

# Is there more than meets the eye with the professor at the center of the Trump-Russia probe? Or less?

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By **Griff Witte** and **Karla Adam** November 4

BERLIN – His affiliations were a roll call of institutions whose very names suggest power, influence and global reach: the London Academy of Diplomacy, the London Center of International Law Practice, the Euro-Mediterranean University.

His titles had a loftiness to match: president, director, and according to his [online biography](#), “founding father of the term ‘Academic Diplomacy.’”

But in the plea agreement unsealed last week as part of special counsel Robert S. Mueller III’s investigation into Russian influence on last year’s U.S. presidential election, he is simply and mysteriously “the professor.”

Joseph Mifsud, the man who, according to court papers, offered himself as a bridge between the Trump campaign and the highest echelons of the Kremlin, has spent his career trading one impressive-looking business card for the next.

To George Papadopoulos, the Trump foreign policy aide who liaised with Mifsud, the Maltese academic may have appeared to be just the sort of man needed to cut through the impenetrable fog of Moscow power structures.

But a review of Mifsud’s credentials and connections reveals plenty of fog there, as well.

At the Scottish university where he was a professor, he was seldom if ever seen by fellow faculty or students. At the Slovenian university where he was president, he left amid a swirl of accusations of financial impropriety, including a [cellphone bill](#) that topped \$1,000 a month. And at the London law center where he served as an adviser, others named as part of the firm’s “team” were shocked this week to learn of the association.

“Seriously, I work there? Does anyone else work there?” said Gary Born, a specialist in international arbitration who was surprised to hear when reached by a Washington Post reporter that his picture and biography were on the London Center of

International Law Practice's website.

Whether there is much more to Mifsud than meets the eye — or perhaps much less — will now be a question for Mueller.

In the plea agreement, Papadopoulos depicts Mifsud as a contact eager to help play matchmaker between the Trump team and President Vladimir Putin's inner circle.

Mifsud introduces Papadopoulos to a woman he identifies as Putin's niece, promises top-level Russian meetings for Trump aides and returns from a visit to Moscow offering "dirt" on Hillary Clinton based on "thousands of emails" obtained by the Russian government.

The plea agreement makes no direct accusation against Mifsud. But a sworn affidavit from FBI Special Agent Robert Gibbs at least raises the possibility he was a Russian cutout.

"[The] Russian government and its intelligence and security services frequently make use of non-governmental intermediaries to achieve their foreign intelligence objectives," Gibbs writes. "This structure serves in part to hide the overt involvement of the Russian government."

Russia, he continues, "has used individuals associated with academia and think tanks in such a capacity."

Mifsud last week insisted he was "not a secret agent. I never got any money from the Russians."

But on other points he has been contradictory.

When the indictment was unsealed on Monday, he initially denied that he was the "professor" cited in the court papers. Then on Tuesday he confirmed it, but told London's Daily Telegraph that the descriptions of his role were "exaggerated" and insisted he had had no contact with Russian officials.

But the same day, The Post reported that he had boasted to his former assistant late last year that he had had a meeting with Putin.

On Wednesday, he told Italy's La Repubblica that Papadopoulos's claims about him in the indictment were "nonsense."

"I strongly deny any discussion about secrets concerning Hillary Clinton," he said. "I swear it on my daughter."

But then, minutes later, he related that he had been in Moscow during the presidential campaign and had had a conversation with Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov. He also said he was in touch with officials at Russian think tanks that are considered close to the Kremlin and the Foreign Ministry.

As for the alleged niece of Putin, Mifsud laughed off the suggestion that she was related to the Russian president. “She’s just a student,” he said. “A very good-looking one.”

Mifsud also told La Repubblica that he had been speaking with the FBI.

Mifsud has not responded to calls or emails from The Post.

To former colleagues in his native Malta, Mifsud’s sudden entrance into the center of the world’s most-watched investigation is a surprise. But not a total one.

“He’s a charmer,” said Dominic Fenech, a dean at the University of Malta.

Mifsud was once a lecturer in education at the university. But Fenech and other colleagues said his interest in the normal preoccupations of academics — research, publishing and teaching — was minimal.

Instead, Fenech said, Mifsud was more focused on creating international educational partnerships.

One was a for-profit branch of the University of Malta that Mifsud helped to establish in Rome with a senior Italian politician who had been implicated in a series of scandals. The university later withdrew its participation.

Another was the European Union-funded Euro-Mediterranean University in Slovenia. Fenech, a scholar of Mediterranean history, said the school had little to no academic profile.

“To me, frankly, people who get these jobs in these kinds of institutions, well, it often makes me wonder,” he said. “I’m not saying he’s wheeling and dealing. I’m just saying everything’s possible.”

Mifsud left the university under a cloud, with Slovenian government ministers expressing disappointment at the institution’s progress and officials claiming that Mifsud had left behind tens of thousands of euros worth of unexplained expenses.

Mifsud told the Times of Malta when the claims came to light in 2013 that it was “a private matter.”

The university released [a statement](#) this week saying its relationship with Mifsud was “completely severed since he has resigned from his post as President of the University in July 2012.”

“In fact,” the statement continued, “following his resignation, the University was unaware of the whereabouts of Mr. Mifsud.”

His whereabouts were mostly in London, though exactly what he was doing there is difficult to pin down.

His roles included professorships at the University of Stirling in Scotland and the University of East Anglia — both of which were associated with the London Academy of Diplomacy, where Mifsud was honorary director.

Andrew Glencross, a politics expert who taught at Stirling between 2013 and 2016, described Mifsud as “personable, congenial” and “an inveterate name dropper in terms of politicians.”

But Mifsud was not a typical professor. The university’s student newspaper reported last week that Mifsud had no office on campus, and it could not find any students who had met him.

“He’s not your run-of-the-mill professor with a large hinterland of research, of teaching, of supervising research students, grant applications . . . no. That was why, from the first instance I was aware of the collaboration with [the London Academy of Diplomacy] I was perplexed about who exactly they were and what they brought to us.”

When the university announced the association in 2014, Glencross said he and his colleagues had never heard of the organization. “They weren’t on the radar.”

Equally perplexing was the London Center of International Law Practice.

The center supposedly operates from a fine Georgian building overlooking a leafy London square.

When a Post reporter buzzed the door on several occasions during business hours last week, no one answered.

Until recently, the staff Web page had 33 people listed on it, including Joseph Mifsud. But the page was deleted on Oct. 23, a week before the Papadopoulos plea agreement was unsealed.

Several of those listed as being part of the “team” were only loosely affiliated — if at all.

Born, the arbitration specialist whose name was listed on the site, said he met once with one of its employees, who pitched him on “a forum for academic and public policy discussions. It was pretty vague and aspirational.” As far as Born knew, nothing came of it.

Another person connected to the center was Papadopoulos, who worked there in the spring of 2016 under the lofty title of director of the Center for International Energy and Natural Resources Law & Security.


It’s unclear whether the center explains how the young Papadopoulos and the middle-aged Mifsud first connected.


But Glencross, the political analyst, speculated that whenever they met, they probably saw in each other kindred spirits.

“[Mifsud] is exactly the type of person who is on the make, or wants to be on the make in foreign policy circles,” he said. “I can see why someone like Papadopoulos, if he wanted to make himself seem more important, he would want to latch on to someone like Joseph.”

*Adam reported from London. Isaac Stanley-Becker in Oxford, England, contributed to this report.*

 **150 Comments**

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