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Trump administration hits 24 Russians with sanctions over 'malign activity'

Government officials and oligarchs are among those sanctioned, in US retaliation for alleged election meddling and other actions



The US treasury secretary, Steven Mnuchin, accused Russia of 'attempting to subvert western democracies, and malicious cyber activities'. Photograph: Frederic J/AFP/Getty Images

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The Trump administration announced new sanctions on seven Russian oligarchs and 17 top government officials on Friday, in a move that targets Vladimir Putin's inner circle for "malign activity" including meddling in the 2016 US election and other aggressions.

The new economic sanctions represent the most forceful action yet taken by the Trump administration against Putin's circle.

“The Russian government operates for the disproportionate benefit of oligarchs and government elites,” said the treasury secretary, Steven Mnuchin. “Russian oligarchs and elites who profit from this corrupt system will no longer be insulated from the consequences of their government’s destabilizing activities.”

Mnuchin cited Russian aggression in Crimea and Moscow’s support of the regime of Bashar al-Assad in the bloody civil war in Syria as well as “attempting to subvert western democracies, and malicious cyber activities” as reasons for the sanctions.

Among the targeted Russians are Kirill Shamalov, who has grown massively wealthy since marrying Putin’s daughter in 2013.

A dozen Russian companies owned by the oligarchs were also targeted, including Rosoboroneksport, a state a state-owned arms-dealing company with ties to the Syrian government, the treasury department said.

Senior Trump administration officials cast the penalties as part of a concerted and ongoing effort by the US to push back Putin’s government, emphasizing that since Trump took office last year, the US has punished 189 Russian-related people and entities with sanctions.

Trump has been under pressure from Congress to respond more forcefully to Russian aggression in the US. In recent weeks his administration has rolled out a series of actions including several economic and diplomatic steps to increase pressure on Putin and those in his circle.

“Nobody has been tougher on Russia than I have,” Trump said at a news conference on Tuesday.

Still, he has pointedly continued to avoid directly criticizing Putin himself, and recently invited the Russian leader to meet with him, possibly at the White House.

Rather than punishing Russia for one specific action, the new sanctions are in response to “the totality of the Russian government’s ongoing and increasingly brazen pattern” of bad behavior, said the officials, who were not authorized to comment by name and briefed reporters on condition of anonymity.

Russian lawmaker Konstantin Kosachev, chairman of the international affairs committee of Russia’s upper house of parliament, said the sanctions were baseless and unfriendly, Interfax news agency reported. Russia’s trade minister said state companies targeted in the new measures would be given additional government support.

But Rosoboronexport said the sanctions against it were designed to squeeze Russia out of the global arms market. “This is unfair competition in its purest form,” a spokeswoman told Reuters.

Many of the targets are individuals and businesses associated with Russia’s energy sector, including those affiliated with state-owned Gazprom. Officials said the goal was to show that those who have benefited financially from the Russian president’s position of power are fair game for US punishments, noting that many of those being sanctioned are closely tied to Putin himself.

Also targeted is aluminum magnate Oleg Deripaska, a figure in Robert Mueller's investigation into Russian election meddling, due to his ties to Trump's former campaign chairman Paul Manafort. Deripaska has been targeted with US sanctions previously, but officials said those being announced on Friday were more comprehensive.

Shares in Deripaska's London-listed EN+ group fell around 20% in the wake of the sanctions announcement.

Many of the Russian oligarchs and politicians and affiliated businesses had already been identified by the treasury and state department as potential targets on a list that was compiled and published in January.

Senator John McCain, a Republican of Arizona who has been critical of Trump's posture on Russia, applauded the new wave of economic sanctions.

"Today's sanctions send a clear message to Putin and his cronies that there will be a high price to pay for Russia's aggression in Ukraine and Syria, and its attempts to undermine Western democracies, including our own," McCain said in a statement.

The sanctions freeze any assets that those targeted have in US jurisdictions and bars Americans from doing business with them. But the administration said it would give guidance to Americans who may currently have business with them about how to wind down that business and avoid running afoul of the sanctions.

The Trump administration used a variety of legal mechanisms to implement the sanctions, including the Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act. Known as CAATSA, the law was overwhelmingly passed by Congress in 2017 and signed by Trump despite some objections.

The law aims to punish Russia for interfering in the US election as well as actions intended to subvert democracy in Europe. The law also authorizes the president to impose sanctions on Iran for destabilizing activity in the Middle East and North Korea for its nuclear and ballistic missile programs.

Last month, the US targeted 19 Russians and five other entities with sanctions in the first use of the law. The administration has also expelled dozens of Russian diplomats and shut down two Russian consulates in response to Russian behavior, including the poisoning of an ex-spy in Britain that has been blamed on Moscow.

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