

INVESTIGATE ALL THE SLEAZY INFLUENCE PEDDLERS!

Back when CNN revealed that Paul Manafort had been the subject of a FISA order prior to his work on Trump's campaign, only to have a new one approved after events of the campaign raised new concerns, I suggested Tony Podesta likely had been included on that first FISA order.

Manafort was first targeted under FISA for his (and associated consulting companies, probably including Tony Podesta) Ukrainian influence peddling in 2014.

As CNN noted, the earlier investigation pertained to Manafort's *and Podesta's* work for Viktor Yanukovich.

The FBI interest in Manafort dates back at least to 2014, partly as an outgrowth of a US investigation of Viktor Yanukovich, the former Ukrainian president whose pro-Russian regime was ousted amid street protests.

Yanukovich's Party of Regions was accused of corruption, and Ukrainian authorities claimed he squirreled millions of dollars out of the country.

Investigators have spent years probing any possible role played by Manafort's firm and other US consultants, including the Podesta Group and Mercury LLC, that worked with the former Ukraine regime. The basis for the case hinged on the failure by the US firms to register under the US Foreign Agents Registration Act, a law that the Justice Department only rarely uses to bring charges.

[snip]

Last year, Justice Department

prosecutors concluded that there wasn't enough evidence to bring charges against Manafort or anyone of the other US subjects in the probe, according to sources briefed on the investigation.

Today, NBC reports that Robert Mueller has opened a separate investigation into Podesta on the activities targeted in the original FISA order.

Tony Podesta and the Podesta Group are now the subjects of a federal investigation being led by Special Counsel Robert Mueller, three sources with knowledge of the matter told NBC News.

The probe of Podesta and his Democratic-leaning lobbying firm grew out of Mueller's inquiry into the finances of former Trump campaign chairman Paul Manafort, according to the sources. As special counsel, Mueller has been tasked with investigating possible collusion between the Trump campaign and Russia.

Manafort had organized a public relations campaign for a non-profit called the European Centre for a Modern Ukraine (ECMU). Podesta's company was one of many firms that worked on the campaign, which promoted Ukraine's image in the West.

The sources said the investigation into Podesta and his company began as more of a fact-finding mission about the ECMU and Manafort's role in the campaign, but has now morphed into a criminal inquiry into whether the firm violated the Foreign Agents Registration Act, known as FARA.

Presumably, as Mueller collected evidence against Manafort, he got some on Podesta that merited (re)opening this investigation, and he

feels it sufficiently tied to the Russian investigation to keep it under his supervision.

This is a lovely development, and not just because all DC's sleazy influence peddlers deserve far more legal scrutiny.

Now that it's public that one of the most important names in Democratic politics – Podesta (nevermind that it's Tony and not John – the wingnuts can never tell the brothers apart) – is also targeted by Mueller's probe, it will change the politics around the investigation, at least a little. The nutjobs are likely to scream mightily about Podesta's corruption (conflating Tony with John). But as they do so, they'll also be making a case that Manafort (who set up the non-profit in question) is also corrupt. So to the extent that the nutjobs wail about Podesta (Tony or John), it will make it harder for Trump to pardon Manafort, when that time comes. It may also buy Mueller some time to work through the entire investigation.

Update: This, from August, provides detail on both what Podesta did and how closely it was tied to the Russian government. Notably, John Podesta's brother was pitching DC power brokers using quotes from some of the same people who would, four years later, attack the campaign his brother was running.

To try to sanitize Ukraine's elections, the firm distributed materials to Hill staff with quotes from election observers praising Ukraine's process. It was a tall order, given Yanukovich's penchant for imprisoning his political opponents. But the Podesta Group did its best.

"Initial Reactions from International Observers Positive," claimed one Podesta Group document.

One person they quoted to make that argument was Sergey Markov, described as "Observer–The Civic Chamber of the Russian Federation."

“The elections to the Ukrainian parliament were successful, democratic and organized according to standards even better than some of the European Union member states,” he said.

Markov likely relished the chance to bash the EU. He was no ordinary election observer; rather, Markov is well-known as an informal adviser to Vladimir Putin. He also advised Yanukovich on campaign tactics, according to a former State Department official with knowledge of the region’s politics. The official said Markov was likely in Ukraine helping Yanukovich at Putin’s behest.