

The Breach 308: Sarah Kendzior on the 'Oligarch Envy' Haunting President Trump

Lindsay B.: Welcome to The Breach, your deep dive into authoritarianism and corruption in the era of Trump. I'm your host, Lindsay Beyerstein. The Breach is a production of rewire.news, your home on the web for cutting-edge reporting and commentary on reproductive health, rights, and justice. If you're enjoying the show, please take a moment to rate and review on Apple Podcasts. It really helps new people find out about the program.

My guest today is journalist, author, and pundit, Sarah Kendzior. Sarah was one of our very first guests on The Breach back in April, and she's back today to update us on the rapidly unspooling story of Russian interference in the 2016 election. Sarah got her PHD studying post-Soviet states and speaks Russian, and she's been following Trump's Russia ties since long before the election. Just FYI, we're taping this interview on November 13th, because I'm going on vacation. I'll be sipping Sangria in Barcelona by the time you hear this. So it's possible, just possible, that more news will have broken in the interim. Sarah, welcome to the program.

Sarah Kendzior: Oh, thanks for having me back.

Lindsay B.: You are our second ever guest on The Breach, and when you came in April to talk about Trump and Russia, so now we're having you back. What would you say have been the most significant discussions in that whole scenario since then?

Sarah Kendzior: Oh, wow. I mean, that's like an eternity in Trump time. I guess last time we talked, James Comey had not been fired yet. I think that his firing in May set forth the series of events, including Mueller taking over the case, forming a team, and also just a general realization among the public that this is serious. This is not a conspiracy in the sort of paranoid and unbelievable sense. It's a conspiracy in the sense of multiple parties are complicit in an illicit operation to undermine the integrity of the US government, and do other things to benefit themselves financially, and this is an international conglomeration of people. And so I think folks grasp that now. The list of people that have been implicated in this operation has grown longer, and of course, we've had an indictment, we've had a couple indictments, and I think that that development two weeks ago today was probably the most significant thing since then.

Lindsay B.: I feel like we should exchange cards or something as the two week anniversary of indict-a-palooza.

Sarah Kendzior: Yeah. I can't believe it's only been two weeks, and you know, keep hoping there's another Mueller Monday, and a Flynn-dictment, and all that, so, we'll see.

Lindsay B.: Dana Priest, the former intel beat reporter of The Washington Post, has a piece in The New Yorker where she accuses the intelligence community of committing an intelligence failure, or failing to recognize Russia's interference in our election, a failure on par with their biggest blunders of the Bush years. Do you think that's a fair assessment?

Sarah Kendzior: Yeah. Unfortunately, I do think that's fair. I think that, especially in the second half of the Obama administration, they were not on the ball in terms of how they dealt with Russia generally. They caught a lot of the funding and positions in various departments, including intelligence, to study Russia. I don't think they had a great grasp on cyber technology and cyber warfare. They tended to focus mostly on ISIS, which of course is a serious threat, and I think they underestimated the capacity of Russia to intervene in foreign countries to the degree that they have. And the other thing, of course, that they did was to not go public with all of this earlier. Like the intelligence agencies were aware of the situation by mid-2016. Harry Reid had written about it publicly and asked people like Comey to go public, and I think that some of the skepticism that's been expressed towards this is that it was talked about much more after the election than before. So that made it seem partisan, like "oh, people are just angry and they want to blame Russia, and they're upset that Trump is in, and this is a way to get it out." It's like, no, this is a nonpartisan, national security problem. And the sooner people grasp that, the better, because it really does affect everybody. And so I do wish that the Obama administration had handled things differently.

Lindsay B.: It's so ironic, because the reason they didn't go forward with it earlier was that they want it to sound partisan before the election. It's like there was no right time to bring up the fact that Russia was meddling in our election.

Sarah Kendzior: Yeah, exactly. And that's ... so it's very frustrating. And I mean, in one sense I understand, because of course the Republicans would have attacked Obama, and of course they would have framed it as partisan, and of course the media would've framed it as partisan. But just because they're going to do that doesn't make it true. And there would have been no good time. They should've just gone forward, because it's their obligation as elected officials who serve the public to inform the public of a national security threat. That's the reason. And they would've had to fend off people like Mitch McConnell, who has expressed out loud that that was his intent, was to try to reframe this as some sort of partisan plot, and that itself is very disturbing. That's not really the way he should be thinking about a threat like this. But, you know, it's what they needed to do, and they didn't do it.

Lindsay B.: You have a doctorate in studying the former Soviet states. As the government's capacities, in terms of monitoring and understanding Russia were dwindling, was that something that people in that community of scholars were talking about and lamenting at the time?

Sarah Kendzior: Oh, absolutely. I gave a keynote speech at Indiana University, I think in 2014, 2015, and I remember calling my keynote speech a eulogy, because it was in the central Eurasian studies department, and jobs were disappearing, funding was disappearing, research was disappearing, academic positions, NGO positions, and positions in the government, which used to be fairly robust throughout the Bush era, at least for Central Asia -- there is interest in those countries, because they bordered Afghanistan, we have military bases there, they were kind of undercover before. But also, there are a lot of Russia scholars, especially around the time of the

sequester that were like, hey, you know, there's a lot going on with Russia. This is not where you should be doing cuts. If you're going to cut, this is not a safe place to do this. You should actually be investing more attention to Russia.

And then of course, Russia went and invaded Crimea shortly after, proving them right, and I kind of thought at that point, all right, they're going to get serious. They're going to realize that Russia is newly aggressive and take these threats seriously. And I mean they did improve a little, but they just didn't realize the capacity or the scope, and I think that they were also very overwhelmed with other foreign policy crises, some of which are related to Russia, like Syria. But I think they just had a lot on their plate and they weren't balancing it well.

Lindsay B.: What are some of the things, as an area expert in this kind of thing, that you see the media missing in their coverage of Russia? What sort of things jump out at you?

Sarah Kendzior: Well, it's gotten more thorough lately. I mean, for the longest time, just convincing people that this was happening, that the Trump team was working with oligarchs and Kremlin officials and people connected to them -- that was something that's very difficult to get people to believe. And now what you're seeing is an investigation that's enormous in scope taking in money laundering, espionage, cyber security, the possibility of treason, all these angles. So I do think the coverage is pretty good. I wish there was more written by people who spoke Russian. I wish there was more analysis of Russian media.

I think when you look back at what Russian media and Russia state media was doing in 2014, 2015, and the years leading up to this, it's very interesting. Like a lot of really damning American English language materials that I found about Trump, I found through reading Russian language websites that were very excited about that. Like when Trump did an interview about Crimea on Fox News in February 2014, which was very strange, like why is the host of The Celebrity Apprentice on Fox News talking about Crimea? I found that because Russian state media outlets were really excited about it, because Trump was for Russia to be a superior country, and saying that the US is going to do a great favor for Russia in the future. He was very mysterious about it. So I just wish there were more people that spoke Russian that were doing kind of hard digging and research into this, and I suspect there are in the intel community and in academia, but it's not necessarily getting translated to the public.

Lindsay B.: This is kind of blowing my mind. What year did they have Trump on?

Sarah Kendzior: In February 2014, during the Olympics, during the Sochi Olympics. And he was on talking about Russia, defending Putin. He was also calling for riots, for an economic crash, for everything to go to total hell to make America great again, and then he just kept saying we need to go easy on Russia, we need to be Russia's friend, because they're going to be doing us a favor in the future, and we're going to be glad about that. It was an absolutely bizarre interview. I've referenced it numerous times, but no one noticed it, because I think it just seemed like okay, crazy Donald Trump is on TV, blabbing away about stuff he doesn't know. I mean, that's like

basically every Donald Trump interview, so I don't think that people at that time realized the significance of him talking about Russian foreign policy. But in retrospect, especially because we know everything Russia was doing during that period, it looks pretty damning.

Lindsay B.: Has anyone asked him about that interview?

Sarah Kendzior: Oh yeah. I mean, I've written about it several times, and a couple of radio shows and stuff have played excerpts after I found it. But what was frustrating to me is I found this interview back in, I think June 2016, and I was like holy cow -- I don't know if you can swear on this show (laughs). You know, I couldn't believe what I was seeing, because it was showing that yes, Trump had had interactions with Putin. He admitted in the interview. It showed his whole philosophy, which is basically, let's have everything be destroyed so that people like himself could financially benefit from it, and it had this implication that there is some sort of deal being struck behind the scenes with Russia that was going to benefit it. And it was at a very strange time, like this is kind of before the Republicans had embraced Russia and Putin openly. Like even the Fox News host that interviewed him were a little bit like, gee Donald, you really think so?

And of course, this just became their party line a couple years later, and now they're Kremlin advocates, but it really stood out, and I could not get people to really take it seriously. Like I was sort of surprised that this interview wasn't all over the place, because as Trump was out there saying, "I have nothing to do with Russia. I've never had anything to do with Russia," there's like this really damning interview with him bragging about all the stuff he has to do the Russia, and I'm like okay.

And that was a lot of my frustration is in 2016, it was just people's refusal to look at Trump's own words. It had nothing to do with a big conspiracy by second hand or third hand sources saying things about him. It was just the stuff coming out of his own mouth that was so incredibly damning, and people just didn't pay enough attention.

Lindsay B.: Where do you think Trump's attachment and admiration for Russia comes from?

Sarah Kendzior: I think it's multifaceted. I think there's some kind of ideological or philosophical component in that Trump generally admires dictators, he admires strong-men governments, he admires oligarchs. I think he has oligarch envy. I think if he could, he would have lived like an oligarch in the United States, free of the kind of rules and regulations that we have, although obviously, we do not have enough regulations, because people like Trump and his cabinet members manage to come to power. And I think that that's what he wanted, and I think he's worked directly with Russian financiers throughout his whole career, but especially after his bankruptcies in the '90s. They propped up his business and gave him money when nobody else wanted to work with him, because he was very high risk, and I think that it's possible he owes them quite a bit of money. And so I think there's an aspect of debt. I think there's an aspect of greed, where certain policies like

removing the sanctions could prove beneficial to the Kremlin, to the oligarchs that back the Kremlin, to Trump, and to Trump's cronies in the US, to plutocrats here.

And of course, there's also the issue of Kompromat which has been brought up, and I do think the Kompromat is real. I don't know if the specific allegation in this field OCA is real, but I tend to think that Putin and the Kremlin do have something incriminating on Trump that they are using as insurance, but I don't think they need it exactly yet. I think that Trump is a willing participant in the situation and genuinely seems to see eye to eye with them and is extremely deferential, and that's been constant with him for the last 30 years in terms of his attitude towards Russia, and especially towards Putin since Putin took power at the turn of the century.

Lindsay B.: I wish I could say I was shocked, but at least it made an impression when Trump called the intelligence community political hacks and sided with Putin about the interpretation after the 2016 election recently.

Sarah Kendzior: Yeah, I mean, it's not shocking in the sense that we don't expect him to say something like that, but there's a surreal aspect that this is our president, and he's expressing greater loyalty to a hostile foreign state that's hacked us than he is to our own intelligence services in our own country, on Veterans Day at that. I thought the phrase political hacks was notable, because, I think it was July 29th, 2016, shortly after Trump had his last press conference of the campaign raid, asked Russia to release Hilary's e-mails, and I think his handlers were like, whoa, we need to get this guy off the stage.

He gave this speech that was really rambling and crazy, and I wrote about that, too, where he kind of had a confession. He kind of had this big breakdown and he was like, I work with the worst people in the world, and I need to do it, and these people are terrible. They stay up all night turning, and their bodies covered with sweat, and he's like, but I'd rather work with them, because otherwise, we just have political hacks, and kept using political hacks over and over. It sounded demented, but this is obviously something he's thought about before. Like I don't think that phrase emerged from nowhere. I think to the degree that Trump has any kind of conscience or coherent philosophy, it's in this idea of wanting to undermine a state that seems, in his mind, out to get him, the alleged deep state. So basically, he wanted to undermine anybody who can impose rules upon him, and that's, I think, what the category of political hacks is in his mind. And those, of course, are public servants. He's against the idea of public servants.

Lindsay B.: And against the idea of democracy itself, that political hacks are people that are, in some sense, responsible to the people, possibly pandering to the people for their support. But if you've got oligarchs who have their own strength, it's almost a fascistic kind of sentiment.

Sarah Kendzior: Oh yeah. I mean, he is anti-democratic. He's explicitly anti-democratic. He's sat and ruminated on why can't I get the Justice Department to just carry out my whims? Why can't I get the FBI to target private citizens for me? Like he almost genuinely

doesn't seem to understand that the powers of the president are not the powers of a dictator, and I think this is somebody who has had everything handed to him his entire life, who was born rich and became richer through crime, and I think that he doesn't understand anything outside this narcissistic philosophy, and he also seems terrified by the concept of sacrifice, by the idea of putting anything above yourself. And you particularly see this with the way he treats veterans, where he's insulted multiple gold star families, and he's targeted veterans that are private citizens, he's insulted McCain, and I think that that's because this idea just terrifies him on a fundamental level, and so I think when he thinks of something like our foreign service officers, or our intel community, he can't fathom that they're working for anything beyond personal enrichment. Like the concept baffles him that they're working for the United States as a democracy, as a political entity, and as their home. It's beyond him, and I think that that's, in part, a psychological issue and not even an ideological one.

Lindsay B.: I mean, it was striking when he was trying to handle that condolence call to the widow of La David Johnson, saying well, I guess he knew what he signed up for, which seemed like he was almost telegraphing something Kelly told him about how ... which was much more compassionate when Kelly explained it, that this man died doing what he'd always wanted to do, surrounded by the best men in the world, what he'd always wanted to be, the chief, and it's like Trump couldn't even process it. Like he was interpreting it from a foreign language and translating it really badly.

Sarah Kendzior: Yeah, I think that's a good way to put it. I think that that is genuinely beyond him, and I think that it frightens him. I think it threatens him, the idea that people could fight for something higher than their own material needs or self-promotion. I think when he is up against people who value things that are not the same values he has, which are all kind of self-enhancement values, he gets afraid because he doesn't understand. And that makes him, of course, incapable of rendering sympathy or empathy towards anyone, which is a horrendous thing for a president to have. I think that they really should not have him deliver these calls. I think it's cruel to our troops. I think any situation that calls for tact and sympathy or diplomacy is not a situation that Trump should be involved in, and the fact that he is at this level of power, and that he can call world leaders anytime he wants and say whatever he wants, which he has. Like his conversations with Australia and Mexico and Canada are just horrifying. He needs to be controlled, and there's really no one who can control him, unfortunately.

Lindsay B.: Has any progress been made on actually imposing sanctions that Congress ordered against Russia for their meddling in the election?

Sarah Kendzior: Not in this country. I think Canada's imposed some for Magnitsky. No, I mean, I wish ... actually, when you asked what hasn't been reported on thoroughly, that's something that hasn't been reported on thoroughly, is whether the sanctions are being upheld in practice. It took him a long time to sign them. To my knowledge, they have not been effectively upheld. I've heard some things about certain repercussions for Russian financiers and oligarchs, but not kind of thorough reporting. And I don't know if it's because information on that is difficult to obtain,

or just people haven't filed their reports, but that's certainly something people should be looking into.

Lindsay B.: People have been using the phrase “Russian orphans” as synonymous with the Magnitsky Act. Could you unpack that and explain how those two concepts relate to each other?

Sarah Kendzior: Oh, I mean Russian orphans was the cover story that Donald Trump Jr used, I believe, when he had the June 9, 2016 meeting with all of the various players in this controversy, you know, Manafort, and the Russian liaisons, and Kushner, and so forth. Initially, they said “we were talking about Russian orphans, and how we needed to lift the policy and allow people to adopt,” but what it's really connected to are the sanctions that were imposed on Russia because of their human rights violations, these are economic sanctions, that Russia very badly wants the sanctions lifted so that they can continue to purchase properties in the US, launder money, all the things that they've been doing basically since the Soviet Union collapsed and they saw investment opportunities here. And so that's what it was really about how. They wanted the RNC platform to be changed to reflect that, and then it was. So that's very damning. I think one of the most significant and damning things that's happened since we last spoke was Donald Trump Jr putting those e-mails on Twitter, which was really a gift to the public and the intelligence community, but I don't know what the hell he was thinking when he did that.

Lindsay B.: It was pretty amazing, but there was some truth, right, that Russia ... was it that Russia, in retaliation, refused to allow people from the US to adopt Russian orphans? Is that how that went?

Sarah Kendzior: Yeah, there were adoptions, I believe, that were stopped midway. Like families that had children that they're hoping to take home, and yeah, that was a form of retaliation. And I think that this is a way for Russia to paint this as an act of aggression instead of defense by America. They're like America is being cruel to children, it's being cruel to families that want to adopt Russian babies, and that takes the focus off of the oligarchs and the financial deals and the human rights violations that Russia has made, which has gotten much worse over the last four to five years, basically since Putin got back into power. They're broader, they're targeting groups like gays and lesbians much more, they're targeting people in Chechnya, they've had very aggressive, imperialistic ambitions. There's all sorts of stuff going on that they do not want you looking at. They'd rather have you think about poor Russian babies, but that was their decision, to my knowledge, to put that policy into play.

Lindsay B.: What do you think Putin's wishlist is going forward in the near term? What kind of concessions would he like to get out of Trump? And what agendas of his would those help advance?

Sarah Kendzior: Basically, I think you can figure this out from what Trump has said, because he has trouble keeping it quiet. I think Putin would like the sanctions dropped. I think that's the main thing. I think he would like the US to withdraw from NATO. I think

he would like the US to withdraw from friendly engagement with the EU, and of course, he would like the EU to weaken, or potentially collapse as well. I mean, he basically wants a weakened West so that they don't constrain him, so that they don't constrain him and his inner circle financially, in terms of investments and in money laundering and basically criminal activity. He doesn't want to be constrained in the human rights violations. He doesn't want the UN or other bodies breathing down his neck, and he really wants, I think, to continue this aggressive expansion of Russian territory into Eastern Europe. I think that he would like to make moves into former Soviet Union territory. This could potentially include the Baltics or parts of Central Asia, as well as Ukraine, where they're already operating. He doesn't want anybody to stand in their way, and so the weaker his rivals are, the better off he feels.

Lindsay B.: And can you talk a bit about how Russia has the meddling affairs of other western democracies, say, in Europe? Like I think that people often find it hard to wrap their mind around the idea of Russia interfering in US elections because they're not familiar with all these other petri dishes where Russia has been trying to poison.

Sarah Kendzior: Yeah, Russia has been doing this for a long time, and I think the significant change isn't really the extent of their ambitions, but their ability to carry it out, and that's due to changes in technology. I think social media was a huge gift for them. It allowed them to perform manipulative acts and reach a massive foreign audience very easily under anonymity. And so they started out targeting countries in the former Soviet Union. You saw this in Georgia, in Ukraine, they tried in countries like Estonia that were on to them and had a bulwark of guns. And then they started to make moves into Western Europe. They were active during Brexit.

That's something that's currently being studied, is the connections of people like Nigel Farage to Kremlin officials, and others, Boris Johnson, others involved in Brexit, the use of bots in Brexit. They attempted to get Marine Le Pen elected in France. That wasn't successful, in part because France was aware of these kind of operations, and they were warning the public, this is what to look out for in terms of Russian propaganda. They also tried in Germany. I think the world needs to accept that this is what they're going to continue to do, and I think the fine line that people need to hold to is to not go into full-fledged paranoia and just assume everything is a Russian bot, everything is a Russian operation.

It's very difficult for people to maintain relationships of trust online, and I think that you should be cautious, you should get to know people, know their history and backgrounds, look for inconsistencies, or whether an account suddenly appeared at a political moment, and seems to be backed up by a lot of bots. Just apply some critical thinking and media literacy to what you see, but I think it would be beneficial, not just to Russia but to Trump and to anybody who opposes the principles of democracy, for us to all doubt each other, for us to all be incredibly paranoid about who we, quote, really are, and so I think just be cautious, but also try to work for the greater good within the difficulties of this new cyber environment.

Lindsay B.: We've got listeners all over the technological sophistication spectrum. Can you give a quick overview of what bots are for somebody who maybe doesn't use Twitter?

Sarah Kendzior: Yeah. I mean, people sometimes use bots and trolls interchangeably, and that's not quite right. When I say bot, I'm thinking of an automated account that is not really run by a human being, that's often programmed to respond to an algorithm in order to make certain hashtags or people or sentiments public, I mean popular, and to resonate with the public. And they can do things, like on Twitter, if enough people are talking about something, it can be pushed into a trending topic. They also can be used to take advantage of preexisting public interest, things people are already talking about, and try to spin that material so that it reflects a particular political perspective, usually with a fairly inflammatory content, or content which makes the people that they like, like Trump or Putin, look good, and poses conspiracy theories about those that don't.

And then there's also trolls. There are people that are hired to write these kind of content, to impersonate Americans, or people of other nationalities, to create an entire persona, and this is designed for a variety of reasons. Some of it's propaganda, some of it, I think, is to basically map social networks online and use that information to give back to those designing these sorts of attacks, and see whose friends with who, and who can be manipulated and who can't, and what's useful, and also just to spy on people. There were some Russians that were impersonating black activists, and they were having direct message exchanges with actual people in the US, and even organizing protests, and they did with Trump supporters as well, and they did this with a Texas secessionist group, and all of that, it helps erode trust, and it gives them a lot of material and insight into the American political system. And so all these kinds of things that Russia historically has been very good at doing, these kind of active measures of surveillance and deceit and espionage. They're now able to do really fast and pretty well in a cyber capacity. That's a frightening thing,

Lindsay B.: So it becomes very easy to develop the cultural expertise that they may have been lacking, that they can just literally ping anybody out on the Internet and the receptive people come in and give them information they probably couldn't buy at any price about how Americans think and live and feel.

Sarah Kendzior: Yeah, absolutely. I mean, there's been all this question about how much help did Americans give them, and I do think that there are Americans who are involved in helping them. I mean, we know who some of them are. That's why Manafort was indicted, it's why Papadopoulos was indicted. But I think in terms of acquiring cultural knowledge, it's not really that hard to immerse yourself in an Internet culture to get to know people. I'm saying this as an anthropologist, you could basically use like ethnographic techniques to gain this kind of knowledge. And of course, some of these trolls, the Russian trolls, are sloppy. The Texas website is a great example that, you know, it's like I love Texas shape. Like very obviously not-

Lindsay B.: Texas shape is very nice though. Very shapely.

Sarah Kendzior: It is.

Lindsay B.: Pointy at the bottom.

Sarah Kendzior: Excellent shape. (laughs) You know, but it was very obvious that this is not a home-grown US effort, but others are slicker, and that's because these guys are professionally trained. This is their livelihood. They are spies, and so that's what they do, and it's a lot easier to be a spy on the Internet than it is a real life, and they can get a lot done, and they're very committed to it.

Lindsay B.: Sarah, that's all the time we have for today. Thank you so much for coming on the program.

Sarah Kendzior: Oh thank you.

Lindsay B.: And now it's time for recommended reading, a hand-picked selection to deepen your understanding of our current political moment. This week's reading comes from AJ Vicens and Mother Jones, and it's called Rebuilding Puerto Rico Will Cost 95 Billion, Says Governor. As of mid-November, 60% of the island remains without power, and 70% remains without potable drinking water. Congress has approved five billion in aid for Puerto Rico, but most of that is a loan the island will have to pay back on top of the tens of billions of dollars it already owes to bondholders and in outstanding pension obligations. Disaster capitalism is already in full swing on the island. Education secretary Betsy DeVoss has already visited talk up school privatization, so clearly it's going to be a long road back for our fellow citizens, and we have to all remain vigilant and demand accountability.

That's it for recommended reading.

The Breach is produced by Nora Hurley for Rewire Radio. Our executive producer is Marc Faletti. Our theme music is Dark Alliance performed by Darcy James Argue's Secret Society, and I'm your host, Lindsay Beyerstein. Follow Rewire at [rewire_news](#) for the latest on the issues that matter most. See you next week.