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Consummate Diplomat or Intelligence Mastermind: The Russian at the Heart of Trump Scandals

To some, Sergei Kislyak is a loyal diplomatic functionary. To others, he's the top Russian spy recruiter in Washington.

By Matthew Bodner

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Sergei Kislyak **Vitaly Belousov / TASS**

Russia's man in Washington, Sergei Kislyak, is not usually one for the spotlight. A diplomat of the Soviet school, he is often regarded as a quiet, diligent professional who always toes the party line loyally.

But in the last few weeks, Kislyak has been thrust to mainstream public attention. He now finds himself at the center of a series of scandals surrounding the Trump Administration's ties to Russia.

It all began with former National Security Advisor Michael Flynn's resignation in early February. Flynn departed amid reports that he had private conversations with Kislyak regarding sanctions against Russia before Donald Trump took office — a possibly illegal move.

The plot thickened on March 1, when the Justice Department announced that Attorney General Jeff Sessions failed to disclose two previous meetings with Kislyak in his confirmation hearing. During the hearing, Sessions told the Senate that there were no such contacts between the Trump campaign and Russian officials.

"I have been called a surrogate at a time or two in that campaign and I did not have communications with the Russians," Sessions said.

But with the Trump administration's alleged ties to Russia still dominating much of American political discourse, Kislyak has himself become a target. Some even accuse the Russian diplomat of being Moscow's number one spy in Washington.

Embed:

> Evan Perez just said it on CNN, so I suppose I can here: Kislyak wasn't just ambassador, he was Russia's "top spy recruiter" in D.C.: SVR.
>
> — Michael Weiss (@michaeldweiss) 2 марта 2017 г.

One CNN story, citing unidentified former and current administration officials, reported that Kislyak has long been known to U.S. intelligence agencies as Moscow's leading recruiter in Washington.

Experts plugged into the Moscow diplomatic scene give no weight to such allegations. Vladimir Frolov, a prominent foreign policy analyst here, called the idea "laughable and childish." Anton Tsvetov of the Center for Strategic Research said the claims are "a product of the general chaos in Washington and attempts to make sense of things by finding new enemies."

Meanwhile, The Moscow Times' sources close to the Foreign Ministry declined to comment on allegations that Kislyak is a spy, and one called the media scandal "a very sensitive topic." Others noted he has always kept a low profile. The sources were all dismissive of the idea that Kislyak is an intelligence officer.

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A Career Diplomat

An engineer by education, Kislyak entered the Soviet foreign service as an expert on trade and,

eventually, nuclear arms control issues. He has worked as a Russian diplomat in the United States on and off since his arrival at the Soviet mission to the United Nations in 1981.

From there, Kislyak enjoyed a rather stable and predictable rise through the ranks to his current post in Washington, considered the third most important position in the Russian foreign policy apparatus.

By 1985, Kislyak was the First Secretary at the Washington embassy. In 1989, he was named deputy director of the Foreign Ministry's Department of International Organizations. Two years later, he was transferred to the Department of International Scientific and Technical Cooperation. In 1993, he took the helm of the department, before moving on to disarmament issues in 1995.

These are all issues that Russian spies would be interested in, but Kislyak was too senior to be a spook. The "neighbors," as spies are known to Russian diplomats, usually fly lower under the radar. Kislyak has always been the top dog, or at least second in command, everywhere he goes. And since 1998, he has been a career ambassador, notes Frolov.

"Kislyak is a personable and professional guy," Frolov says, "and he's very active in terms of diplomatic outreach and establishing a wide network of contacts within the U.S. establishment."

From 1998, Kislyak served as Russia's Ambassador to Belgium and permanent representative to NATO. In 2003, he was moved to the post of Deputy Foreign Minister — a traditional holding slot for future ambassadors to Washington. In 2008, he was finally sent to DC, where he has served ever since.

Currently, Kislyak is nearing retirement age, and is expected to be replaced by former Deputy Defense Minister Anatoly Antonov sometime this year. While sources who know Antonov describe him in similar terms to Kislyak, others describe him as a "bull-terrier."

Related article: Russia Set to Send 'Bull Terrier' Ambassador to Washington

Spygames

Diplomats are often suspected of being spies, but it is usually Western diplomats in Moscow who feel the most heat. The U.S. Embassy maintains routine contact with local officials and opposition figures of all stripes — it is part of their job. Kislyak's connection to both the Sessions and Flynn scandals is simply evidence that he is doing his job, experts say.

The newfound stigma in DC surrounding contact with the Russian ambassador is "really ironic," says Tsvetov. "It mirrors how many in Moscow see contact with foreign diplomats almost as the first step to treason."

The idea that Kislyak could have been involved in Russia's alleged hacking of the U.S. presidential election also stretches the imagination, says Frolov. The embassy has other

people for covert activity, and Kislyak was probably "deliberately kept in the dark [about the hacking] for the sake of deniability," he says.

"Talking to Flynn, Sessions and possibly other members of the campaign was just regular outreach and relationship building," Frolov says.

Embed:

> Let's not be naive folks. Kislyak obviously was meeting Sessions because of his role in Trump world. That's his job.
>
> — Michael McFaul (@McFaul) March 2, 2017

Predictably, officials in Moscow are not amused by allegations that Kislyak is a spy. Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov was quoted by the TASS news agency as saying "[we] have not heard a single statement by U.S. special services about our ambassador."

Foreign Ministry Spokeswoman Maria Zakharova, never at a loss for words, noted simply that the allegations were "a shame."

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