

Sergey Kislyak, the ambassador at the center of the Trump-Russia scandals, is going home

That's bad news for US-Russian relations.





When it comes to Donald Trump's Russia scandals, one man has been squarely at the center of them all: Russian Ambassador to the US Sergey Kislyak.

Former National Security Adviser Michael Flynn was forced out after lying about his communications with Kislyak in December. Attorney General Jeff Sessions was forced to recuse himself from the Russia investigation after it became clear that he had not disclosed his own meetings with the ambassador during his confirmation hearings. When Jared Kushner wanted to set up a secret line of communication with the Kremlin, [Kislyak was the person he turned to](#) (there's no evidence the idea ever went anywhere).

And now, with the investigation into Trump's Russia ties heating up, Kislyak is leaving Washington — both [BuzzFeed](#) and [NBC News](#) have confirmed that the ambassador, a nuclear physicist by training, will be returning to Moscow in the coming months.

While the reports suggest his departure had been in the works for several months, it's hard to imagine the mounting scandal didn't play a role in the situation. Kislyak had become such a lightning rod for criticism — Newsweek termed him "[the most radioactive man in Washington](#)" — that it became hard for him to work effectively with the Trump administration.

"People were now scared out of meeting with Kislyak because they're worried someone is going to make some [controversy] that they really shouldn't," Mark Galeotti, a Russia expert at the Institute of International Relations Prague, told me. "He could not do his job."

This shows a way in which the Russia scandal is impacting US-Russian relations — but not how the Kremlin wanted.

Now the taint of scandal has been attached to his name — a perception in Washington that taking a private meeting with Kislyak could end up coming back to haunt you

The goal of Russia's hack of the election was to sow chaos in the US political system and maybe even help elect Trump president. Check and check. But it also appears to have helped marginalize Kislyak, one of Moscow's most effective and respected advocates in Washington. The Trump administration's refusal to come clean about the nature of its ties with Russia, its continual lying about the extent of those contacts, and the ongoing FBI and congressional investigations all mean that anyone caught up in the swirling Russia scandals will have a hard time doing their job as normal.

That makes it much tougher for Kislyak to get the policy changes from the Trump administration Putin wants, on both smaller things like returning diplomatic compounds the Obama administration seized as punishment for its election hacking and major issues like lifting debilitating US sanctions and recognizing its annexation of Crimea.

So Kislyak's departure became necessary — cutting off a potentially useful conduit of information between the two sides in the midst of a series of growing points of conflict, most notably an increasing risk of [actual shots being fired between US and Russian forces in Syria](#). Russia's gambit appears to have actually cost the country a key point of contact with the Trump administration — exactly the kind of person who could effectively advocate for Moscow's interests in Washington and play a constructive role in a crisis.

"Kislyak [has had] a steady influence," Galeotti says. "These are precisely the kind of volatile times when you need a seasoned, steady hand at the embassy."

Kislyak's diminished status shows how US-Russia relations have gone off the rails

There's no public evidence that Kislyak was actually involved in Russia's hack of the US election — or any other kind of wrongdoing, for that matter.

The best evidence that Kislyak is involved is the fact that his name just keeps coming up in the various investigations. But you don't need to posit some kind of John Le Carré conspiracy theory, where Kislyak is the puppet master pulling the strings of a vast White House–Kremlin plot, to explain why.

Kislyak is the highest-ranking Russian official in Washington, making him the natural point of contact for people like Flynn, Sessions, and Kushner. They made the choice to meet with him and lie about it (in the case of Flynn and Sessions) or propose something inappropriate (in the case of Kushner). Kislyak did nothing wrong by choosing to sit down with them.

"His job is to make as many contacts as possible, as well as advocate for the policies of his government. He always did both very effectively," Michael McFaul, former US ambassador to Russia and an outspoken critic of Putin's government, said in an interview with [Newsweek](#). "On political involvement, I personally don't think he crossed any lines."

The general consensus among the Russia-watching community, in fact, is that Kislyak is a skilled and reasonably levelheaded professional diplomat. Putin's inner circle has plenty of ideologues and anti-American hardliners; Kislyak was seen as a high-ranking counterpoint, a pragmatist who was sincerely interested in building a working relationship with his American counterparts.

"Generally a very capable guy, very professional and by the book," Matthew Rojansky, director of the Kennan Institute at the Woodrow Wilson Center, told my colleague [Zeeshan Aleem](#).

His removal from Washington is, instead, a function of the fact that he was simply in the wrong position (Russian ambassador to the US) at the wrong time (the early Trump administration). Now the

taint of scandal has been attached to his name — a perception in Washington that taking a private meeting with Kislyak could end up coming back to haunt you. If it could cost Flynn his job and force Sessions to recuse himself from a vital investigation, what could it do to you?

So Kislyak had to go, regardless of his qualifications for his actual job. And this isn't good news for anyone, Russians or Americans.

During the campaign, Trump promised to revamp US-Russian relations, to improve tensions created by Russia's invasion of Ukraine and intervention in the Syrian civil war on behalf of dictator Bashar al-Assad. In reality, the opposite has happened. Trump's Pentagon deployed 900 new troops to Poland as part of an explicitly anti-Russian NATO task force in April; his State Department slapped new sanctions on companies and individuals with links to the Ukraine invasion last week.

The tensions are even more acutely felt in Syria, where the US seems to be intentionally targeting Assad's forces. My colleague [Alex Ward](#) explains:

This past Sunday, the US [shot down a Syrian warplane](#), the first time America had done that during Syria's civil war. That angered the Russians — allies of the Syrian government — to the point that its Ministry of Defense [threatened](#) to target US or allied aircraft flying over Syria west of the Euphrates River. The US ignored Moscow's harsh words and [shot down](#) a Syrian drone Tuesday, something certain not to go unnoticed in the Kremlin.

It's unclear how much of this is intentional — Trump going back on his promises to cozy up to Moscow — and how much of it is the result of Trump devolving policy responsibilities to the military and top-level officials like Secretary of Defense Jim Mattis (a noted Russia skeptic).

Either way, though, it's created a situation where effective US-Russia communication is essential in order to avoid sending the wrong signal. Imagine, for example, a US jet shoots down a Russian helicopter supporting Assad's troops in Syria — an increasingly plausible scenario as tensions in Syria grow. In a crisis like that, you need cool heads who are trusted in both capitals to prevent the situation from escalating.

"I'm having trouble thinking of someone who could be as good in that role as Kislyak," Galeotti says. "The person who was meant to be the kind of ultimate expert on how to understand America is now gone. And whoever comes in, even if they're exceedingly able, they're going to be to an extent rebuilding their connections, their networks, their understandings from scratch."

Kislyak's departure, in short, makes miscommunications between the White House and the Kremlin more likely. And that's not good news for anyone.

See More:

- [Politics](#)
- [World Politics](#)