Sources: Russians discussed potentially 'derogatory' information about Trump and associates during campaign

By Pamela Brown, Jim Sciutto and Dana Bash, CNN

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Story highlights

The US intercepted discussions of Russian officials bragging about cultivating relationships with Trump campaign aides

Sources caution the claims "could have been exaggerated or even made up"

(CNN) — Russian government officials discussed having potentially "derogatory" information about then-presidential candidate Donald Trump and some of his top aides in conversations intercepted by US intelligence during the 2016 election, according to two former intelligence officials and a congressional source.

One source described the information as financial in nature and said the discussion centered on whether the Russians had leverage over Trump's inner circle. The source said the intercepted communications suggested to US intelligence that Russians believed "they had the ability to influence the administration through the derogatory information."
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But the sources, privy to the descriptions of the communications written by US intelligence, cautioned the Russian claims to one another "could have been exaggerated or even made up" as part of a disinformation campaign that the Russians did during the election.

The details of the communication shed new light on information US intelligence received about Russian claims of influence. The contents of the conversations made clear to US officials that Russia was considering ways to influence the election -- even if their claims turned out to be false.

None of the sources would say which specific Trump aides were discussed. One of the officials said the intelligence report masked the American names but it was clear the conversations revolved around the Trump campaign team. Another source would not give more specifics, citing the classified nature of the information.

"The Russians could be overstating their belief to influence," said one of the sources.

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As CNN first reported, the US intercepted discussions of Russian officials bragging about cultivating relationships with Trump campaign aides during the campaign, including Trump's first national security adviser, Michael Flynn, to influence Trump. Following CNN's report, The New York Times said Trump's campaign chairman Paul Manafort was also discussed.

A White House spokesman told CNN: "This is yet another round of false and unverified claims made by anonymous sources to smear the President. The reality is, a review of the President’s income from the last ten years showed he had virtually no financial ties at all. There appears to be no limit to which the President’s political opponents will go to perpetuate this false narrative, including illegally leaking classified material. All this does is play into the hands of our adversaries and put our country at risk."

The FBI declined to comment for this story. The Office of the Director of National Intelligence and Flynn did not return calls seeking comment.
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Manafort has denied he received any illicit finances and also denied any wrongdoing in connection with his work for Trump and foreign officials before joining the Trump campaign. He has offered to testify before congressional committees investigating Russia’s election interference.

The FBI investigation into Russian meddling in the US election, recently handed over to Special Counsel Robert Mueller, includes seeking answers as to whether there was any coordination with associates of Trump and includes examining financial dealings of key Trump associates. The FBI would not comment on whether any of the claims discussed in the intercepts have been verified.

But US counterintelligence investigators were already looking into the Russian claims during the summer of 2016, before the public became aware of similar claims in a dossier created for political opponents of Trump by a former British spy. The former spy, Christopher Steele, shared some of those findings with the FBI during the summer of 2016.
CNN has not been able to verify the allegations about the derogatory information in the dossier, but current and former US officials say some of the Russia-to-Russia conversations in the dossier have been corroborated.

By the time Trump took office, questions about some of his aides' financial dealings with Russian entities were already under investigation.

Soon after the Republican convention, Manafort had already stepped aside because of questions about off-the-book payments he received before joining the Trump campaign consulting for Russia-friendly Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovych and his political allies, officials told CNN last summer.

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In addition, a December 2015 visit to Moscow by Flynn caught the attention of US intelligence officials, multiple sources tell CNN. On that trip, Flynn appeared alongside Putin at a gala in honor of Russian state media outlet RT.

That visit was followed with an increase in conversations between Flynn and Russia's ambassador in the US, according to the officials familiar with the matter.

Flynn now faces multiple investigations for failing to disclose on his security clearance forms payments he received for the Moscow trip from Russian entities, in addition to questions about lobbying he did for Turkey.

The President himself has denied having any financial ties to Russia. But his company has had some business dealings in the country over the years.

Comments from the President's sons -- who currently run the Trump Organization's sprawling business -- have raised questions about ties to Russia.
In 2008, Donald Trump Jr. said at a forum on real estate markets that Trump's businesses "see a lot of money pouring in from Russia." Earlier this year, journalist James Dodson claimed that in 2014, Eric Trump told him that the golf business did not need American investment because "we have all the funding we need out of Russia." Eric Trump has vigorously denied he made the remark.

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Trump's personal attorneys recently released a letter asserting that in the past decade of tax returns, "with few exceptions," there is no income from Russians sources, including debt owed or interest paid to Russian lenders by Trump or his business entities. In a break from decades of tradition, the President has refused to release his tax returns.

But the letter acknowledges there has been some business with Russia in the past. The first was income Trump received from the 2013 Miss Universe pageant held in Moscow. Trump also sold a Florida property to a Russian billionaire for millions in profit. Lastly, the "ordinary course sales of goods and services to Russians or Russian entities, such as sales/rentals/fees for condominiums, hotel rooms, rounds of golf, books or Trump-licensed products."

CNN's Marshall Cohen contributed to this report.
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