.

ELIZABETH WARREN:

This is serious. This is about a foreign, a hostile foreign government that attacked our election system and an investigation into that that was blocked by the president for his own political purposes. This is a moment when we have to stand up in Congress. It's not a question of political party or the next election. It's about what we think is right. And I didn't go into this thinking, oh great, let's see if we can stir up a big impeachment fight. It's the conclusion I've reached by reading the whole report, and I urge everybody to read that report. I urge all of my colleagues to read that report, and tell me how they can stand by and say, you know, that kind of behavior may be just fine in a president of the United States. It's not fine. No one's above the law, not even the president. There are some issues that are bigger than politics.

Max Bergmann:

The report was bad. It was real bad. It was much worse than people had expected, because of Barr's letter. And the Trump team thought they were in the political fight for their lives, and they thought Democrats were about to act. But it was ok, because they had their ace in the hole, their new counterargument coming, that Ukraine interfered, and that Obama and Biden colluded with Ukraine. "See, it's not just us that colluded with Russia—it's also Obama and Biden. Everybody colludes." That was going to be their argument. That was going to be their play. And then, just three days later, on April 21, this happened:

NEWSCASTER:





Ukrainian comedian Volodymyr Zelensky has won the presidential election with a landslide, securing more than 70 percent of the vote in Ukraine.

Max Bergmann:

Their man in Kyiv would soon be out of a job, and the compliant Poroshenko government would be gone, just as Trump was in the political fight of his life. If Democrats moved on impeachment, this was going to be the play. This was going to be the plan. They needed the scandals to throw back at the Democrats, and they needed the new government to get with the program. And so what would follow is a frantic effort to get Zelensky to agree to the same deal they had under Poroshenko—even if they had to extort him to do it.

Next time on *The Asset*, we break down Trump's efforts to extort the new Ukrainian president, from Trump's call asking for a favor to Rudy leading intense backchannel diplomacy to Mulvaney putting a hold on \$400 million in vital security assistance for Ukraine. Trump, desperate to stay in office, desperate to avoid legal jeopardy, tried to put the screws on Zelensky.

Producer:

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NEWSCASTER:

Giuliani publicly announced he planned to travel to Ukraine to push for investigations that he told *The New York Times* would be "very, very helpful to my client." At the time, Giuliani said, "We're not meddling in an election; we're meddling in an investigation."