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U.S.

Disclosure of Papadopoulos's Email Hunt Sheds Light on Quest for Clinton 'Dirt'

Former Trump campaign adviser was apparently among the first people to get a hint that Russians sought to steal emails



This undated image posted on his LinkedIn profile shows George Papadopoulos posing on a street in London. PHOTO: AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE/GETTY IMAGES

By *Shane Harris*

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Former Trump campaign adviser George Papadopoulos was discussing the possibility of acquiring stolen emails from Russian contacts well before the public was aware that Democratic Party systems had been hacked, his plea deal with the government indicates.

That disclosure, combined with press accounts and statements from current and former U.S. officials, suggests Trump campaign supporters were engaged in multiple lines of effort in the spring and summer of 2016 to obtain "dirt" about then-candidate Donald Trump's rival, Hillary Clinton, including emails that Russian hackers claimed to have obtained about her.

White House special counsel Ty Cobb said Tuesday that Mr. Papadopoulos's role in the campaign, and his outreach efforts to Russia described in his plea agreement, were greatly exaggerated.

"The press can hyperventilate all it wants with regard to Papadopoulos, and they've turned him into everything but Batman," Mr. Cobb said. "But at the end of the day, he's going to be as memorable as Mr. Papagiorgio from [the 1997 movie] 'Vegas Vacation.'"

President Trump has said there was no collusion between his campaign and Russia, an assertion he repeated Tuesday. The president also minimized Mr. Papadopoulos's role in his campaign, saying in a tweet, "Few people knew the young, low level volunteer named George, who has already proven to be a liar."

But at least two other Trump aides or allies were engaged in similar efforts as Mr. Papadopoulos, at approximately the same time, according to current and former U.S. officials.

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Mr. Papadopoulos was apparently among the first people to get a hint that the Russians had undertaken an effort to steal and release emails that would harm Mrs. Clinton's campaign. A 30-year-

old energy expert with no political experience before he joined the Trump team in spring 2016, Mr. Papadopoulos was living in London when Sam Clovis, a senior Trump adviser, tapped him to join a panel of foreign-policy advisers.

Based on a March 6 conversation with Mr. Clovis, Mr. Papadopoulos "understood that a principal foreign-policy focus of the campaign was an improved U.S. relationship with Russia," his plea agreement says. A lawyer for Mr. Clovis, Victoria Toensing, denied that he told Mr. Papadopoulos this was a policy goal, but said Mr. Clovis appreciated the advice of volunteer advisers.

While traveling in Italy on March 14, Mr. Papadopoulos met a London-based professor who took great interest when he found that Mr. Papadopoulos worked for the Trump campaign, the plea agreement says.

The professor, Joseph Mifsud, an honorary director of the London Academy of Diplomacy, told the British newspaper the Daily Telegraph on Tuesday that he was the professor described in the plea agreement. Mr. Mifsud, a native of Malta, denied any wrongdoing in his interactions with Mr. Papadopoulos, telling the newspaper that he "had a clear conscience."

Mr. Papadopoulos believed he'd met someone with "substantial connections with Russian government officials," which Mr. Papadopoulos "thought could increase his importance as a policy advisor to the campaign," according to his plea agreement.

Thus began a relationship that led to further contacts between Mr. Papadopoulos and other Russians, including people who claimed to know influential figures in the Russian foreign ministry. Meanwhile, Russian government operatives were mounting the latest prong in a campaign to hinder Mrs. Clinton's candidacy. For months, into mid-August 2016, Mr. Papadopoulos continued to talk to his Russian contacts and tell campaign officials of Russia's eagerness for a meeting.

On March 19, hackers working for Russia penetrated the email account of John Podesta, Mrs. Clinton's campaign chairman, investigators have concluded. Russian operatives had also breached the email system of the Democratic National Committee.

In the spring of 2016, the public knew nothing of the hacking. But Mr. Papadopoulos may have gotten an early tip when, on April 26, he met Mr. Mifsud for breakfast at a London hotel and the professor informed him the Russian government had collected "dirt" on Mrs. Clinton in the form of "thousands of emails," the plea documents say.

It isn't clear from the plea agreement who, if anyone, in the Trump campaign Mr. Papadopoulos told about this claim. But news of the hack emerged two months later, in June.

On June 3, Mr. Trump's eldest son, Donald Trump Jr., received an email advising him that one of his family's former Russian business partners had been in touch with a senior Russian government official. That official, the email said, wanted to pass the Trump campaign derogatory information on Mrs. Clinton.

A few minutes later, he replied to the email, "If it's what you say I love it especially later in the summer," as the campaign entered the home stretch.

The younger Mr. Trump eventually met with a Russian lawyer who had connections to the Kremlin. But, he later said, he was disappointed to find that the lawyer wanted to talk about policies on Americans adopting Russian children. There has been no suggestion since that the Russians provided any derogatory information on Mrs. Clinton that the Trump campaign used.

At the same time, a Trump campaign ally was trying to obtain Clinton emails on his own. Peter W. Smith, a private-equity executive active in Republican politics, had been gripped by the idea that Russian hackers had penetrated Mrs. Clinton's private email server, which she used while serving in the Obama administration, and had stolen more than 30,000 emails that she said she deleted because they concerned personal matters.

Mr. Smith had no evidence for his belief. But as he told The Wall Street Journal earlier this year, over the summer of 2016 he assembled a group of technology experts and others in hopes of acquiring the emails. In communications with prospective team members, as well as financial backers, Mr. Smith said that Michael Flynn, a retired general who served as a top foreign-policy adviser to the Trump campaign, was an ally.

Mr. Flynn's exact role is unclear, and several Trump campaign aides said they had no knowledge of Mr. Smith's efforts.

But Mr. Smith told the Journal that he and his colleagues found five groups of hackers who claimed to possess Mrs. Clinton's deleted emails, including two groups he determined were Russians. Mr. Smith encouraged the hackers to give the emails to WikiLeaks, which would eventually publish the emails stolen from the DNC and Mr. Podesta.

He remained involved with the Trump team through the inauguration. Then, on Jan. 27, 2017, Federal Bureau of Investigation agents investigating election interference by Russia approached him and asked about his relationship with Mr. Mifsud.

Mr. Papadopoulos now admits he lied when he told the FBI he met the professor and first learned about the Russian information on Mrs. Clinton before joining the Trump campaign. In fact, he said, he was already aboard and pursuing contacts with Russia on the campaign's behalf.

On July 27 of this year, after arriving at Dulles International Airport outside Washington, Mr. Papadopoulos was arrested. He continued meeting with the government "on numerous occasions to provide information and answer questions," the plea agreement states.

—Rebecca Ballhaus, Paul Sonne, Alan Cullison and Peter Nicholas contributed to this article.

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