

IF PUTIN IS RUNNING MUSK, TRUMP SHOULD BE TERRIFIED

WSJ's report that Elon Musk has had a number of communications with Vladimir Putin and other top Russians is unsurprising. Musk has obvious buttons to press (not just his narcissism, but also his insecurity about trans women arising from being dumped for Chelsea Manning and his daughter transitioning). And Musk has increasingly parroted obvious Russian propaganda of late.

I want to pull the passages of the story that describe the when, what, and who, because they're important for understanding the import on the race.

As the story describes, Musk was originally supportive of Ukraine's plight after Russia's invasion. But then Musk's provision of Starlink to Ukraine became one of what seem to be a number of complaints Russia raised about Elon's businesses. And that period of pressure is when Musk's public comments about the war began to change.

Later that year, Musk's view of the conflict appeared to change. In September, Ukrainian military operatives weren't able to use Starlink terminals to guide sea drones to attack a Russian naval base in Crimea, the Black Sea peninsula Moscow had occupied since 2014. Ukraine tried to persuade Musk to activate the Starlink service in the area, but that didn't happen, the Journal has reported.

His space company extended restrictions on the use of Starlink in offensive operations by Ukraine. Musk said later that he made the move because Starlink is meant for civilian uses and that he believed any Ukrainian attack on Crimea

could spark a nuclear war.

His moves coincided with public and private pressure from the Kremlin. In May 2022, Russia's space chief said in a post on Telegram that Musk would "answer like an adult" for supplying Starlink to Ukraine's Azov battalion, which the Kremlin had singled out for the ultraright ideology espoused by some members.

Later in 2022, Musk was having regular conversations with "high-level Russians," according to a person familiar with the interactions. At the time, there was pressure from the Kremlin on Musk's businesses and "implicit threats against him," the person said.

But the most interesting ties have to do with Russia's exploitation of Xitter for propaganda. The piece describes how Musk published Tucker Carlson's simpering "interview" with Putin.

Earlier this year, Musk gave airtime to Putin and his views on the U.S. and Ukraine when X carried Tucker Carlson's two-hour interview with the Russian leader inside the Kremlin. In that interview, Putin said he was sure Musk "was a smart person."

And Musk's contacts with *other* Russians include some with Sergei Kiriyenko, who is in charge of the Doppelganger effort.

But more conversations have followed, including dialogues with other high-ranking Russian officials past 2022 and into this year. One of the officials was Sergei Kiriyenko, Putin's first deputy chief of staff, two of the officials said. What the two talked about isn't clear.

Last month, the U.S. Justice Department said in an affidavit that Kiriyenko had created some 30 internet domains to spread Russian disinformation, including on Musk's X, where it was meant to erode support for Ukraine and manipulate American voters ahead of the presidential election.

As for the contacts with Putin? Those are sourced to intelligence sources, suggesting that US – or possibly foreign – spooks are aware of the contacts.

One current and one former intelligence source said that Musk and Putin have continued to have contact since then and into this year as Musk began stepping up his criticism of the U.S. military aid to Ukraine and became involved in Trump's election campaign.

But those contacts are not broadly known.

Knowledge of Musk's Kremlin contacts appears to be a closely held secret in government. Several White House officials said they weren't aware of them.

If spooks or the FBI are tracking these ties, you would closely guard details, not least to protect the coverage they have on Putin himself.

Both the Pentagon's official comment and that of an anonymous source suggest the government is acutely aware of all this, but thus far measuring it in terms of leaks, not whether Musk's reported Ketamine abuse or his open embrace of anti-American conspiracy theories make him unfit to retain clearance.

A Pentagon spokesman said: "We do not comment on any individual's security clearance, review or status, or about personnel security policy matters in the

context of reports about any individual's actions."

One person aware of the conversations said the government faces a dilemma because it is so dependent on the billionaire's technologies. SpaceX launches vital national security satellites into orbit and is the company NASA relies on to transport astronauts to and from the International Space Station.

"They don't love it," the person said, referring to the Musk-Putin contacts. The person, however, said no alerts have been raised by the administration over possible security breaches by Musk.

And that's sort of the underlying problem: Until Musk does business with a sanctioned entity or leaks information, these contacts would only be illegal if you could prove Musk were acting as an agent of Russia.

If this concerns you any more than Musk's long-standing public Russophilia already should, then the best thing to do in the short term is to use Musk as a way to attack Trump's campaign (as Tim Walz did the other day, though mostly just attacking Musk for being so dorky).

But there are three things not included in this story that make it more interesting.

First, Justin Trudeau testified last week that Tucker was being funded by RT.

Conservative political analyst Tucker Carlson and Canadian psychologist Jordan Peterson were among those who were funded by the Russian state-owned news outlet RT to boost anti-vax claims in 2022, Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau claimed while under oath during testimony delivered Wednesday at the Foreign Interference Commission.

I'm genuinely a bit confused by Trudeau's claim – whether he means Tucker himself was being funded or his promotion was. In any case, he was discussing 2022 activities (notably, the trucker protests that I hope to hell DHS keep in mind as potential election or post-election disruption).

But Tucker was mentioned in the RT indictment. One point I made about how DOJ unrolled it is that it disrupts or criminalizes *ongoing* funding from RT, and can be used as a basis for ongoing investigation and/or charges.

Relatedly, Tim Pool recently announced he is shutting down his podcast.

The more important detail not included in this story, given WSJ's mention of Kiriyenko, is the involvement of Russian entities in magnifying the conspiracy theories behind the Southport riots in the UK.

“While all the action is happening on the ground and people in Britain are dealing with the consequences of this misinformation,” says Al Baker, managing director of Prose, “the people stoking the violence, the people flooding Telegram and other platforms of misinformation are largely based outside the UK.”

What it shows is the nature of the new far-right – not a tightly organised hierarchy based in a specific location, but an international network of influencers and followers, working together almost like a swarm to stir up trouble.

In the UK riots, you had both Musk and possible Russian bots stoking anti-migrant violence in a foreign country. If Musk has facilitated that – or even just if Kiriyenko used his contacts with Musk for ostensibly other reasons to optimize interference efforts on Xitter – that would be a grave concern (though the latter hypothetical involves no criminal exposure for Musk).

But by far the most important thing excluded from this story (it is admittedly tangential to the description of these contacts, but not to the import of them) is JD Vance.

Musk's involvement in Trump's campaign cannot be separated from Trump's pick of JD Vance as his running mate, someone who is even more pro Russian than Musk, and someone whose regressive Catholic ties have aligned neatly with Russia in the recent past. Donald Trump has been an exceedingly useful idiot for Putin, but he was unreliable as to Putin's immediate policy goals like eliminating sanctions.

There's abundant reason to believe that JD's selection was the price of Musk's support (though it was a pick Trump was inclined to make anyway).

If Russia is using Musk to affect the election, it's not clear whether the primary goal would be electing Trump or placing JD in the position where he would become President.