The Asset – Season 2, Episode 1

PRODUCER:
Previously, on The Asset:

MAX BERGMANN:
The Russia scandal became topic number one in the first six months of 2017. In a whirlwind of bombshell stories and breaking developments, Trump's Russia ties went from a fringe topic ignored by the national media to a national media obsession.

DONALD TRUMP:
Together, we will make America Great Again. Thank you, god bless you, and god bless America.

MAX BERGMANN:
During the 2016 election, Trump's laudatory comments about Russia did not go unnoticed.

DONALD TRUMP:
If Putin likes Donald Trump, guess what folks, that's called an asset, not a liability.

MAX BERGMANN:
In 2016, we didn't think Trump could win. Now we know. In 2016, America was subjected to a surprise attack on our democracy by a hostile foreign power, by Russia. It was the most successful espionage operation in history. It was successful because we didn't know what a bot or troll was, or about election interference, or about foreign interference. We didn't know that this was possible. Complacency kills democracy, and in 2020, we cannot be complacent. Our democratic future is at stake.

MAX BERGMANN:
Episode one: Rock and a Hard Place. On Wednesday morning, November 9, 2016, the Ukrainian capital of Kyiv woke up to terrifying news.

WOLF BLITZER:
Right now, a historic moment. We can now project the winner of the presidential race. CNN projects Donald Trump wins the presidency. The business tycoon and tv personality, capping his improbable political journey with an astounding upset victory. Donald J. Trump will become the 45th president of the United States.

MAX BERGMANN:
For Ukraine, the election of a pro-Russian American president was petrifying. Ukraine was fighting a war against Russia and its proxies in the east of the country. Russia has seized and

annexed Ukrainian territory in Crimea, and Russia was doing everything it could to undermine Ukraine internally. Power outages, cyberattacks, and concerted disinformation campaigns. The election of a pro-Russian American president, of Donald Trump, therefore posed an existential threat to Ukraine's very survival. *The Kyiv Post* later summarized, "In the days since the election, the mood in Kyiv remains grim as Ukrainians and foreigners fear the worst if Trump decides to mend relations with Moscow." But Ukraine was terrified at the prospect of a Donald Trump presidency, because by November 2016, Donald Trump's affinity for Putin was no secret. Trump had effusively and repeatedly praised Russia.

DONALD TRUMP:
Getting along with Russia would be a good thing, not a bad thing.

MAX BERGMANN:
Attacked NATO.

DONALD TRUMP:
The United States pays for a very big share of NATO, a disproportionate share.

DONALD TRUMP:
So we're paying for a big proportion of NATO, which basically is protecting Europe.

MAX BERGMANN:
Trump had hired Paul Manafort as his campaign manager. Manafort's previous job was as top political strategist for the previous president, Viktor Yanukovych, who was corrupt and pro-Kremlin, and who ultimately fled to Russia in 2016 following the successful Maidan revolution. And last, but not least, Trump attacked Ukraine during the campaign. In July 2016, Trump went on ABC News.

DONALD TRUMP:
He's not going into Ukraine, ok? Just so you understand. He's not going to go into Ukraine. Alright. You can mark it down, you can put it down, you can take it anywhere you want.

GEORGE STEPHANOPOULOS:
Well, he's already there, isn't he?

DONALD TRUMP:
Ok. Well, he's there in a certain way. But I'm not there. You have Obama there. And frankly, that whole part of the world is a mess, under Obama.

MAX BERGMANN:

Trump's comments during the election were so shocking that the ambassador to Ukraine, Valeriy Chaliy, wrote an op-ed in *The Hill*. He wrote, "Recent comments by Republican nominee Donald Trump about the Ukrainian peninsula of Crimea have raised serious concerns in Kyiv. Even if Trump's comments are only speculative, they call for appeasement of an aggressor and support the violation of a sovereign country's territorial integrity and another's breach of international law." The Ukrainian prime minister at the time warned on Facebook that Trump had "challenged the very values of the free world." Ukraine's minister of internal affairs took to Twitter in July 2016, calling Trump a "clown" and describing him as "an even bigger danger to the U.S. than terrorism." These were visceral responses from Ukrainian officials, who much like everyone else, assumed that she would win, and that he would lose. But in September 2016, Ukrainian president Petro Poroshenko sought to build ties with then-candidate Trump. He requested to meet with both candidates at the U.N. General assembly, an annual event that brings together almost every leader in the world. While Trump was in New York at the time, his campaign didn't even bother to reply. They just ignored the request. Poroshenko did meet with Secretary Clinton, who affirmed her support for Ukraine.

HILLARY CLINTON:
Oh, it's wonderful to see you again. So pleased to have this conversation.

MAX BERGMANN:
So imagine the horror in Ukraine when news of Trump's victory arrived. Their backer, their superpower ally, whose sanctions kept Russia at bay, and whose economic and military assistance kept the Ukrainian economy afloat and helped the Ukrainian military stay in the fight, had just elected someone who looked like a Russian asset to be leader of the free world. An article in *Kyiv Post* led with, "American voters who elected Donald Trump as the country's next president may have inadvertently signed a death warrant for tens of thousands of Ukrainians, as Russia's Vladimir Putin could very likely interpret it as a green light to invade Ukraine." Poroshenko, the day after the election, desperately sent a peace offer, inviting Trump to come to Ukraine. Poroshenko and the Ukrainian government were in an impossible position. They were between a rock and a hard place. They were literally in the midst of fighting a war in Eastern Ukraine against the Kremlin where their sons and daughters were dying. They had had American backing and support. But now the future of Ukraine was in doubt. The election's result seemed existential for the new Ukrainian government and for its new democracy. So what would you do in that position? Well, one clear path is to court the hell out of Donald Trump and do whatever you can to ingratiate yourself to him. The future of your country is at stake. I'm Max Bergmann, and this is The Asset.

In the summer of 2013, Ukraine faced a choice. They were being offered an economic association agreement with the European Union. This would bring Ukraine increased access to the EU's vast economic market. And while this agreement would not necessarily put Ukraine on

a pathway to membership of the European Union, it would inevitably shift Kyiv's focus from Moscow to Brussels. This would have profound geopolitical consequences, consequences that EU officials were largely oblivious to. After all, the EU saw itself as a postmodern, peaceful actor, not concerned about traditional power politics. But for Vladimir Putin's Kremlin, this was a direct geopolitical challenge, and threatened to undercut his sphere of influence. In the condescending view of Russian nationalists like Putin, Ukraine was basically seen as part of Russia, their little brother. And Boris Yeltsin had made a huge mistake in letting Ukraine become independent at the end of the Cold War. So, not wanting Ukraine to move toward the EU and Brussels, Putin made his own offer for Ukraine to join the "Eurasian Union." Yanukovych's engagement with the EU had raised expectations amongst the Ukrainian people. But the pressure from Putin was unrelenting, and on November 29, 2013, at an EU summit, Yanukovych shocked the European Union, and shocked Ukraine, when he rejected the EU's proposal. He chose Russia. As *The Guardian* described it, Yanukovych's government "abruptly ditched its plans to sign a historic pact with the European Union." In Kyiv, people took to the streets—or, to be more precise, they took to the square. To Maidan Square.

NEWSCASTER:
These are the scenes that triggered the breakup of Ukraine, scenes that have brought the world to the brink of a new Cold War. Unarmed protestors gunned down in the streets by the riot police, who are retreating from Kyiv's Maidan Square. By the end of the day, more than 50 people were dead, including three policemen.

MAX BERGMANN:
The anger was palpable. People took to the streets and occupied Maidan Square. They wanted a European future, but they were also fed up with the corrupt bastards running their country. Last season, we talked a lot about the geopolitical tug of war in Ukraine between Russia and the West, but a key, perhaps the key, driver of the revolution, both the one in 2004, the Orange Revolution, and the 2013-2014 Maidan Revolution, wasn't just wanting to be closer to Europe and the West, like Ukraine's neighbors of Hungary, Poland, and Romania. It was all the unrelenting corruption. Ukraine was a cesspool of corruption, and Ukrainian people were fed up.

UKRAINIAN:
I am upset by the radical events that took place on Independence Square.

MAX BERGMANN:
The protest movement caused a political earthquake. It went on for months, and slowly but surely, the Ukrainian political leaders and Ukraine's economic stalwarts, its oligarchs, started to back the movement. And one of them was Petro Poroshenko, the "chocolate king of Ukraine" and a backer of liberal political reform. Poroshenko was a billionaire. His chocolate was

everywhere. Think Hershey's chocolate. But he was more than chocolate. His wealth had spread into other industries, and he had owned a TV station that had covered the protests extensively and favorably. Poroshenko was also one of the main backers of reformist leader and former Ukrainian president Viktor Yushchenko, who led the previous Ukrainian revolution in 2004, the Orange Revolution. That revolution had succeeded, and Poroshenko had been made secretary of the national security and defense council at the time. But in February 2014, Putin had had enough, and put pressure on Yanukovych to act again. And Yanukovych sent in the Birkut, the special police force. Protestors were killed in cold blood. But again, the reaction was not to melt away; it was to act with defiance. The protestors didn't go quietly into the night. They came back stronger. They held the square. And fearing his regime would collapse, Yanukovych panicked and fled to Russia. The next morning, February 23, protestors woke up and the regime had vanished. The revolution had succeeded. They had won. Victorious revolutionaries stormed Viktor Yanukovych's Versailles-like country estate, that had a pirate ship, a zoo, and a golf course. It personified the shocking corruption of the time. But as Kyiv was shaking off hangovers from a grand, victorious celebration, little green men were emerging in Ukraine's Black Sea region of Crimea.

NEWSCASTER:
Overnight, dozens of armed, pro-Russian forces seized control of the international airport and military airport in Ukraine's Crimea region, a day after pro-Russian gunmen took over government buildings in the city and raised the Russian flag.

MAX BERGMANN:
Putin was not simply going to let Ukraine go. He instructed Russia's military forces that were based in Crimea in Ukraine to leave their bases and become an occupying force. But he told them to take off their insignias, to take off their Russian flags. Russian forces, therefore, in green combat fatigues with black ski masks and Russian weapons, were suddenly occupying government buildings and imprisoning Ukrainian forces in their bases. But these weren't Russian forces. They had no flag on their shoulder. These were little green men. The Kremlin claimed to have nothing to do with this. These were clearly just concerned Ukrainian citizens, they claimed. This was 2014. The world wasn't used to Russian disinformation. They weren't used to being blatantly lied to, and much of the Russian press didn't say that these were clearly Russian forces. And so the international response was muddled. To make matters worse, Yanukovych had stolen from the Ukrainian military just like his government had stolen from every other Ukrainian institution, and the Ukrainian military simply wasn't ready for a fight. So Russia's little green men occupied the Crimean parliament and government buildings without a shot being fired. Meanwhile, the Western press failed to accurately describe what was happening. Russia was invading and seizing the territory of a sovereign foreign country. That hadn't happened in Europe since World War 2. For Russia, the Crimea operation went so smoothly that Putin got greedy, and he set his sights on other regions in Ukraine.

NEWSCASTER:
The crisis in Ukraine is taking a new turn this morning. Armed men wearing camouflage seized a police station. This happened in the eastern city of Slovyansk. That is north of Donetsk, where pro-Russian protestors have been holed up in a government building for almost a week. Another group of pro-Russian separatists continue to occupy two official buildings along Ukraine's eastern border. They rejected an order of amnesty from the Ukrainian government in exchange for laying down their weapons. This comes as a new constitution for the recently annexed Crimea takes effect.

MAX BERGMANN:
Ukraine scrambled to have new elections, and on May 29, 2014, Petro Poroshenko became the new leader of Ukraine. Poroshenko positioned himself as a wartime president. There was a war to fight, and he was going to get Ukraine into it. Ukrainian forces rallied. They fought back. And as they fought back, Russia escalated. They provided advanced weaponry, tanks, and air-defense equipment. Ukrainian planes were being shot out of the sky. And then, in July 2014, MH17 was shot out of the sky. It was a Russian surface-to-air missile that killed hundreds of millions of innocent people who were flying from Malaysia to Amsterdam who had nothing to do with Ukraine and nothing to do with the fighting. This prompted strong US and EU sanctions, and rallied the EU to the notion that Russia needed to be punished. But by August 2014, Ukrainian forces had begun to turn the tide. They were actually winning the fight. And then, Russia sent in the tanks.

In 2014, I went to Ukraine twice as a State Department officer. That winter, I went to the Ukrainian-Russian border as part of a delegation to visit Ukrainian border guard, and along the border, they had been busy digging deep trenches to thwart a potential larger tank invasion that would drive toward Kyiv to overthrow the government. The Javelin missiles that Ukraine were after, that many people in the Obama administration, including myself and the State Department, were pushing actively to provide, were intended to help deter that potential Russian invasion. The Obama White House was against providing Javelin missiles. And part of the dilemma was that providing weapons, especially advanced weaponry, takes time. And as each crisis seemed to escalate, where it seemed possible Russian forces could pour over the border at any moment, well then there would be no way to get these weapons there to make a difference. But the decision to provide Javelin missiles could also be seen as escalating the crisis, a provocation that could prompt Russia to push all the chips in. This was a stressful period of decision-making. Strong and sensible arguments were being made to act cautiously. Russia, after all, does have nuclear weapons, and providing lethal weapons could be a match thrown into a pool of gasoline. This was, in other words, a tough diplomatic and military call. I thought Ukraine needed a way to deter Russia, and pushed inside the State Department for that to happen. But the decision was to stand pat. In the end, Russia didn't invade, and the

conflict stabilized. It settled. The fighting never went away completely, but the lines of the fight stabilized. In eastern Ukraine, a pseudo-gangster government propped up by the Kremlin took root. The US and Europe, meanwhile, renewed sanctions every six months, and suddenly the United States, which had sought to pivot to Asia, was back focused on Russia. A tortured diplomatic process was stood up with France, Germany, and Russia for talks on the conflict. The war continued, but at a lower ebb. The fighting, however, has never ended. More than 13,000 have been killed to date. 1.5 million people have been internally displaced. 30,000 people have been wounded. And more than 90 Ukrainian soldiers have been killed this year, in 2019. Ukraine still has a 280-mile-long front line, and as of 2018, the US had provided $1 billion in aid to Ukraine. Putin had wanted to bring Ukraine back under his thumb, back under the Kremlin's control, just as he had done with the Orange Revolution in 2004. So how do you bring this new, Western-leaning, pro-American government of Ukraine to heel? Well, it's not easy. One way is to fuel a war, which we just talked about. You run disinformation campaigns.

NEWSCASTER:
Truth and openness ought to be Ukraine's most powerful weapons against false news. But their ministries have been slow to disseminate information to the public, especially to conflict areas in the east.

MAX BERGMANN:
You cyberattack.

NEWSCASTER:
Nuclear power stations, gas supplies, chemical factories. Ukraine's critical infrastructure is under threat from cyberattack. Hackers have already had success breaking into the country's computer systems.

MAX BERGMANN:
And you funnel money to corrupt the Ukrainian government.

NEWSCASTER:
These days, corruption in Ukraine is all over the news. But for Ukrainians, corruption isn't new. It's old.

MAX BERGMANN:
Let's break these down. We talked about the war. Ukraine was also a laboratory for Russian disinformation. *The Washington Post* actually got a hold of an internal GRU report outlining their disinformation efforts. In the report, it found that, on Saturday evening, February 22, 2014, the day Yanukovych fled to Russia, that a man calling himself Ivan Galytsin commented on an article in a British newspaper. He claimed to have been on Maidan Square, but said it was

taken over by fascists. "There was a coup in Ukraine." Galytsin was actually an identity created by a GRU psychological operations officer. His profile was created that very day using a profile photo of a convicted Russian drug smuggler. *The Post* found that, overall, the GRU team targeted more than 30 Ukrainian groups and social media platforms, as well as 25 leading English-language publications. The commenters called the demonstrators on the Maidan Nazis and fascists. They made violent threats against Yanukovych allies in an effort to show that the opposition were violent fascists. They bought ads to promote them on Facebook. The GRU report that *The Post* got was highlighting their efforts. It was a brag sheet. And according to the GRU document, their Facebook pages received nearly 200,000 views on Facebook on February 27 alone. During the Ukrainian presidential election in 2014, after the revolution, Russian hackers even breached the servers of Ukraine's election commission. They programmed its website to put up a fake result when the polls closed. But Ukrainian election officials saw what was happening, and at the last minute, thwarted Russia's attack. But this didn't stop Russian television from reporting the bogus result in an effort to sow confusion and doubt in Ukraine's new, post-revolution democracy. In July that summer, Russian TV even staged an interview with a woman claiming to be from eastern Ukraine who had "seen a three-year-old child being crucified by Ukrainian nationalists while his mother was forced to watch." She was an actor.

UKRAINIAN WOMAN:
[Speaking Ukrainian]

MAX BERGMANN:
If all of this sounds familiar, it should. Russia would use these very techniques in 2016 in the US election, buying ads, polluting the discourse, pushing fake stories, and even hosting live, in-person events. For Russia, Ukraine was its disinformation laboratory, a place to try new things and to experiment. Russian disinformation was such a concern to the new Ukrainian government they created a ministry of information policy just to combat it. Effectively, this was an entire government ministry devoted to combatting Russian lies. According to the European Union's counter-disinformation office, "Ukraine still stands out as the most misrepresented country in pro-Kremlin media." Ukraine has never stopped being in Russia's disinformation crosshairs. But Ukraine also became a battlefield for Russia's cyberwarriors. It was a late afternoon on December 23, 2015, just a few months before the Russians would hack into the Democratic Party, and a worker in a control center of a power station in western Ukraine, far from the conflict raging in the east, was preparing to go home. As a report in *Wired* from March 2016 explained, he noticed that the cursor on his computer suddenly started moving without him doing anything. The cursor started clicking on the icons and tabs that controlled the circuit breakers at a regional substation. A dialogue box opened, confirming that they wanted to take the breakers offline, and the cursor clicked yes. The plant operator frantically tried to take back control, as he knew that the lights had just been turned off, and, more importantly, so was the heat. It was December, in Ukraine. It was freezing cold, and the operator tried to gain control of

his computer, but the cyberattackers logged him out and changed his password. Suddenly, breaker after breaker was being turned off, leaving nearly 250,000 people without power in Ukraine in December. Lastly, Russia turned to its go-to influence tool: corruption.

24:24
So Poroshenko often complied, sometimes begrudgingly, but he did act, even when he didn't want to. Why? Well, the only thing really holding Putin back, that kept the tanks across the line, that kept Russia from pursuing a full-on regime-change campaign, was the United States and Europe. The sanctions regime that the US and EU had put in place contributed to a significant downturn in the Ukrainian economy. The Ukrainian economy was also hit. After all, the two economies, Russia and Ukraine, were integrated, but US and EU economic assistance helped cushion the downturn in Ukraine. So while the US wasn't providing lethal aid, it was also helping to rebuild the Ukrainian military. Hundreds of millions of dollars of equipment were flown to Ukrainian forces by this point in 2016. Now, you might be thinking: What good was nonlethal aid at a time like that? They were fighting a hot war. The answer is that it was hugely significant. For example, the Ukrainians used Russian-made communications systems, and often they had to resort to using their cellphones, that were often on Russian networks. This enabled Russian artillery to pinpoint Ukrainian positions. Lastly, Russia turned to its go-to influence tool: corruption.

25:40
After the Orange Revolution in 2004, something we talked about in episode 5 of the previous season, Russia got to work. They helped support Viktor Yanukovych and his political revival. Political consultants like Paul Manafort were hired, and Russia sat back and waited for Ukraine's endemic corruption to infect the new liberal government of Viktor Yushchenko. And it worked to the t. Over the next few years, Yushchenko's popularity fell, and Yanukovych looked more polished, and he won with the strong support of the ethnic Russian population, which was roughly half the country. I talked with Michael Kimmage, a professor of history at Catholic University and former member of the State Department's policy planning staff under John Kerry.

26:22
MICHAEL KIMMAGE:
It is a country in which inevitably Russia is going to have a lot of influence. But the question is torturously complicated from a Ukrainian perspective, because the fact of the matter is you have millions of families that are Ukrainian-Russian. You have all kinds of people who go over the border. You have all kinds of Ukrainians who work in Russia and send remittances back to Ukraine, and it's not always easy to draw the line between what's Russian and what's Ukrainian, sort of, with language, with business, with money, with politics. So from the Russian perspective, the key point is, how can one use one's influence? And the fact of the matter is

that Russia has a fair number of levers, although, that said, it's hard to say that Russia used those levers so successfully for its own purposes from 2014 to 2019. So I'm not sure this story of Russian influence in 2014 is a success story. I think it may actually be a story of gradual failure.

27:12
MAX BERGMANN:
Putin now had a problem. See, he invaded and seized Crimea. They had a faux-referendum, and Russia now considered it to be Russian territory, so they aren't voting in Ukraine, and neither is the Donbass. That's 16 percent of the voting population. We tend to think of Putin as some grand wizard, a master strategist, but really he's a tactician. He sees an opportunity and he takes it, sometimes masterfully, and sometimes this works out. But sometimes, this creates unforeseen problems. And in seizing Crimea and the Donbass, he made the ethnic Ukrainian population the overwhelming majority. Not only that, but by spilling Ukrainian blood, he turned Ukraine against Russia, and turned it even more pro-Western and pro-European.

28:03
MICHAEL KIMMAGE:
Russia and Ukraine are both among the most corrupt of the post-Soviet states, but Russia's corruption, if you could put it this way, has been verticalized. There's the famous power vertical in Russia, so it's a top-down system, Putin sort of knocked out the oligarchs. Forty percent of Russians, some sort of rough equivalent of that number, work for the Russian state now, and most businesses in Russia are either state-owned in fact or in practice, with corruption greasing the wheels of that. Ukraine, I think, is a different story. What happened after 1991 is that you don't have the concentration of power in Kyiv to the same extent at all, so it breaks into domains in Ukraine in terms of power, economic and political power, and each domain is associated with an oligarch or with overlapping oligarchies, all of them of course very corrupt. So that's perhaps the first point to make about Ukrainian corruption, before we even get to the Maidan, is that it's a decentered and decentralized corruption. I don't know if that's better or worse than the Russian style of corruption, but it's a different kind to begin with.

29:09
MAX BERGMANN:
But corruption was still a critical tool. For the Obama administration and the European Union, uprooting corruption was critical. It wasn't just that corruption is bad and hurts Ukraine's democracy and its economic development. It was that uprooting corruption was critical to breaking the Kremlin's malign influence. Ukraine's corruption was a national security risk. And so the US and the European Union put the screws on Poroshenko to act. The US and the EU conditioned their massive economic assistance, which consisted of loan guarantees and other

aid, to Ukraine's actions on corruption. For Poroshenko, this could be kind of awkward. After all, he was an oligarch. He was a success within a corrupt economic system within Ukraine.

29:54
MICHAEL KIMMAGE:
The currency of Ukrainian politics, and Ukraine is not unique in any respect, at all, in this way, but the currency of Ukrainian politics is money. So you can't do well in that system without having access to money, and the way that you gain access to money is not by founding the next Microsoft or the next Google. It's through corruption. So Ukrainian politicians, even those who are elected to office, and you'll see this later with Poroshenko, need television advertisements. Often they own television stations, they need to project their image, and at times to do legal battle, nationally, internationally, all of that takes money. So there's a huge incentive, once you get into power, to direct the system in your favor, and to do so through corruption.

30:37
MAX BERGMANN:
But despite the setbacks, Ukraine did make some progress under Poroshenko. Just before the US election, on October 31, *Foreign Policy* reported, "The incomes and assets of tens of thousands of Ukrainian officials and lawmakers became publicly available in an online database for the first time in the country's history." It became mandatory, as part of a long-awaited reform program that passed in October 2014.

31:04
So Poroshenko often complied, sometimes begrudgingly, but he did act, even when he didn't want to. Why? Well, the only thing really holding Putin back, that kept the tanks across the line, that kept Russia from pursuing a full-on regime-change campaign, was the United States and Europe. The sanctions regime that the US and EU had put in place contributed to a significant downturn in the Ukrainian economy. The Ukrainian economy was also hit. After all, the two economies, Russia and Ukraine, were integrated, but US and EU economic assistance helped cushion the downturn in Ukraine. So while the US wasn't providing lethal aid, it was also helping to rebuild the Ukrainian military. Hundreds of millions of dollars of equipment were flown to Ukrainian forces by this point in 2016. Now, you might be thinking: What good was nonlethal aid at a time like that? They were fighting a hot war. The answer is that it was hugely significant. For example, the Ukrainians used Russian-made communications systems, and often they had to resort to using their cellphones, that were often on Russian networks. This enabled Russian artillery to pinpoint Ukrainian positions. Ukrainian forces also lacked basic things like body armor, which are pretty damn important in a hot war. They also lacked critical items like tents and winter gear and water filtration systems, all things needed to support a deployed force fighting in the field. They lacked vehicles, a basic necessity to get them to the fight on a front that was 200 miles long. So the US provided Humvees. We also provided counter-mortar

radars, which enabled Ukrainian artillery to pinpoint where the shelling was coming from and respond. Because the US was providing these critical items, it also freed up money for Ukraine to buy needed weapons themselves. Also, diplomatically, the US had moved to isolate Russia. Putin had become the pariah. Obama went to Estonia and said this.

33:00
BARACK OBAMA:
As we gather here today, we know that this vision is threatened by Russia's aggression against Ukraine. It is a brazen assault on the territorial integrity of Ukraine, a sovereign and independent European nation. It challenges that most basic of principles of our international system: that borders cannot be redrawn at the barrel of a gun, that nations have a right to determine their own future. It undermines an international order where the rights of peoples and nations are upheld and can't simply be taken away by brute force. This is what's at stake in Ukraine. This is why we stand with the people of Ukraine today.

33:53
MAX BERGMANN:
Biden spoke at the Ukrainian parliament.

33:56
JOE BIDEN:
Thank you very much. Thank you, thank you, thank you. You have a historic opportunity to be remembered as the Rada that finally and permanently laid in place the pillars of freedom that your people have longed for, yearned for, for so many years.

34:16
MAX BERGMANN:
Russia was kicked out of the G8.

34:17
NEWSCASTER:
Now we move to the president's trip to Europe in this crisis with Russia. In a bold move, the US and its closest allies have decided to end Russia's role in the G8 as punishment for its actions in Crimea.

34:29
MAX BERGMANN:
At the 2014 G20, Putin left early after he was shunned by other world leaders. We have to remember, the thing Putin perhaps craved most of all was geopolitical restoration, to make Russia great again, as it was during the Soviet Union. When Putin remarked that the collapse of

the Soviet Union was the greatest geopolitical tragedy, what he meant was not that the collapse of communism was bad, but that the capitulation of the Soviet empire was catastrophic, was a disaster. The USSR had contained the Baltic states, Ukraine, Kazakhstan, central Asian states, and the USSR had client states in eastern Europe and around the world. The USSR was respected. It was feared. And that's what Putin wanted to get back: the status, the fear. And in 2014, he was on the verge of losing Ukraine, what he and many other Russian nationalists considered "little Russia." And worse, when Putin and Russia acted, these Western bastards, the Americans, they sanctioned us and caused our economy to shrink, threatening Russia's power. And now, when Putin went abroad, he was shunned like a pariah. Putin was down.

Putin struck back, and he struck back with Donald Trump, his asset. And when Trump won, the Russian Duma, the parliament, erupted in cheers. The Russian bear was back, and Ukraine feared it would soon become the prey. So when Kyiv found out that the United States, their main and most powerful ally, had elected a pro-Russian president, the reaction was terror. And what do you do in that situation? Well, whatever America wanted. And that was now Donald Trump's America.

36:17
NEWSCASTER:
Paul Manafort, welcome.

PAUL MANAFORT:
Thank you.

NEWSCASTER:
What role are you playing in this transition?

PAUL MANAFORT:
I'm not active in the transition. I'm watching, and—

NEWSCASTER:
But are you talking to the president-elect, is the question.

PAUL MANAFORT:
I'm, I'm, I'm watching the transition. I'm not active in it, and I don't really want to talk about who I'm speaking to, but I'm aware of what's going on.

36:43
MAX BERGMANN:

There was a mad scramble to get to Trump and his inner circle after the US election. This was not unique to Ukraine. The whole world was frantic. World leaders were in and out of Trump Tower constantly. Everyone had banked that Hillary Clinton would become the next president, and so diplomatically, everyone was playing catchup. But for Ukraine, the urgency was existential. Russian emissaries were meeting with the Trump team in Trump Tower, and on the island of the Seychelles, which we talked about in episode 11. So the Russians were all over the Trump transition. And then, in January, before Trump was inaugurated, Michael Flynn's calls with the Russian ambassador Sergey Kislyak came out, and they were talking about sanctions. Flynn came into office as the national security adviser trying to get rid of Russia sanctions, the thing that was holding Russia back. And the Trump team were exploring radical ideas like reducing US force presence along Russia's periphery. So Russia was all over the Trump transition and the Trump administration.

37:45
NEWSCASTER:
In December, Jared Kushner, Mike Flynn, and Sergey Kislyak, the Russian Ambassador, had a private meeting at Trump Tower. At that meeting, Jared Kushner proposed a secret and secure communications channel between Trump's transition and Moscow at the Russian embassy.

38:06
MAX BERGMANN:
But that's not all. Pro-Russian Ukrainians were busy pushing peace plans that would essentially turn eastern Ukraine into a Russian state inside of Ukraine. Former president Viktor Yanukovych spoke to Western journalists in January 2017 from Russia, where he announced a nine-page peace proposal for ending the war in Ukraine. *Der Spiegel* and *The Wall Street Journal*, who interviewed Yanukovych, said he sent the plan to Trump and the leaders of Russia, Germany, France, and Poland. This plan closely emulated the one that Konstantin Kilimnik had briefed Paul Manafort on in August 2016 at the Havana Club in New York City. It was at that meeting that Manafort also briefed Kilimnik on the Trump campaign's political strategy and passed on confidential polling data. Kilimnik in 2017 was working for the Party of Regions, the party associated with Yanukovych, and was in Washington, D.C., during the inauguration with Manafort to push this peace plan. But that's not all. There was another effort from a Ukrainian politician named Andriy Artemenko, who was pushing a similar proposal.

39:16
NEWSCASTER:
A *New York Times* story got our attention over the weekend. In what the paper calls "diplomatic freelancing," Trump's personal lawyer Michael Cohen allegedly drafted a peace plan for Ukraine which would give Russia long-term control over territory it seized in 2014. Now, the plan calls for the lifting of US sanctions against Russia. In exchange, Russian forces would withdraw from

eastern Ukraine. *The Times* says a pro-Kremlin Ukrainian politician, Andriy V. Artemenko, helped Cohen draft the plan.

39:45
MAX BERGMANN:
His plan would have involved lifting US sanctions on Russia, allowing Russia to "lease" Crimea for 50 to 100 years, and then using kompromat to show that then-Ukrainian president Poroshenko and his associates were corrupt. This was not your typical wonky diplomatic proposal. Artemenko somehow got connected with Felix Sater, an ex-felon former Trump real-estate broker who was working to get Trump Tower Moscow built. Sater then connected Artemenko with his childhood friend and Trump's personal lawyer, a guy named Michael Cohen, who is now in prison. At that meeting, Cohen said he'd get the peace plan to the White House, and during Trump's first month in office, Michael Cohen hand-delivered a sealed proposal to the national security adviser, Michael Flynn, just a week before he resigned. Artemenko also happened to attend the inauguration in Washington, as well as stuck around and attended the Women's March that happened the next day. Other Ukrainian politicians were getting in on the act as well. Just 12 days into the Trump administration, President Trump and Vice President Pence met with a Ukrainian politician. But it wasn't the president, Petro Poroshenko; it was Yulia Tymoshenko, best known in the West for sometimes sporting a Princess Leia hairstyle. Tymoshenko was part of the Orange Revolution, but she was seen as trying to play both sides: the reformist Yushchenko and the Kremlin-oriented Yanukovych. She was seen as someone who could do business with the Kremlin and was a vocal opponent of Poroshenko. And here she was in the Oval Office, before the Ukrainian president. But the meeting also came just four days after Trump spoke to Putin on January 28. *Politico* reported that Poroshenko's team was "apoplectic" about the off-the-cuff meeting that happened with Tymoshenko. The Poroshenko government could clearly see the sharks were circling. To add to the pressure on Poroshenko's government, in late 2017, just as Trump was inaugurated, fighting in eastern Ukraine picked up, and Russia threatened to provide Russian passports to residents of the Donbass, effectively making them Russian citizens. *Foreign Policy* reported that "the Ukrainian government is also scrambling to establish a reliable line of communication with the White House, both to ensure it can plead its case and to avoid being undermined by any one of the lawmakers currently looking to capitalize off the uncertainty. The Ukrainian ambassador to the US told *Foreign Policy*, "We want to understand who is responsible for the foreign policy of the United States and the European region. Currently, it is not obvious who this person will be." They were clearly scrambling. And so Poroshenko's people, desperate to get some kind of foothold in Trump's Washington, did what you do when you're trying to gain influence in Washington: They opened up the checkbook. in January 2017, they paid $600,000 to retain BGR Group, a DC-based Republican lobbying firm with lots of current and former government officials on staff, including the former Mississippi governor and chair of the RNC Haley Barbour. The BGR Group also included a man named Kurt Volker, who Trump later made

his special envoy to Ukraine. Interestingly enough, Volker was unpaid when he was paid by the US government, because he kept getting a salary from BGR Group. According to reports, the Ukrainian government was at one point so desperate to get to Trump that they even tried to go through a Miss Universe contestant. *Foreign Policy* reported that the Ukrainians had gotten in touch with a Ukrainian model and former Miss Universe contestant who was married to Phil Ruffin, a close friend of the president. Trump was even best man at Ruffin's wedding, and Ruffin had donated $1 million to Trump's Make America Great Again PAC. Another place the Ukrainians went was Capitol Hill, and there, they made headway.

43:35
JOHN MCCAIN:
We will be working for much tougher sanctions against Russia. They attacked the United States of America. The hacking was an attack, and we should be treated as such.

LINDSEY GRAHAM:
We're going to go back and tell our colleagues what Russia's up to, and the Baltics, what they're doing in the Ukraine. We'll get briefed about Georgia. We hope to make 2017 a year of offense. We believe that Putin has hacked into our elections in America, that he's trying to undermine democracy all over the world, and it's time for new sanctions to hit him hard as an individual, his energy sector, his banking sector. It is time to push back against Putin but be a better friend to our allies over here.

44:17
MAX BERGMANN:
One major constraint on the Trump administration as it came into office, and what prevented them from just ripping up sanctions, was the United States Congress. By mid-January 2017, before Trump had taken the oath of office, Congress already had bipartisan Russia sanctions legislation ready to go. This would effectively turn the Obama-era Russia sanctions into law, instead of just executive order. So Congress posed a constraint on Trump selling out Ukraine. Another critical constraint on Trump was that, as we outlined in the first episode of last season, the Russia investigation exploded over the first six months of 2017. The whirlwind of information that came out about Trump's ties to Russia may have indeed saved Ukraine. According to Trump's own admission, and as was outlined in the Mueller report, Trump told the director of national intelligence, Dan Coats, on March 25, "I can't do anything with Russia. There's things I would like to do with Russia." What's clear is the Russia scandal contained him. And so if you were Vladimir Putin, you would start feeling pretty frustrated that you haven't got the payoff you expected. We helped elect this guy, and nothing's happened yet! Come on, Donald, get on it. The timeline of events in early May are thus worth recounting. On May 2, 2017, Trump and Putin have a call. The topic was, according to the readout, about Syria, but it seems pretty clear that Ukraine was also discussed. And a bizarre sequence of events followed

this call. On that call, it seems to have been arranged that Sergei Lavrov, the Russian foreign minister, would come the following week, just eight days later, to Washington to meet with Trump in the Oval Office. Four days after the call, Trump convened at his golf club in Bedminster, New Jersey, with Jared Kushner, Stephen Miller, and other close confidents, and made the decision to fire the FBI director James Comey, which he did on Tuesday evening, May 9. The very next morning, after he fired Comey, Trump met in the Oval Office with Lavrov and Russian ambassador Kislyak, where he talked about firing Comey. He told them, "I faced great pressure because of Russia. That's taken off. I'm not under investigation." The fact that Trump would say this to the Russians was shocking, but few have asked, what the hell were the Russians doing there in the Oval Office? What was the purpose of their visit? The answer comes from another meeting Trump had later that afternoon. He also met with Pavlo Klimkin, the Ukrainian foreign minister, and these meetings appear to have intended to be about trying to make peace. And Trump tweeted the next day, "Yesterday, on the same day- I had meetings with Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov and the FM of Ukraine, Pavlo Klimkin." And then he writes, in all caps, "#LetsMakePeace!" Trump also goes on Fox News that very night.

DONALD TRUMP:
Russia came in to see me, the foreign minister, the other day, and right after that, they didn't say this, but right after that, the foreign minister from Ukraine came in. I said, "fellas, you gotta make peace, you gotta get peace."

MAX BERGMANN:
What happened at these meetings? What was the point of these two foreign ministers coming to the Oval Office? The notes from this meeting and the transcripts of the president's May 2 call with Putin would seem of immense interest to congressional investigators. Remember, one of Russia's main goals was to get the United States to strongarm Ukraine to adopt a pro-Russia peace plan. The president just fired the guy who was investigating him because of Russia, and according to Trump's own words, he had "faced great pressure because of Russia." But that had been "taken off." And remember what he said to DNI Coats: He had told Coats there are "things he wanted to do" with Russia. Well, maybe one of the things he wanted to do with Russia was force Ukraine to adopt a pro-Russia peace plan. And it's important to note that the establishment of a peace agreement between Russia and Ukraine would remove the rationale for keeping US sanctions against Russia. If there's no war, if there's peace, then, ok, we can remove the sanctions. And remember, these were executive branch sanctions. Trump could simply remove them. Trump thought that firing Comey would take the pressure off of him, but we know it didn't work out that way.

ANNOUNCER:
This is an NBC News special report. Here's Lester Holt.

LESTER HOLT:
Good afternoon. We're on the air with a major development in the investigation into Russian influence as it may pertain to the Trump White House and the Trump campaign. We want to go right now to Pete Williams with word of the appointment of a special counsel to lead an investigation. Pete?

PETE WILLIAMS:
Lester, after serving as the deputy attorney general for 22 days, the deputy Rod Rosenstein today took himself out of overseeing the Russia investigation, turning that over to Robert Mueller. He is the former FBI director who served 12 years in that job. He was actually held over two extra years before James Comey became the FBI director. He will have the full authority to investigate that any US attorney would, including the power to file criminal charges. This is exactly what congressional Democrats have been pushing for, for the appointment of a special counsel.

MAX BERGMANN:
A week later, Robert Mueller was appointed. The special counsel investigation geared up, and the pressure ratcheted up. Not only that, but the firing of Comey caused Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell to freak out. He had been blocking Russia sanctions legislation, and suddenly he moved the legislation forward. That summer, Russia sanctions legislation became the law of the land. Trump could no longer remove Russia sanctions simply through the stroke of a pen. So instead of freeing Trump's hand, firing Comey and the appointment of Mueller constrained Trump, and likely helped save Ukraine from being bullied by the United States and Russia. While this was not the intention of the Russia investigation, it did serve a critical national security purpose by making it much harder for Trump to sell out Ukraine. But it was in the wake of Comey's firing and the appointment of Mueller that Petro Poroshenko finally got his meeting in the Oval Office.

DONALD TRUMP:
Thank you very much. It's a great honor to be with President Poroshenko of Ukraine, a place that we've all been very much involved in, and you've been seeing it and everybody's been reading about it.

MAX BERGMANN:
He came to Washington in June, and the meeting with Trump was, well, weird. Instead of being officially greeted by Trump, Poroshenko was basically smuggled into the Oval Office for a "drop-by." It was about as close to a snub as you can get in a face-to-face meeting. An article in *Foreign Policy* ran with the headline "Ukraine's president has a remarkably low-key meeting with Trump." A Ukrainian journalist closely following the visit told *Foreign Policy*, "It was being kept very, very quiet." *Foreign Policy* noted that Ukrainian media weren't absolutely sure that

Poroshenko was going to get what he wanted—namely, a visit with Trump—and so the visit was kept very low-key to avoid the embarrassment in case Poroshenko didn't actually meet with Trump. And os the question has to be asked: Did Trump even know he was going to meet with Poroshenko? Or was it simply thrust upon him? Poroshenko had already taken off from Ukraine when the meeting was confirmed. But after the meeting with Trump, Poroshenko could not have felt reassured. Yes, Trump was constrained by the Russia investigation. But all of the reporting, and all of Trump's actions, made him look like he was in Russia's pocket, like he was an asset of Putin. By this point, it was also clear that Trump was corrupt. And Poroshenko, we have to remember, was an oligarch. He'd ultimately thrived in a corrupt Ukrainian system. He saw that he needed to play ball. And so what can Poroshenko do for Trump? Well, he tried to offer some sweetheart deals. He offered US construction companies 90 percent of contracts to rebuild parts of war-torn eastern Ukraine. He worked on a nearly $80 million coal deal, the first of its kind between the two countries, that would allow Trump to claim he was fulfilling his promise to to bring back the coal industry in the United States. Ukrainian railways signed a $1 billion deal with GE, creating a ton of jobs. So Poroshenko pushed to cut deals with Trump that would make Trump look good. And it was clear to everyone what Poroshenko was doing. One Ukrainian-American lobbyist told *The Atlantic*, "Poroshenko has become a hostage of Trump."

As Poroshenko was doing all of this, there was also a push within the Trump administration, led by people like H.R. McMaster, the national security adviser, to get Ukraine the Javelin missiles that it desired. In December 2017, the United States finally decided to move forward. This was an important step. You might remember back from season one that a change in the Republican platform essentially weakening the Republican Party's commitment to providing lethal assistance to Ukraine was one of the first things that tipped people off that there was something fishy about Trump's relationship with Russia. So it's safe to say that providing Ukraine with Javelin missiles was very reassuring. Poroshenko's administration wasn't going to leave anything to chance. After Trump had approved the deal, but before the missiles were delivered, Poroshenko made a move he knew would surely grab Trump's attention. In 2018, he ordered that four cases that were investigating Paul Manafort's actions in Ukraine be frozen. And just a few weeks later, the Javelin missiles arrived in Ukraine. Now, this looks a lot like a quid pro quo, like Poroshenko ended the investigation into Manafort in exchange for receiving the missiles. This very well could be the case, but I will tell you, it is very hard to time the deliveries of weapon transfers, and it requires a degree of coordination that I'm not sure the Trump folks would be able to pull off. I think what's probably more likely is that Poroshenko simply knew that moving forward with investigations into Paul Manafort would draw Trump's ire, endangering his relationship with the United States, so Poroshenko froze the investigations into Manafort. Adding to the sense that there was a quid pro quo is that multiple administration officials thought there was one, with some officials telling *The New York Times*, "In every possible way, we will avoid irritating the top American officials. We shouldn't spoil relations with the administration," one official said. A second made the stakes even more clear.

"Can you imagine," he asked *The Times*, "that Trump writes on Twitter, 'The United States isn't going to support any corrupt post-Soviet leaders, including in Ukraine?' That would be the end of Poroshenko." And so Ukraine got its missiles. But one thing we have to remember: The conflict by that point had stabilized. Russia wasn't going to pour over Ukraine's borders and invade Ukraine. And so the purpose of the Javelin missiles, to deter Russia, while still critical, and still important, lost the urgency that it may have had in 2014 and 2015.

But it wasn't just the Manafort cases. According to *The New York Times*, Ukrainian law enforcement also allowed one of the key figures in the Russia investigation, Konstantin Kilimnik, a suspected Russian intelligence agent and the guy Paul Manafort had passed on polling data to in the Havana Club in August of 2016, they allowed him to leave for Russia, putting him out of reach of the Mueller investigation. Now, there may be a quid pro quo, a formal sort of arrangement that Poroshenko was going to drop investigations into Manafort and let Kilimnik leave. But it may have also just been implicit and understood. Ukraine could see how other countries were doing business with the Trump administration—the Saudis, for instance, had agreed to lavish arms sales, the Japanese Prime prime minister had bent over backwards to ingratiate himself with Trump—that the way you dealt with Trump was by acting in a corrupt way, was by giving him something, something that could be seen as a political victory for Trump. And so when the Javelin missiles arrived on April 30, 2018, it was a big political victory for Poroshenko. For Poroshenko, he was doing what it took to help Ukraine, and that meant maintaining good relations with the United States. During the Obama administration, this meant having to crack down on corruption and enact reforms in exchange for aid. For Trump, it was about what could help Trump politically. Business deals with US companies that Trump could highlight politically, dropping the cases against Manafort—this wasn't about advancing policy goals of the United States. This was about advancing Trump's political interests, and he was willing to play ball. Poroshenko had been between a rock and a hard place, between Putin and his pro-Russian American president. And during the first six months of the Trump administration, when Poroshenko couldn't get a meeting, when Trump tried to push a pro-Russian peace plan, these were scary times for Ukraine. But the Russia scandal and the Mueller investigation had boxed Trump in from looking too pro-Russian on policy. So Poroshenko maneuvered, sucked up, offered deals to the Trump administration. He played ball, and it worked. But soon, Trump would want more. With 2020 around the corner, and the Russia investigation heating up, there would soon be another top Trump representative heading to Ukraine to ask for a favor.

RUDY GIULIANI:
I asked the Ukraine to investigate the allegations that there was interference in the election of 2016 by the Ukrainians for the benefit of of Hillary Clinton, for which there already is a court finding—

CHRIS CUOMO:
You never asked anything about Hunter Biden, you never asked anything about Joe Biden and his role with the prosecutor?

RUDY GIULIANI:
The only thing I asked about Joe Biden is to get to the bottom of how it was that Lutsenko was appointed dismissed the case against AntAC.

CHRIS CUOMO:
So you did ask Ukraine to look into Joe Biden.

RUDY GIULIANI:
Of course I did!

CHRIS CUOMO:
You just said you didn't!

MAX BERGMANN:
Next week on The Asset, we break down the schemes. All of the schemes. Everyone has an angle. From Trump and Rudy's desperate search for dirt as the Mueller investigation was closing in, to a Kremlin/Russian mob-linked Ukrainian oligarch desperate to avoid extradition to the United States, and to a pair of hustlers scheming to funnel foreign money into US elections and cut a gas deal with Ukraine. The schemes are all coming together, until...

NEWSCASTER:
Having played the role of president in a TV show, Volodymyr Zelensky is now on course to make that role a reality, winning an overwhelming majority of votes cast on Sunday.

PRODUCER:
The Asset is a production of the Center for American Progress Action Fund, Protect the Investigation, and District Productive. Paul "Woody" Woodhull, Max Bergmann, executive producers, and Peter Ogburn, senior producer. The Asset is written by Max Bergmann and the good people at the Moscow Project, Jeremy Venook, Talia Dessel, and Siena Cicarelli, and the team at Protect the Investigation, and Paul "Woody" Woodhull and his cohort at District Productive. To learn more about Russian interference in the 2016 presidential election, go to themoscowproject.org and protecttheinvestigation.org. Please subscribe to the podcast on Apple Podcasts or your favorite podcast app, and please leave a rating and a review. Thank you.

VOLODYMYR ZELENSKY:
I'm sorry, but I don't want to be involved to democratic, open elections of USA.