

Leaked files reveal how Uber lobbied U.S. and European politicians for favors



Dutch PM Mark Rutte, Uber's then CEO Travis Kalanick and Neelie Kroes on a visit to Silicon Valley in 2016. (File photo)

San Francisco, July 11 (RHC)-- Thousands of leaked files have revealed how a U.S.-based transport company lobbied top American and European politicians to win favors, change transportation regulations, and escape justice.

The files detail the extensive accommodation Uber received from high-level politicians and government officials including US President Barack Obama's campaign manager, David Plouffe, France's Emmanuel Macron, and former European Union commissioner Neelie Kroes.

They show how the global transportation company's former CEO personally ordered the use of a "kill switch" to prevent raiding police and regulatory agents from accessing its computers.

The 'Uber Files' is a collection of over 124,000 records -- including 83,000 emails and 1,000 other files involving conversations, spanning 2013 to 2017 -- leaked to the UK-based Guardian news outlet and shared with the International Consortium of Investigative Journalists and a number of media organizations.

The files, for the first time, reveal how a \$90 million-a-year lobbying and public relations effort by Uber recruited friendly politicians to help in its controversial campaign to disrupt Europe's taxi industry.

While French taxi drivers staged occasional violent protests in the streets against Uber, Macron -- who at the time was the country's Economy Minister -- shared a close relationship with the company's boss Travis Kalanick, and told him he would reform French laws in its favor.

Reporting on the revelations, British media noted that while "Uber's ruthless business methods were widely known," they offer for the first time "a unique inside view of the lengths it went to in achieving its goals."

The files also demonstrate how former EU digital commissioner Neelie Kroes was in talks to join Uber before her tenure ended - and then secretly lobbied for the firm, in potential breach of EU ethics rules.

At the time, Uber was not just one of the world's fastest-growing companies, it was one of the most controversial firms, dogged by court cases, allegations of sexual harassment, and data breach scandals.

Paris was the scene of Uber's first European launch, and it met stiff resistance from the taxi industry, culminating in violent protests in the streets. In August 2014, however, Macron -- who had just been appointed minister for the economy -- saw Uber as a source of growth and badly needed new jobs, and was keen to help.

That October, Macron held a meeting with Kalanick and other executives and lobbyists, which marked the start of a long -- but little-publicized -- stint as a champion of Uber's interests within the French government.

Uber lobbyist Mark MacGann described the meeting as "spectacular. Like I've never seen," the files show. "We will dance soon," he added. French taxi drivers were particularly enraged by the 2014 launch of UberPop -- a service that allowed unlicensed drivers to offer rides, at much lower prices.

Courts and parliament banned it, but Uber kept the service running as it challenged the law. The extent of Macron's relationship with the controversial global firm that was operating in violation of French law had not been revealed until the recent reports about the leaked files.

The leaked files also expose how Uber's relationship with European Commission vice-president Neelie Kroes began significantly and ran deeper than was previously known, putting her in an apparent breach of rules governing commissioners' conduct.

They also show she was in talks to join Uber's advisory board before she even left her last European post in November 2014 – which is in violation of EU rules that say commissioners have to respect a "cooling-off" period, then 18 months, during which new jobs require the approval of the commission.

In her home country, the Netherlands, the UberPop ridesharing service had also brought legal and political trouble and in March 2015, Uber's Amsterdam office was raided by Dutch police. She wrote to the commission's Ad Hoc Ethical Committee requesting permission to join Uber's advisory board before the 18 months were up, and appealed to commission president Jean-Claude Juncker.

That permission was denied, but documents show Kroes continued to help Uber informally until her appointment was announced, shortly after the cooling-off period had ended. According to the leaked documents, Uber had a second line of defense against legal probes -- the "kill switch," which made it impossible for visiting law enforcement to access the company's computers.

This would restrict officers' access to sensitive company data, such as lists of drivers, which the company believed would harm its growth. The files confirm earlier news reports about the kill switch and reveal that Uber's CEO (Kalanick) himself activated the system at least once.

"Please hit the kill switch ASAP. Access must be shut down in AMS [Amsterdam]," an email from Kalanick's account says. The kill switch was also used in Canada, Belgium, India, Romania, and Hungary, and at least three times in France, the reports further note.

Kalanick wanted someone to help Uber take on what he referred to as the "big taxi cartels," and David Plouffe, who had led Obama's successful campaign for the White House in 2008, was the ideal choice.

A campaigner by trade, Plouffe became one of the central figures in Uber's global lobbying effort, using his experience and a massive contact list to get the company access to leaders, officials, and diplomats.

Uber also relied on another Obama alumnus as a consultant for political advice, Jim Messina, who had served as Plouffe's deputy and first introduced him to Kalanick. The files suggest that in some cases Uber tried to use him to gain access to public officials.

In their different ways, the leaked files suggest, Plouffe and Messina promoted and advised Uber in places where it faced the toughest resistance, at times infusing an aura of legitimacy around a company that was known for openly flouting regulations and laws.

Their work for the company appears to contradict the spirit of the Obama administration's pledge to bring to an end the unsavory use of cozy government relationships to enhance the positions of companies.

The leaked files clearly demonstrate how Uber sought help from US ambassadors known to both Plouffe and Messina to help smooth over relations in cities where Uber faced trouble. This made perfect sense since most senior US diplomats abroad were big Obama donors.

Dating back to 2014, Uber had seen sitting and former US government officials as key to its expansion plans, according to a leaked memo contained in the files that were titled "Leveraging the US government to support Uber's international business."

An examination of the leaked internal Uber e-mails and communications also offers a rare insight into the company's behind-the-scenes international lobbying efforts; the then Italian prime minister, Matteo Renzi, his Spanish counterpart, Mariano Rajoy, and the ruler of Dubai, Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid al-Maktoum, were among those Uber sought to gain access to, sometimes with mixed success.



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