

# Do U.S. Oligarchs Exist? Not in Mainstream Media

We hear incessantly about Russian oligarchs. But do they also exist in the United States? You wouldn't know it by watching cable news, says Jeff Cohen.

By **Jeff Cohen**



TV news shows are good at getting viewers riled up. Day and night, I hear the anchors on CNN and MSNBC getting us in a frenzy about the schemes of this or that “Russian oligarch with links to the Kremlin.” I’ve heard that phrase incessantly in recent weeks

Plenty of others have heard the “Russian oligarch” phrase. Merriam-Webster.com [reported](#) that “oligarch” was one of its most searched-for words on April 5 “following reports that Robert Mueller had questioned Russian businessmen to whom this descriptor applies.”

Webster’s defines oligarchy as a “government in which a small group exercises control especially for corrupt and selfish purposes.” Dictionary.com calls it “a form of government in which all power is vested in a few persons or in a dominant class or clique; government by the few.” So an oligarch is not just a rich person but one who has influence or control over government, rather than directly ruling, as in a [plutocracy](#).

One phrase I haven’t heard from any of the purportedly progressive hosts on MSNBC is: “A *U.S. oligarch with links to Washington.*”

That avoidance is revealing when one considers an indisputable fact: U.S. oligarchs have done far more to undermine U.S. democracy than any Russian.

When Vladimir Putin first became Russian president in the early 2000s he made a deal with the oligarchs: he would leave them alone if they kept their noses out of politics. Hence they would revert to just being filthy rich. The oligarchs who remained are presumably loyal to Putin, or at least don’t try to dominate him, the way some powerfully rich Americans seek to influence the U.S. government away from what it might otherwise do.

## **A List**

Here is a 2014 [list](#) compiled by the Brookings Institution of the 20

“Most Influential Billionaires Behind The Scenes of US Politics,” who could

otherwise be called U.S. oligarchs. But they aren't called that by mainstream media, and that's telling. Rupert Murdoch, Jeff Bezos, the Koch brothers (and Donald Trump, who made the list) all have exercised undue influence on government for their own interests, and not necessarily the public's. Let's take a close look at one U.S. oligarch who didn't make the list.

Brian L. Roberts – who certainly fits the Cambridge English dictionary definition of “oligarch” as “one of a small group of powerful people who control a country or an industry.” As chair and CEO of Comcast, Roberts runs the company his dad founded and has sole voting rights over one-third of the corporation's stock. His annual compensation last year of \$28.6 million was less than what 14 other U.S. oligarchs – I mean, CEOs – “earned.” His net worth is estimated to be over \$1.65 billion.

Does this oligarch have “links to Washington”? In one recent year, Comcast devoted nearly \$19 million to lobbying, second only to military-industrial firm Northrop Grumman. Last year, it spent more than \$15 million. And oligarch Roberts has been a top D.C. power player for decades, having gotten his way with one president after another – from President Clinton's deregulatory, anti-consumer Telecommunications Act of 1996 to President Trump's current effort to end Net Neutrality on behalf of Comcast and other giant Internet providers.

President Bill Clinton's pro-conglomeration Telcom Act and Donald Trump's Net Neutrality assault have both undermined U.S. democracy. No Russian had a hand in it. (You may have heard that the Trump-propagandist Sinclair Broadcast Group will soon own more than 200 local TV stations; until the Telcom Act, a company could legally own no more than 12.)

You've got to hand it to U.S. oligarchs; so many of them stay on top no matter which party runs Washington. They sure have greater staying power than Russian oligarchs – who, we're constantly told, end up dead or in prison if they fall out of favor with President Putin.

Roberts certainly has the lifestyle of an oligarch. He maintains a seasonal dacha – I mean, second home – in Martha's Vineyard where he keeps his custom-built Sparkman & Stephens sloop, and where he has hosted President Obama, including at an A-list cocktail party thrown for Obama in August 2013. And Roberts reportedly just built a sprawling mansion in North Palm Beach, not far from Trump's Mar-a-lago.

But his primary residence is in Philadelphia; Obama has been a regular presence at Comcast mansions there as well. In 2013, speaking at a Democratic Party fundraiser in the Philadelphia home of Roberts' top lobbyist, President Obama commented: “I have been here so much, the only thing I haven't done in

this house is have Seder dinner.”

While Russian oligarchs are often passionate game-hunters, Roberts is an avid golfer, carrying an impressive 8 handicap. Obama has famously golfed with him “on the lush fairways of the Vineyard Golf Club.”

There’s one last factoid I need to add about Roberts. As Comcast’s CEO, he is the ultimate boss of those allegedly progressive hosts on MSNBC. Which may help to explain their silence about U.S. oligarchs, since it would be difficult to bring up the topic without mentioning their boss.

I really shouldn’t single out Roberts. Nor the MSNBC hosts he employs. Because the problem goes way beyond this particular oligarch and that particular corporate news outlet.

Roberts is just one of dozens of powerful U.S. oligarchs. They compose a “U.S. ruling class” and preside over a “corporate state” – a couple more phrases one virtually never hears in mainstream U.S. media. One reason these oligarchs get little critical coverage and no systemic scrutiny is because – as in Russia – oligarchs are owners or major sponsors of mainstream media.

Let me be clear, so as to not overstate things: Fox News hosts are free to tarnish certain oligarchs, Democratic ones like George Soros – and MSNBC hosts gleefully go after Republican oligarchs like the Mercers and the Koch brothers.

But to get a more accurate and complete view of the workings of the U.S. political system (aka “U.S. oligarchy”), I have a suggestion: Disconnect from MSNBC, CNN, Fox and other corporate news sources and turn instead to high-quality, independent progressive media.

If you do, you’ll see that the problems plaguing U.S. democracy and the U.S. economy are definitely the work of oligarchs. But they don’t speak Russian.

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