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# Trump is a Russian oligarch

by [Anne Applebaum](#)

During the course of a long career, Paul Manafort, the ousted boss of the Donald Trump campaign, has helped [oligarchs and crooks](#) of all kinds come to power. He worked for Ferdinand Marcos and Jonas Savimbi; in Ukraine, he helped transform an ex-convict, Viktor Yanukovich, into a corrupt president who fired on demonstrators and eventually fled the country. Given all of that, recent [reports](#) that Yanukovich's party allotted Manafort \$12 million in off-the-books cash should hardly have come as a surprise.

Now he's been [pushed aside](#) by the differently sinister figure of Stephen Bannon. But before Manafort fades from view, it's worth looking at what his affiliation with Trump tells us about both of them. Quite a lot has already been written, [including by me](#), on the multiple connections between Vladimir Putin's Russia and the Trump campaign. But the deeper point has not really been driven home: The real problem with Trump isn't that he is sympathetic to Russian oligarchs, it's that he *is* a Russian oligarch, albeit one who happens to be American.

By this, I don't mean that Trump eats caviar or hangs out in Moscow nightclubs, although for all I know he's done both of those things. He is, rather, an oligarch in the Russian style — a rich man who aspires to combine business with politics and has an entirely cynical and instrumental attitude toward both. The Kremlin actively seeks to buy politicians all across Europe. Trump, meanwhile, has [explained](#) that he gave money in the past to candidates from both political parties — the majority Democrats — because “I support politicians . . . and that was because of the fact that I am in business.” He has never shown any interest in real policy debates or political ideas, just in whom and what he could buy.

His transition from donor to candidate, although partly motivated by megalomania, has also been designed to shore up his businesses. Just as Russian businessmen use political power to direct money to their own companies, so does Trump. Federal records in June showed that a [fifth of his campaign spending was being directed toward his own businesses](#), ensuring that he makes a profit whatever happens. He has used campaign events to promote Trump products and a campaign visit to Scotland to promote a Trump golf course. Now those around him are hinting that even if he loses, he can turn his mob of angry followers into the foundation of a [media company](#).

As a candidate, Trump has used the same kinds of tactics that Manafort, on behalf of Russian and pro-Russian clients, deployed in Ukraine: pumping up ethnic (in Trump's case, white ethnic) discontent, playing on public fear and hatred, undermining trust in democracy. In 2006, Manafort [instructed](#) his client, Yanukovich, to begin talking up the possibility of election fraud. Yanukovich's party began training election observers. It's an amazing coincidence, but these are exactly the same tactics that Trump has also deployed. And now, as Manafort's replacement, Trump has selected a man from the closest thing to Sputnik News in the United States: Breitbart.com, a completely dishonest propaganda machine that seeks to sow information chaos under the guise of producing news. Massive, negative trolling operations; bots that repeat angry slogans; the constant repetition of fake stories — these are tactics used to excess in Putin's Russia as well as Trump's America.

Trump also has the Russian oligarch aesthetic: The gilt fixtures of his Trump Tower apartment rival those in the palatial “cottages” that have been built in the suburbs of Moscow. Melania Trump, a Slovene ex-model with a [murky immigration history](#) and a penchant for [plagiarism](#), would fit in perfectly with the professional gold diggers who live in those vulgar mansions. Of course, Moscow oligarchs are far richer than Trump, which is perhaps why he admires them. And they are richer because they successfully converted their money into political power and then used their political power to make even more money. Might a President Trump not continue in the same vein? He could certainly use U.S. foreign policy to persuade foreign dictators to invest in his companies. He could appoint judges sympathetic to his many legal problems. He could use the patronage of the presidency to enrich his family, which is exactly what a Russian oligarch would do.

This would be a totally different kind of presidency from any in recent memory. We've had plenty of presidents who earned money after they left office. Bill Clinton is the most famous and most flamboyant, but both George Bushes also slipped away quietly into the worlds of [consulting](#) or speechmaking after they left office — activities that are neither illegal nor immoral. In modern history, however, we have never had a president who used the power and influence of the federal government to enrich himself while serving.

But if Trump wins, that may be what we get. He isn't running a campaign designed to help his party or his country, or even to push a coherent set of ideas. He's running a campaign for the same reasons a Russian oligarch would: to build a brand, to stoke an ego, to make money. It's the kind of campaign that succeeds in failing states and autocracies. If he wins, America could become one too.

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