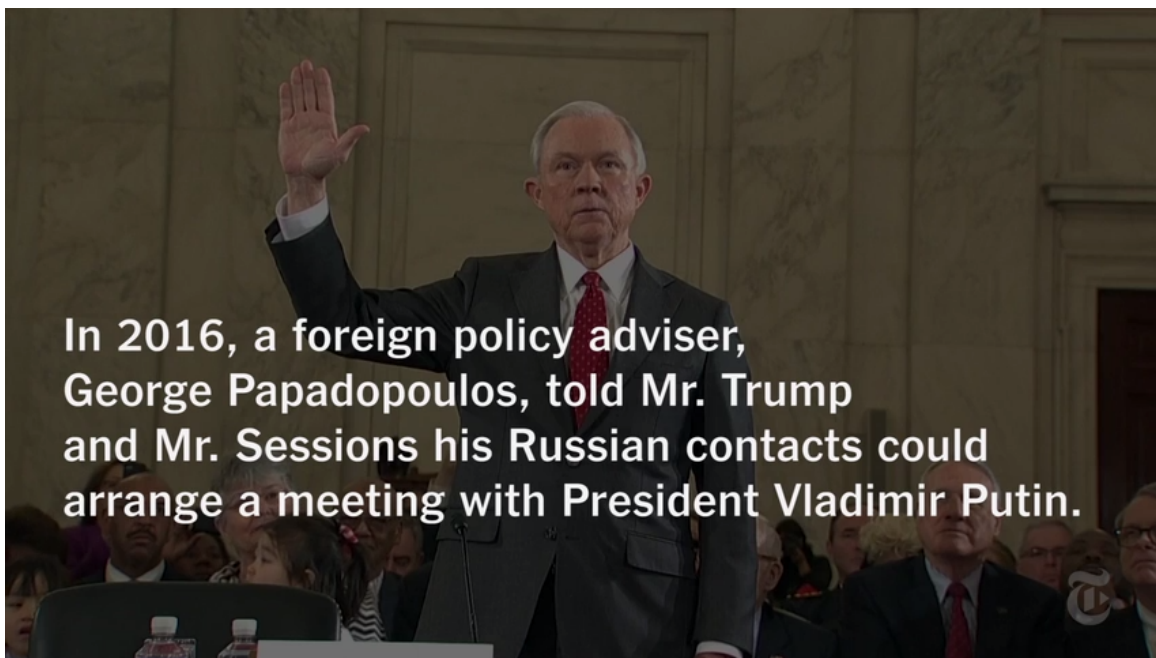


The New York Times

Trump and Sessions Denied Knowing About Russian Contacts. Records Suggest Otherwise.



In 2016, a foreign policy adviser, George Papadopoulos, told Mr. Trump and Mr. Sessions his Russian contacts could arrange a meeting with President Vladimir Putin.

Attorney General Jeff Sessions and President Trump stated in early 2017 that no campaign advisers had contact with Russians. However, new court documents show that a foreign policy adviser, George Papadopoulos, had contacts that he told them about in 2016.

Nov. 2, 2017 | Image by Stephen Crowley/The New York Times

By Michael S. Schmidt (<http://www.nytimes.com/by/michael-s-schmidt>),
Matt Apuzzo (<http://www.nytimes.com/by/matt-apuzzo>) and
Scott Shane (<http://www.nytimes.com/by/scott-shane>)

Nov. 2, 2017

WASHINGTON — Standing before reporters in February, President Trump said unequivocally that he knew of nobody from his campaign who was in contact with Russians during the election. Attorney General Jeff Sessions has told the Senate the same thing.

Court documents unsealed this week cast doubt on both statements and raised the possibility that Mr. Sessions could be called back to Congress for further questioning.

The special counsel, Robert S. Mueller III, unsealed his first charges Monday (<https://www.nytimes.com/2017/10/30/us/politics/paul-manafort-indicted.html>) in a wide-ranging investigation into Russian attempts to disrupt the presidential election and whether anyone close to Mr. Trump was involved. Records in that

case show that George Papadopoulos, a foreign policy adviser, had frequent discussions with Russians in 2016 and trumpeted his connections in front of Mr. Trump and Mr. Sessions.

For months, journalists have revealed evidence that associates of Mr. Trump met with Russians during the campaign and the presidential transition. But the court documents represent the first concrete evidence that Mr. Trump was personally told about ties between a campaign adviser and Russian officials.

At a March 31, 2016, meeting between Mr. Trump and his foreign policy team, Mr. Papadopoulos introduced himself and said “that he had connections that could help arrange a meeting between then-candidate Trump and President Putin,” according to court records.

“He went into the pitch right away,” said J. D. Gordon, a campaign adviser who attended the meeting. “He said he had a friend in London, the Russian ambassador, who could help set up a meeting with Putin.”

Mr. Trump listened with interest

(<https://www.nytimes.com/2017/10/31/us/trump-foreign-policy-advisers.html>).

Mr. Sessions vehemently opposed the idea, Mr. Gordon recalled. “And he said that no one should talk about it,” because Mr. Sessions thought it was a bad idea that he did not want associated with the campaign, he said.

Several of Mr. Trump’s campaign advisers attended the March 2016 meeting, and at least two of those advisers are now in the White House: Hope Hicks, the communications director, and Stephen Miller, a senior policy adviser.

After Mr. Trump was sworn in, he could not escape questions about Russia. At a Feb. 16, 2017, White House news conference

(<https://www.nytimes.com/2017/02/16/us/politics/donald-trump-press-conference-transcript.html>), a reporter asked Mr. Trump, “Can you say whether you are aware that anyone who advised your campaign had contacts with Russia during the course of the election?”

“No,” Mr. Trump said. “Nobody that I know of. Nobody.”

The White House has sought to portray Mr. Papadopoulos as an insignificant figure (<https://www.nytimes.com/2017/10/31/us/politics/trump-manafort-papadopoulos-mueller.html>) in the campaign.

Ty Cobb, the White House lawyer dealing with matters related to Mr. Mueller's investigation, said the White House stood behind the president's comments.

"The media's willingness to inflate Papadopoulos, a young unpaid volunteer and supposed energy expert, into an important thought leader in the campaign or Russian operative is ludicrous," Mr. Cobb said. "The evidence so far suggests he attended one meeting, said something about Russia and was immediately shut down by everyone in the room. It's very important to remember that he is not a criminal now because of anything he did for the campaign — he is a criminal because he initially lied to the F.B.I."

A Justice Department spokesman declined to comment.

Another member of the foreign policy team, Carter Page, said on Thursday that he told Mr. Sessions in passing in June 2016 that he planned to travel to Russia for a trip "completely unrelated" to his volunteer role in the campaign.

"Understandably, it was as irrelevant then as it is now," Mr. Page said. Mr. Page traveled twice to Russia in 2016.

Democrats in the Senate said on Thursday that they would push to have Mr. Sessions return to the Judiciary Committee for further questioning.

"He now needs to come back before the committee, in person, under oath, to explain why he cannot seem to provide truthful, complete answers to these important and relevant questions," said Senator Patrick J. Leahy, Democrat of Vermont, who is on the Judiciary Committee.

Senator Richard Blumenthal of Connecticut, another Democrat on the committee, pointed out that Mr. Sessions's testimony was under oath and "wasn't just some random comment he made in passing on the street."

Mr. Sessions faced similar questions in January before the Senate Judiciary Committee (<https://www.nytimes.com/2017/06/13/us/politics/jeff-sessions-testimony.html>), when Senator Al Franken, Democrat of Minnesota, asked him about contacts between the campaign and Russia. "I'm not aware of any of those activities," Mr. Sessions said. He denied having any such contacts himself.

Democrats condemned those remarks as misleading when it was revealed that Mr. Sessions held meetings with the Russian ambassador (https://www.nytimes.com/2017/03/02/us/politics/jeff-sessions-russia-trump-investigation-democrats.html?_r=0) during the campaign. Last month, Mr. Franken renewed his questioning.

“You don’t believe that surrogates from the Trump campaign had communications with the Russians?” he asked.

“I did not, and I’m not aware of anyone else that did,” Mr. Sessions replied. “And I don’t believe it happened.”

He did not make any reference to Mr. Papadopoulos. Mr. Sessions has said he answered honestly because he was being questioned in the context of Russian officials continuously exchanging information with campaign advisers.

Mr. Gordon said that while the March 2016 meeting technically contradicted Mr. Sessions’s testimony, he defended the attorney general.

“This is something he heard way back in March from some young man who was not authorized to speak for the campaign,” he said. “I don’t blame Senator Sessions for not remembering that.” He said that only in the political “gotcha game” could the matter be considered significant.

The court documents in the Papadopoulos case represent the most explicit evidence yet that Mr. Trump’s campaign was eager to coordinate with Russian officials to undermine his rival, Hillary Clinton. Federal investigators suspected that Russian intelligence services used intermediaries to contact Mr. Papadopoulos to gain influence with the campaign, offering “dirt” on Mrs. Clinton in the form of “thousands of emails.” Mr. Papadopoulos pleaded guilty to lying about those contacts and is cooperating with the F.B.I.

On Thursday, as news of Mr. Papadopoulos’s Russian ties continued to ripple through Washington, Mr. Franken sent a stern letter to Mr. Sessions. “This is another example in an alarming pattern in which you, the nation’s top law enforcement official, apparently failed to tell the truth, under oath,” he wrote.

The case against Mr. Papadopoulos was unsealed at the same time as an unrelated indictment against two other former campaign advisers, Paul J. Manafort and Rick Gates. Taken together, the three charges sent a foreboding message to a fourth adviser to Mr. Trump’s campaign, Michael T. Flynn.

White House officials and others in the case are bracing for charges against Mr. Flynn, a retired three-star general who had a short and tumultuous tenure as national security adviser. Mr. Mueller is investigating Mr. Flynn for not disclosing his Russian contacts or his foreign lobbying work.

Mr. Manafort was indicted on seldom-used charges of concealing foreign lobbying, as well as for lying on federal documents — the same activities for which Mr. Flynn is being investigated.

“It’s a bad sign,” said Paul Krieger, who until recently was the top federal fraud prosecutor in Manhattan. “It shows that the special counsel’s office will not hesitate to charge individuals connected to the administration or campaign with obstruction-like offenses.”

Mr. Flynn, one of the architects of Mr. Trump’s “America first” foreign policy, did not disclose (<https://www.nytimes.com/2017/04/01/us/politics/michael-flynn-financial-disclosure-russia-linked-entities.html>) payments from Russia-linked entities on financial disclosure documents. He did not mention a paid speech (<https://www.nytimes.com/2017/03/16/us/politics/michael-flynn-russia-paid-trip.html>) he gave in Moscow, and he belatedly disclosed (<https://www.nytimes.com/2017/03/10/us/politics/michael-flynn-turkey.html>), after leaving the White House, that the Turkish government had paid him more than \$500,000 for lobbying services.

Charging people for not disclosing their foreign lobbying is extremely rare, a point that Mr. Manafort’s lawyers made in documents filed in court on Thursday. Since 1966, his lawyers wrote, only six such cases have been filed and only one person has been convicted. Such violations are typically handled administratively.

“It is far from clear what activity triggers a requirement to file a report as a foreign agent,” said Kevin M. Downing, Mr. Manafort’s lawyer.

Mr. Manafort and Mr. Gates appeared in court briefly on Thursday. Lawyers discussed the conditions of their house arrest and the possibility of a trial in April.

White House officials have long been anticipating the indictments of Mr. Manafort and Mr. Flynn, and have tried to distance themselves from both men. They were caught by surprise, however, by Mr. Papadopoulos’s guilty plea and the fact that he had been cooperating with the F.B.I. since July.

That cooperation agreement fueled speculation that Mr. Papadopoulos had secretly recorded his conversations with White House officials this summer. But Mr. Cobb said he had seen no evidence that Mr. Papadopoulos had visited the White House or had recent conversations with staff members.

“We have no indication that this George Papadopoulos came to this White House,” Mr. Cobb said, adding that a different person with the same name had entered the White House this year.

Court documents do not explain the extent of Mr. Papadopoulos’s cooperation with Mr. Mueller’s investigation, but prosecutors said they showed him emails, chat transcripts, text messages and other records “in an attempt to refresh his recollection” about his contacts with Russians and with members of the Trump campaign.

(https://www.facebook.com/dialog/feed?app_id=9869919170&link=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.nytimes.com%2F2017%2F11%2F02%2Fjeff-sessions-russia.html&smid=fb-share&name=Trump%20and%20Sessions%20Denied%20Knowing%20About%20Russian%20Contacts%20Records%20Suggest%20Otherwise)
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Sharon LaFraniere, Nicholas Fandos and Adam Goldman contributed reporting.

A version of this article appears in print on November 3, 2017, on Page A1 of the New York edition with the headline: Files Contradict Trump and Sessions on Russia. Order Reprints (<http://www.nytreprints.com/>) | Today's Paper (<http://www.nytimes.com/pages/todaypaper/index.html>) | Subscribe (<https://www.nytimes.com/subscriptions/Multiproduct/lp8HYKU.html?campaignId=48JQY>)

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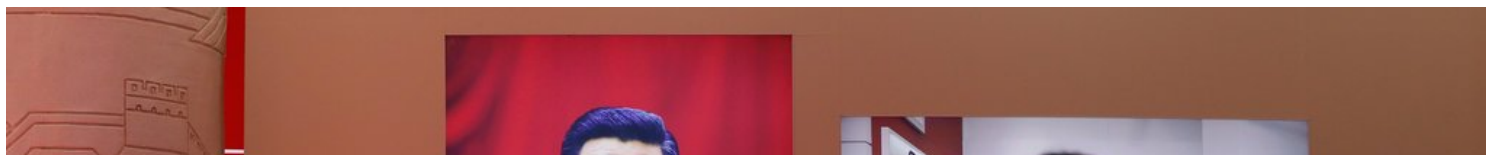
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