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POLITICS AND POLICY

## Russian Officials Overheard Discussing Trump Associates Before Campaign Began

It isn't clear whether Mr. Trump's associates had any connection to his presidential aspirations



Donald Trump with son Donald Trump Jr. after the first presidential debate last September. PHOTO: JEWEL SAMAD/AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE/GETTY IMAGES

By *Shane Harris*

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WASHINGTON—Investigators are re-examining conversations detected by U.S. intelligence agencies in spring 2015 that captured Russian government officials discussing associates of Donald Trump, according to current and former U.S. officials, a move prompted by revelations that the president's eldest son met with a Russian lawyer last year.

In some cases, the Russians in the overheard conversations talked about meetings held outside the U.S. involving Russian government officials and Trump business associates or advisers, these people said.

Russian officials are routinely monitored by U.S. intelligence agencies, and it wouldn't be unusual for them to discuss people who have business interests in Russia.

Mr. Trump held the 2013 Miss Universe pageant in Moscow, was a globally recognized celebrity and sold properties to Russians. The intelligence gathering wasn't aimed at Mr. Trump or people in his circle, and it isn't clear which Trump advisers or associates the Russians referred to, or whether they had any connection to his presidential aspirations.

The 2015 conversations were detected several months before Mr. Trump declared his candidacy for the White House. The conversations have been in investigators'

possession for some time, but officials said the Donald Trump Jr. news this week prompted them to look at them again.

In 2015, intelligence agencies weren't sure what to make of the surveillance reports, which they viewed as vague and inconclusive, the current and former officials said. But the volume of the mentions of Trump associates by the Russians did have officials asking each other, "What's going on?" one former official said.

A lawyer for Mr. Trump didn't respond to a request for comment on the 2015 conversations.

Now, in light of the release of emails Tuesday by the president's eldest son, describing a 2016 meeting with a Russian lawyer, investigators are going back to those early reports. They are seeking new leads as they probe whether the Trump campaign colluded in what several U.S. intelligence agencies say was a Russian government-sponsored effort to meddle in the election to benefit Mr. Trump.

Mr. Trump has denied any collusion and called the probes a "witch hunt."

The meeting Donald Jr. arranged in June 2016—as his father was on the verge of clinching the Republican nomination—involved a Kremlin-connected lawyer to discuss allegedly incriminating information about Democratic candidate Hillary Clinton obtained by the Russian government.

Donald Jr. and the Russian lawyer said no information about Mrs. Clinton was disclosed in the meeting. But the emails offer the first clear public evidence that senior officials in Mr. Trump's camp were open to offers of assistance from Russia in his quest for the presidency.

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In the spring of 2016, U.S. intelligence officials' suspicions about Russian meddling in the election grew after their counterparts in Europe warned that Russian money might be flowing into the presidential

election, according to officials with knowledge of the warning. It remains unknown if or whether those funds were funneled to a particular campaign or to others to spend it on behalf of candidates.

In June 2016, officials at the Democratic National Committee revealed that their computer networks had been penetrated by hackers, whom the FBI and intelligence agencies later determined worked for the Russian intelligence services. Emails taken in those incursions subsequently were published by WikiLeaks, and in October, the site released emails that had been stolen from Mrs. Clinton's campaign chairman, John Podesta.

At that point, intelligence officials had little doubt that the Russian government was attempting to interfere in the election. By the end of 2016, they concluded publicly that the Russian hacking campaign was meant to undermine Mrs. Clinton and help Mr. Trump.

Now, the Federal Bureau of Investigation and several congressional committees are probing Mr. Trump's ties to Russia over the years, as is special counsel Robert Mueller.

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