

## **Debunking Trump’s Defenses: It Was Russia, not Ukraine, That Interfered in the 2016 Election**

In the search for a defense of President Trump during the impeachment hearings, House Republicans have repeatedly turned to a conspiracy theory that the real collusion in 2016 was Ukraine helping Hillary Clinton, not Russia’s massive interference campaign to elect Donald Trump.

While it is difficult at times to follow this bizarre argument, there appear to be four points that Trump’s defenders keep returning to: alleged actions by a Ukrainian American part-time Democratic National Committee (DNC) contractor; a claim that the Ukrainian government released the “black ledger” in an effort to smear Trump campaign chairman Paul Manafort; breathless concerns that the Ukrainian ambassador to the United States wrote an op-ed in August 2016; and a Facebook post by a Ukrainian minister that was critical of Trump.

Needless to say, none of this holds up to even cursory scrutiny. Worse, this conspiracy theory is part of a broader disinformation campaign that reportedly [originated](#) from a suspected Russian intelligence officer who has been indicted in the United States.

**The original report about the Ukrainian American working for the DNC has been rejected by the very news organization that published it.**

- Some Congressional Republicans continue to point to an [outdated](#) January 2017 *Politico* [story](#) that said former DNC contractor Alexandra Chalupa “conspired with Ukrainian officials during the 2016 election to dig up dirt on Trump campaign chairman Paul Manafort.” In a [2017 interview](#) with *Politico*, Chalupa described communicating with the Ukrainian ambassador to the United States about her concerns regarding Manafort’s many connections to Ukraine and Russia.
- Chalupa has since clarified to both [CNN](#) and [Politico](#) that the Ukrainian Embassy did not provide any documents to her during this effort and that she was not conducting this work on behalf of the DNC, stating, “During the 2016 US election, I was a part-time consultant for the DNC running an ethnic engagement program. I was not an opposition researcher for the DNC, and the DNC never asked me to go to the Ukrainian Embassy to

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collect information.” The DNC has also [stated](#) that Chalupa was not conducting research into Manafort on its behalf.

- As *The Washington Post* has [noted](#), “Politico implicitly contradicted its own 2017 story by reporting ... that ‘no evidence has emerged to support’ the idea of a Ukrainian campaign.” *Politico* has also since stated that the original article “did not state that the Ukrainian government conspired with the Clinton campaign or the DNC.”
- CNN fact-checkers found that House minority members’ [claims](#) that Chalupa “worked with Ukrainian embassy officials to spread dirt on the Trump Campaign” are entirely baseless.

## **Manafort’s involvement in questionable activities in Ukraine was exposed as part of a broader effort by Ukrainians to combat corruption in their own country.**

- Damaging information about Manafort was revealed as part of a broader investigation by Ukrainians into the previous corrupt president, Viktor Yanukovich, whom Manafort had been working for in Ukraine. This was about Ukrainian domestic politics, into which Manafort was swept up because of his intimate ties to the previous corrupt regime.
- Manafort did allegedly [receive](#) “tens of millions of dollars” from his work in Ukraine and ultimately pleaded guilty to criminal charges related to his time there.
- Some House Republicans are also blaming Ukrainian journalist-turned member of parliament Serhiy Leshchenko—who at the time was serving in the Ukrainian parliament—for [revealing](#) the ledger’s link to Manafort. But, as Leshchenko has recently [noted](#), the parts of the black ledger that he made public did not contain Manafort’s name. Leshchenko has said he “learned that Manafort was featured in the full version of the black ledger only on Aug. 14, 2016 when the New York Times [reported](#) it.”
  - House minority members have also pointed to a [statement](#) made by Leshchenko in an August 2016 interview in which he indicated that “the majority of Ukraine’s politicians [were] ‘on Hillary Clinton’s side’.” This is hardly surprising [considering](#) then-candidate Trump was voicing distinctly pro-Russian views.

## **The Ukrainian ambassador at the time wasn’t anti-Trump—quite the opposite. Instead of trying to wade into U.S. politics, he was actually making a policy case to continue the United States’ bipartisan support for Ukraine in the face of Russian aggression.**

- Trump’s allies in the House have breathlessly complained about an [August 2016 op-ed](#) published in *The Hill* by then-Ukrainian Ambassador to the United States Valeriy Chaly.

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While it is unclear why they consider an op-ed in *The Hill* to constitute a sophisticated election interference campaign, even that bizarre contention misses the point.

- The op-ed did not criticize Trump’s candidacy, but rather raised concerns about his comments about Crimea that suggested he would support Russian aggression toward Ukraine.
- The article argued for continued bipartisan support for Ukrainian efforts to combat Russian aggression. Far from wading into U.S. politics on behalf of one party, the piece was simply making the case for the United States to continue its long-standing bipartisan consensus.

## **A single, deleted social media post does not equal an influence operation.**

- Congressional Republicans also argue that in 2016, a single person—the Ukrainian minister of internal affairs—published (and later deleted) personal Facebook posts [criticizing](#) then-candidate Trump.
- To compare or equate this with [Russia’s campaign](#) against the United States is laughable. Personal Facebook posts by a single individual hardly rise to the level of a sweeping “social media campaign designed to provoke and amplify political and social discord in the United States,” a campaign that was funded by an individual with links to Putin and described in the Mueller report as “a targeted operation that by early 2016 favored candidate Trump.”
- According to the [U.S. intelligence community](#), “Moscow’s influence campaign followed a Russian messaging strategy that blends covert intelligence operations—such as cyber activity—with overt efforts by Russian Government agencies, state-funded media, third-party intermediaries, and paid social media users or ‘trolls’.”

Ultimately, impeachment witnesses have confirmed [again](#) and [again](#) what the intelligence community, the Mueller investigation, and countless investigative journalists have found: It was Russia, and not Ukraine, that interfered in the 2016 election.