

Giuliani Is Drawing Attention to Hunter Biden's Work in Romania. But There's a Problem.

Hunter Biden worked to help a Romanian executive facing corruption charges. But so did the former New York mayor — and a former F.B.I. director.



Efforts by President Trump and Rudolph W. Giuliani to pressure Ukraine into investigating the Bidens led to the impeachment inquiry. Credit...Andrew Harnik/Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Rudolph W. Giuliani, President Trump's personal lawyer, signaled this month that he planned to open a new front in his attacks against former Vice President Joseph R. Biden Jr. — work done by Mr. Biden's son Hunter Biden for a wealthy Romanian business executive facing corruption charges.

But there's a problem with that strategy: Mr. Giuliani participated in an effort that would have helped the same executive, and was in fact recruited to do so by Louis J. Freeh, a former F.B.I. director who had been brought onto the matter by Hunter Biden.

In effect, Mr. Giuliani and Hunter Biden were on the same team, if not at the same time. And their work to help the business executive, along with that of Mr. Freeh, stood in contrast to efforts by the United States, including Vice President Biden while he was in office, to encourage anti-corruption efforts in Romania.

The dynamic in Romania underscores how Mr. Giuliani has done a [brisk international business](#) with clients who sometimes seem to be seeking to capitalize on his connections to Mr. Trump even as he has accused Hunter Biden of seeking to capitalize on his father's name while doing business in other countries. And the disclosure of the connection between his role in Romania and Mr. Biden's comes at a time when Mr. Giuliani, the former New York mayor, is [under investigation by federal prosecutors](#) in New York for possible violations of foreign lobbying laws.

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Hunter Biden, who is a lawyer, was retained by the business executive, Gabriel Popoviciu, in 2015, while his father was vice president, to help try to fend off charges in Romania being pursued by anti-corruption prosecutors. In 2016, Mr. Popoviciu was convicted on charges related to a land deal in northern Bucharest, the Romanian capital.

Mr. Popoviciu appealed the decision.

Around the time of the 2016 conviction, Mr. Biden recruited Mr. Freeh to assist on the case, according to four people familiar with the effort. Mr. Freeh then [retained Mr. Giuliani](#), who last year criticized Romania's anti-corruption crackdown and urged amnesty to those who had been convicted, which could have included Mr. Popoviciu.



Hunter Biden was retained by the business executive, Gabriel Popoviciu, while his father was vice president. Credit...Teresa Kroeger/Getty Images for World Food Program USA

Mr. Giuliani's involvement came after Mr. Biden bowed out of the case, according to three people familiar with the arrangements.

The episode, elements of which were [reported Thursday by NBC News](#), is another example of the paydays available to politically prominent Americans willing to work for foreign interests, some of whom are hoping to parlay Washington connections into favorable treatment at home and on the world stage.

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Hunter Biden also served as a [board member of a Ukrainian energy company](#) owned by an oligarch who had been battling accusations of corruption at the same time that Vice President Biden — now a leading 2020 Democratic presidential candidate — was pressing the Ukrainian government to step up its anti-corruption efforts. Hunter Biden was paid as much as \$50,000 a month for his role on the board.

The Biden Presidency

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Efforts by Mr. Giuliani and Mr. Trump to pressure the current Ukrainian government into investigating the Bidens helped lead to the impeachment inquiry underway by House Democrats. Mr. Trump also [asked China to investigate Hunter Biden's business there](#), a request that was rejected by the Chinese government.

There is no evidence that Vice President Biden acted improperly in any of the situations involving his son.

Andrew Bates, a Biden campaign spokesman, said, “Americans are not going to be hoodwinked by a president desperately trying to turn attention to anything but his own corrupt behavior.”

Hunter Biden acknowledged in an [interview with ABC News](#) this month that he exercised “poor judgment,” by joining the board of the Ukrainian gas company Burisma Holdings but said he has done nothing wrong. He left the company’s board in April. This month, he announced he would [step down from the board of a Chinese company](#) and would not work for or with any foreign-owned companies if his father were elected president.

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George Mesires, a lawyer for Hunter Biden, said his client never discussed the Popoviciu case, Romanian anti-corruption efforts or anything else related to Romania with his father.

Mr. Popoviciu’s hiring of well-connected Americans seemed to be an effort to leverage “the importance to the Romanian government of the U.S.-Romanian bilateral” relationship “to influence and possibly overcome his political challenges in Romania,” said Heather A. Conley, who was a deputy assistant secretary of state in the bureau of European and Eurasian affairs from 2001 to 2005.

Ms. Conley, who is director of the Europe program at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, warned that going to work in “environments where corruption is very prevalent such as Romania should be a blinking yellow light of caution reputationally for U.S. firms and individuals.”

Early this month, Mr. Giuliani suggested that he intended to soon draw attention to Hunter Biden’s work in Romania. During an [appearance on Fox News](#) in which Mr. Giuliani reiterated his claims about the Bidens’ activities in Ukraine and China, he announced, as the segment was nearing its end, that “there’s a lot more to come out. We haven’t moved to Romania, yet. Wait until we get to Romania.”

Mr. Trump referred to Hunter Biden’s Romania work for the first time on Friday in remarks to reporters on the South Lawn of the White House. [SKIP ADVERTISEMENT](#)

“Well, I think what Biden did, and his son — and now, I guess, they’re finding also Romania; that just came out today. Or some other country. And I’m sure there are more than that,” the president said.

As far back as May, Mr. Giuliani indicated to The New York Times that he intended to ask Mr. Freeh for information about Hunter Biden’s work in Romania. It is not clear if he did so.

Neither executives at Mr. Freeh’s company, Freeh Group International Solutions, nor Mr. Giuliani responded to requests for comment this week.

Hunter Biden’s work for Mr. Popoviciu was [first reported](#) by The New York Times in May.

But new details demonstrate how Hunter Biden’s efforts stood in contrast to the message being delivered in Romania by his father and put him on the same side of the case as Mr. Giuliani.

Image



Hunter Biden agreed to work for Mr. Popoviciu at a time when Mr. Popoviciu was being targeted by an anti-corruption campaign that had been championed by Vice President Biden and other Western leaders.

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In a [May 2014 speech](#) to politicians in Bucharest, Vice President Biden assailed corruption as “a cancer that eats away at a citizen’s faith in democracy” and “can represent a clear and present danger not only to a nation’s economy, but to its very national security.”

About two years after that speech, Mr. Popoviciu was convicted in a case brought by an anticorruption agency that the vice president had praised.

In 2015, before his first trip to Romania, Hunter Biden met with the Romanian ambassador to the United States in the country’s embassy in Washington, according to two people familiar with the meeting. Mr. Biden stressed that he was undertaking the trip as a private citizen, and did not expressly mention Mr. Popoviciu, or his case, one of the people said.

At one point, Hunter Biden approached Mark Gitenstein, a former American ambassador to Romania during President Barack Obama’s first term, to discuss the possibility of referring the Popoviciu case to Mr. Freeh, according to someone familiar with the conversation.

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Mr. Gitenstein, who had served as a Senate aide for the senior Mr. Biden and now sits on the board of the Biden Foundation, defended the work of the prosecutors who targeted Mr. Popoviciu.

“Both the vice president and I had total confidence in the anti-corruption prosecutors in Romania, and did everything in our power to support them, both during our time in office and after,” Mr. Gitenstein said.

Mr. Mesires acknowledged that Hunter Biden referred Mr. Popoviciu to both Boies Schiller Flexner, the law firm where Hunter Biden worked at the time, and Mr. Freeh’s firm, Freeh Group International Solutions.

Mr. Popoviciu hired both firms, according to four people familiar with the arrangements. Mr. Popoviciu could not be reached for comment.

Boies Schiller Flexner declined to comment.

Mr. Freeh’s firm started work for the Romanian businessman in July 2016, shortly after Mr. Popoviciu was initially convicted by a Romanian court.

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Mr. Freeh conducted a review of the case with a team of retired prosecutors and F.B.I. agents. The team concluded there were “numerous factual and legal deficiencies in the case,” according to a [statement](#) summarizing the findings issued in 2017, after the Romanian high court upheld Mr. Popoviciu’s conviction and handed down a seven-year prison sentence. Mr. Freeh called for Romanian authorities to review the case, and reach “another result.”

That has not happened. Mr. Popoviciu was arrested in London shortly after the high court’s decision. He posted bail and is fighting extradition to Romania.

While Mr. Biden ended his work on the case at some point after recruiting Mr. Freeh, Mr. Freeh continued working for Mr. Popoviciu.

Last year, Mr. Freeh retained Mr. Giuliani, a longtime associate whose 2008 presidential campaign [Mr. Freeh supported](#), to help with his efforts in Romania.

In August 2018, while serving as Mr. Trump’s personal lawyer during the special counsel’s investigation into Russia’s election interference, Mr. Giuliani wrote a letter to Romania’s president [criticizing the country’s anti-corruption prosecutors](#) and urging amnesty to those who had been convicted in the crackdown.

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That could have included Mr. Popoviciu, though Mr. Giuliani did not explicitly mention him in the letter. Mr. Giuliani said the Freeh Group was paying his fee, but did not identify the Freeh Group client on whose behalf he wrote the letter. However, he told Politico at the time that it “[was based on a report I reviewed](#)” by Mr. Freeh.

In the letter, Mr. Giuliani expressed concern about the “continuing damage to the rule of law being done under the guise of effective law enforcement” in Romania.

Less than two months earlier, the American embassy in Bucharest, along with the embassies of 11 other countries, had [issued a statement](#) reaching the opposite conclusion. It highlighted Romania’s “considerable progress” in combating corruption and in building an effective rule of law.

The statement, which came at a time when contentious alterations to the criminal code were moving through the Romanian parliament, also called on all parties involved to “avoid changes that would weaken the rule of law or Romania’s ability to fight crime or corruption.”

Kit Gillet contributed reporting from Bucharest.