

Top Trump Organization executive asked Putin aide for help on business deal

By **Rosalind S. Helderman**, **Carol D. Leonnig** and **Tom Hamburger** August 28 at 9:13 PM

A top executive from Donald Trump's real estate company emailed Russian President Vladimir Putin's personal spokesman during the U.S. presidential campaign last year to ask for help advancing a stalled Trump Tower development project in Moscow, according to documents submitted to Congress on Monday.

The request came in a mid-January 2016 email from Michael Cohen, one of Trump's closest business advisers, who asked longtime Putin lieutenant Dmitry Peskov for assistance in reviving a deal that Cohen suggested was languishing.

"Over the past few months I have been working with a company based in Russia regarding the development of a Trump Tower-Moscow project in Moscow City," Cohen wrote to Peskov, according to a person familiar with the email. "Without getting into lengthy specifics, the communication between our two sides has stalled.

"As this project is too important, I am hereby requesting your assistance. I respectfully request someone, preferably you, contact me so that I might discuss the specifics as well as arranging meetings with the appropriate individuals. I thank you in advance for your assistance and look forward to hearing from you soon," Cohen wrote.

Cohen's email marks the most direct outreach documented by a top Trump aide to a similarly senior member of Putin's government.

Cohen told congressional investigators in a statement Monday that he did not recall receiving a response from Peskov or having further contact with Russian government officials about the project. The email, addressed to Peskov, appeared to have been sent to a general Kremlin press account.

The note adds to the list of contacts between Trump associates and Russian officials that have been a focus of multiple congressional inquiries as well as an investigation led by special counsel Robert S. Mueller III exploring Russian interference in the 2016 election. U.S. intelligence agencies have concluded that the Kremlin intervened to help elect Trump.

Cohen's email to Peskov provides an example of a Trump business official directly seeking Kremlin assistance in advancing Trump's business interests.

Cohen told congressional investigators that the deal was envisioned as a licensing project, in which Trump would have been paid for the use of his name by a Moscow-based developer called I.C. Expert Investment Co.

Cohen said that he discussed the deal three times with Trump and that Trump signed a letter of intent with the company on Oct. 28, 2015. He said the Trump company began to solicit designs from architects and discuss financing.

However, he said that the project was abandoned "for business reasons" when government permission was not secured and that the matter was "not related in any way to Mr. Trump's presidential campaign."

Cohen's request to Peskov came as Trump was distinguishing himself on the campaign trail with his warm rhetoric about Putin.

Cohen said in his statement to Congress that he wrote the email at the recommendation of Felix Sater, a Russian American businessman who was serving as a broker on the deal.

In the statement, obtained by The Washington Post, Cohen said Sater suggested the outreach because a massive Trump development in Moscow would require Russian government approval.

White House special counsel Ty Cobb said Trump knew nothing about Cohen's effort to enlist Peskov's help.

"The mere fact that there was no apparent response suggests this is a non-collusion story," he said.

Cohen has been one of Trump's closest aides since 2007, serving as a business emissary, lawyer and sometimes spokesman for Trump. Friends said Trump has treated Cohen like a member of his family.

Cohen, who was executive vice president of the Trump Organization, did not have a formal role in Trump's campaign. But he spoke with reporters as a defender of Trump and appeared on television as a surrogate for the candidate. He left the company shortly before Trump was inaugurated as president, and, since January, has served as one of Trump's personal lawyers.

In a statement to The Post, Cohen described the potential Moscow project as "simply one of many development opportunities that the Trump Organization considered and ultimately rejected."

"It should come as no surprise that, over four decades, the Trump Organization has received and reviewed countless real estate development opportunities, both domestic and international," he added.

Cohen said he abandoned the project because he lost confidence that the Moscow developer would be able to obtain land, financing and government approvals. "It was a building proposal that did not succeed, and nothing more," he said.

The Post reported Sunday that Cohen had been in negotiations with Sater and foreign investors to build a Trump Tower in the Russian capital from September 2015 through the end of January 2016, at the same time Trump was campaigning for president. Trump entered the race in June 2015, and by January 2016 he was leading in the polls for the Republican nomination.

Cohen told congressional investigators that Sater “constantly” pushed him to travel to Moscow as part of the negotiations, but that he declined to do so.

He said that Sater, who has attempted to broker Trump deals for more than a decade, was “prone to ‘salesmanship,’ ” and that, as a result, he did not routinely apprise others in the company about their interactions and never considered asking Trump to go to Moscow, as Sater had requested.

Sater said in a statement Monday that he brought the idea of the largest tower in Russia to Cohen, his longtime friend. Despite Sater’s enthusiasm for the plan, he said, the Trump Organization abandoned it.

“Michael Cohen was the only member of the Trump Organization who I communicated with on this project,” Sater said.

Over email, Sater bragged to Cohen that he could get Putin to assist with the project and that it would help Trump’s presidential campaign, according to correspondence submitted to congressional investigators.

“Our boy can become president of the USA and we can engineer it,” Sater wrote in a November 2015 email. “I will get all of Putins team to buy in on this, I will manage this process.”

The Post on Sunday first reported on the existence of the emails, copies of which were published Monday by the New York Times.

In another email published by the Times, and confirmed by The Post, Sater described accompanying Trump’s daughter Ivanka Trump on a 2006 trip to Moscow. “I arranged for Ivanka to sit in Putins private chair at his desk and office in the Kremlin,” Sater wrote.

Ivanka Trump said she had taken a “brief tour” of the Kremlin but did not recall sitting in Putin’s chair.

She added, “I was not part of Michael Cohen’s discussions surrounding a potential Trump project that he was evaluating in 2015 in Russia with the exception of recommending architects to consider as part of the routine design process for any potential deal.”

Donald Trump has tried to distance himself from Sater, a New York developer whose office was located in Trump Tower and who helped broker licensed Trump deals. Sater had served time in jail in the 1990s after a bar fight and pleaded guilty in 1998 to his role in Mafia-linked stock fraud. Federal officials have said he then cooperated on various national security and criminal investigations.

In writing to Peskov, Cohen was reaching out to a Kremlin official considered one of the main gatekeepers to Putin.

Peskov was appointed the head of the presidential press service in 2000, during Putin's first term, and has served as a spokesman for Putin in various roles since, staying with Putin during his four years as prime minister. Because he regularly travels with and speaks to Putin, he is a target for lobbyists and petitioners trying to attract the Russian president's attention.

"Aside from being the Kremlin's mouthpiece, he's definitely someone who is viewed as a senior lieutenant, an important oligarch in Putin's power system," said Steven L. Hall, who retired from the CIA in 2015 after 30 years of managing the agency's Russia operations. "If you're looking for someone who is close to Putin, Dmitry Peskov is as good as any of them."

Asked for comment about the Trump Tower negotiations, Amanda Miller, a spokeswoman for the Trump Organization, emphasized Monday that Cohen did not pursue the deal beyond its initial stages. "After the signing of a non-binding letter of intent . . . it was not significantly advanced (i.e., there was no site, no financing, and no development)," she wrote in an email to The Post. "To be clear, the Trump Organization has never had any real estate holdings or interests in Russia."

Still, Trump repeatedly tried for three decades to build in Russia. In 2013, he signed a preliminary agreement to build a tower in partnership with Aras Agalarov, a billionaire who had financed the Trump-owned Miss Universe pageant when it was held in Moscow in 2013. Agalarov told The Post last year that his company's deal with Trump was on hold because of the presidential campaign.

A representative of Agalarov's company attended a June 2016 meeting with top Trump aides and a Russian lawyer organized by Donald Trump Jr., after he was told that the lawyer would provide damaging information about Democratic rival Hillary Clinton provided by the Russian government.

Scott Balber, an attorney for Agalarov, said Agalarov and his company played no role in the 2015-16 Trump Tower proposal.

Andrew Roth in Moscow contributed to this report.

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