

Trump campaign emails show aide's repeated efforts to set up Russia meetings

By **Tom Hamburger**, **Carol D. Leonnig** and **Rosalind S. Helderman** August 14

Three days after Donald Trump named his campaign foreign policy team in March 2016, the youngest of the new advisers sent an email to seven campaign officials with the subject line: “Meeting with Russian Leadership - Including Putin.”

The adviser, George Papadopoulos, offered to set up “a meeting between us and the Russian leadership to discuss US-Russia ties under President Trump,” telling them his Russian contacts welcomed the opportunity, according to internal campaign emails read to The Washington Post.

The proposal sent a ripple of concern through campaign headquarters in Trump Tower. Campaign co-chairman Sam Clovis wrote that he thought NATO allies should be consulted before any plans were made. Another Trump adviser, retired Navy Rear Adm. Charles Kubic, cited legal concerns, including a possible violation of U.S. sanctions against Russia and of the Logan Act, which prohibits U.S. citizens from unauthorized negotiation with foreign governments.

But Papadopoulos, a campaign volunteer with scant foreign policy experience, persisted. Between March and September, the self-described energy consultant sent at least a half-dozen requests for Trump, as he turned from primary candidate to party nominee, or for members of his team to meet with Russian officials. Among those to express concern about the effort was then-campaign chairman Paul Manafort, who rejected in May 2016 a proposal from Papadopoulos for Trump to do so.

The exchanges are among more than 20,000 pages of documents the Trump campaign turned over to congressional committees this month after review by White House and defense lawyers. The selection of Papadopoulos's emails were read to The Post by a person with access to them. Two other people with access to the emails confirmed the general tone of the exchanges and some specific passages within them.

Papadopoulos emerges from the sample of emails as a new and puzzling figure in the examination of the Trump campaign's contacts with Russian officials and their proxies during the 2016 election, now the subject of a special-counsel investigation.

Less than a decade out of college, Papadopoulos appeared to hold little sway within the campaign, and it is unclear whether he was acting as an intermediary for the Russian government, although he told campaign officials he was.

While the emails illustrate his eagerness to strengthen the campaign's connections to the Russian government, Papadopoulos does not spell out in them why it would be in Trump's interest to do so. His entreaties appear to have generated more concern than excitement within the campaign, which at the time was looking to seal the Republican nomination and take on a heavily favored Hillary Clinton in the general election.

But the internal resistance to Papadopoulos's requests is at odds with other overtures Trump allies were making toward Russia at the time, mostly at a more senior level of the campaign.

Three months after Papadopoulos raised the possibility of a meeting between Trump and Russian President Vladimir Putin, the president's son Donald Trump Jr. and son-in-law Jared Kushner met with a delegation led by a Russian lawyer offering to provide damaging information on Clinton.

Manafort attended that Trump Tower session in June 2016, a meeting now under scrutiny in the special counsel's collusion inquiry. But the new emails reveal that Manafort had rejected a request from Papadopoulos just the previous month to set up a meeting between Trump and Russian officials.

In July 2016 and again two months later, Jeff Sessions, then a senator and senior foreign policy adviser to Trump, met with Russian Ambassador Sergey Kislyak.

And also in July, a few weeks after Papadopoulos asked his superiors whether other campaign advisers or aides could accept some of the Russians' invitations, Carter Page, another foreign policy adviser, spoke at a Russian university in Moscow. Page said he made the trip independently of the campaign.

To experts in Russian intelligence gathering, the Papadopoulos chain offers further evidence that Russians were looking for entry points and playing upon connections with lower-level aides to penetrate the 2016 campaign.

Former CIA director John Brennan in May told the House Intelligence Committee that he had seen worrisome evidence of "contacts and interactions" between Russian officials and the Trump campaign, although he offered no specifics.

Steven L. Hall, who retired from the CIA in 2015 after 30 years of managing the agency's Russia operations, said when told by The Post about the emails: "The bottom line is that there's no doubt in my mind that the Russian government was casting a wide net when they were looking at the American election. I think they were doing very basic intelligence work: Who's out there? Who's willing to play ball? And how can we use them?"

Papadopoulos, a former intern and researcher at the conservative Hudson Institute, was on a list of campaign volunteers that Trump announced as his foreign policy advisory team during a meeting with The Post's editorial board in March 2016. Trump called Papadopoulos an "excellent guy."

Almost immediately, Papadopoulos came under scrutiny for his lack of experience. He graduated from college in 2009, and his LinkedIn profile cited his participation in a Model U.N. program for students among his qualifications. Papadopoulos did not respond to repeated requests for comment.

Page, who has been the subject of a foreign surveillance warrant over his connections to Russia, said the Papadopoulos email exchange was another sign that the Russia communications were inconsequential.

“The entirely benign offer from a volunteer member of the Trump movement is infinitely less relevant than the real collusion in the 2016 election,” said Page, who was copied on the first Papadopoulos email communication in March. Page said in an email exchange Saturday that “the real scandal lies among Clinton and Obama associates who fed false evidence” to investigators that he said formed the basis of the federal warrant concerning him.

Papadopoulos made more than a half-dozen overtures on behalf of Russians or people with Russia contacts whom he claimed to know.

On March 24, Clovis, the campaign co-chairman who also served on the foreign policy team, reacted to one proposed Russia meeting by writing, “We thought we probably should not go forward with any meeting with the Russians until we have had occasion to sit with our NATO allies.”

In the same email chain, Kubic, the retired admiral, reminded others about legal restrictions on meetings with certain Russian officials, adding, “Just want to make sure that no one on the team outruns their headlights and embarrasses the campaign.”

Undeterred, Papadopoulos alerted then-campaign manager Corey Lewandowski in an April email that he was receiving “a lot of calls over the past month” about arranging a Russia meeting.

“Putin wants to host the Trump team when the time is right,” he wrote on April 27.

On May 4, Papadopoulos forwarded Lewandowski and others a note he received from the program head for the government-funded Russian International Affairs Council. In it, Ivan Timofeev, a senior official in the organization, reached out to report that Russian foreign ministry officials were open to a Trump visit to Moscow and requested that the campaign and Russians write a formal letter outlining the meeting.

Clovis responded to the Timofeev invitation by noting: “There are legal issues we need to mitigate, meeting with foreign officials as a private citizen.”

The email chain does not show a response from Lewandowski, who did not return calls seeking comment.

Several weeks later, Papadopoulos forwarded the same message from Timofeev to Manafort, the newly named campaign chairman.

“Russia has been eager to meet with Mr. Trump for some time and have been reaching out to me to discuss,” the adviser told Manafort.

Manafort reacted coolly, forwarding the email to his associate Rick Gates, with a note: “We need someone to communicate that DT is not doing these trips.”

Gates agreed and told Manafort he would ask the campaign’s correspondence coordinator to handle it — “the person responding to all mail of non-importance” — to signify this did not need a senior official to respond.

A spokesman for Manafort, whose Virginia home was raided by FBI agents three weeks ago as part of an investigation by special counsel Robert S. Mueller III, said the email chain provides “concrete evidence that the Russia collusion narrative is fake news.”

“Mr. Manafort’s swift action reflects the attitude of the campaign — any invitation by Russia, directly or indirectly, would be rejected outright,” Manafort spokesman Jason Maloni said in a statement.

In an email to The Post, Timofeev confirmed that his organization had discussed a meeting with the Trump campaign in the spring of 2016.

The Russian International Affairs Council was created in 2010 by a decree of then-President Dmitry Medvedev as a project of various Russian government agencies. It is led by former foreign minister Igor Ivanov. Its board includes Russia’s current foreign minister, Sergei Lavrov, as well as top Russian scholars and business leaders, among them the chairman of Alfa-Bank and Sberbank, two of Russia’s largest banks.

“We discussed the idea informally as one of the opportunities for . . . dialogue between Russia and the U.S.,” Timofeev said in the email. “RIAC often hosts meetings with prominent political figures and experts from the US and many other countries.”

He said the group would have been open to meeting with other campaigns.

Clinton spokesman Nick Merrill said officials with the Democrat’s campaign have “no recollections or record” of having been contacted by the group. Similarly an adviser to Barack Obama’s first presidential campaign, former Russian ambassador Michael McFaul, said he could not recall any similar invitation.

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