

Did Putin help elect Trump to restore \$500 billion Exxon oil deal killed by sanctions

Follow the money: Will Trump repay Putin by ending Russian sanctions and killing the Paris climate deal?

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The “Russian hack news ... *is delegitimizing,*” explained former George W. Bush speech writer David Frum in a [recent article](#). The conservative Frum was famous for authoring Bush’s controversial “[axis of evil](#)” speech about the danger posed by Iran, Iraq, and North Korea.

But it appears our democracy and our children have a new axis to worry about: [Putin, Trump, and ExxonMobil](#), whose CEO Rex Tillerson—an [extreme Russophile](#) and long-time director of a [US-Russian oil company](#)—is Trump’s puzzling choice for Secretary of State.

I say “puzzling” because the long-serving Exxon employee (from age 23!) has [no qualifications](#) to be secretary of state—other than a history negotiating major oil deals with countries like Putin’s Russia, which in any sane world would actually disqualify him or at least force a recusal from all State Department dealings with Russia.

But that puzzle disappears if we follow the famous dictum from the Watergate era for uncovering a tangled web of covert campaign acts: “Follow the money.” And perhaps another puzzle is also solved: Why did Putin take such a “fearful risk,” as Frum put it, to “mount a clandestine espionage and disinformation campaign on behalf” of Trump and against Clinton, “when Putin had every reason to expect that he probably *would* end up facing a President Clinton,” and a tremendous backlash.

You can certainly make a plausible case, as U.S. intelligence agencies do in their [bombshell new report](#), that Putin had plenty of motivation to interfere. He wanted to undermine the legitimacy of U.S. elections and a Clinton Presidency, he blamed Secretary Clinton for “inciting mass protests against his regime,” and he was angry with the U.S. for the [Panama Papers](#) leaks. Those leaks showed a \$2 billion trail of offshore accounts and deals that traced back to Putin and his cabal of kleptocrats, who, among other things, were getting rich “[trading shares in Rosneft](#),” Russia’s state-owned (i.e. Putin run) oil monopoly.

But a half trillion dollars to line their pockets and prop up the Russian economy offers a much more tangible motivation for team Putin to get Trump elected. And it was Tillerson who had made the [\\$500 billion oil deal](#) with Putin that got [blocked by sanctions](#).

Blocking the deal did not just “put Exxon at risk,” as the Wall Street Journal [reported](#) in 2014. MSNBC’s [Rachel Maddow explained last month](#) the biggest oil deal in history was “*expected to change the historical trajectory of Russia.*”

The top priority for Putin and the kleptocrats who benefit from his rule is enriching the Kremlin's coffers and their own, which have been hurt by the sanctions. And Trump's election already appears to have delivered \$11 billion to the Kremlin through sale of a 19.5 percent stake in Rosneft, "confounding expectations that the Kremlin's standoff with the West would scare off major investors," as [Fortune has reported](#) in a must-read piece.

Kleptocracy—and interfering with our election—pays.