

## *Italy Did Not Fuel U.S. Suspicion of Russian Meddling, Prime Minister Says*

Casting holes in a Trump conspiracy theory, Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte revealed details of two visits to Rome by Attorney General William P. Barr.

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ROME — Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte of Italy said his country's intelligence services had informed the American attorney general, William P. Barr, that they played no role in the events leading to the Russia investigation, taking the air out of an unsubstantiated theory promoted by President Trump and his allies in recent weeks.

"Our intelligence is completely unrelated to the so-called Russiagate and that has been made clear," Mr. Conte said in a news conference in Rome on Wednesday evening after spending hours describing Italy's discussions with Mr. Barr to the parliamentary committee on intelligence.

Mr. Conte publicly acknowledged for the first time that Mr. Barr had twice met with the leaders of Italy's intelligence agencies after asking them to clarify their role in a 2016 meeting between a Maltese professor and a Trump campaign adviser on a small college campus in Rome, Link Campus University.

During a subsequent meeting, the professor, Joseph Mifsud, told the adviser, George Papadopolous, that Russia had obtained damaging information about Hillary Clinton in the form of "thousands of emails," according to the special counsel's report into Russian meddling in the 2016 American election. Mr. Papadopolous later shared that information with foreign diplomats, which eventually set off alarms among American intelligence officials about Russian interference.

Mr. Trump and his associates have asserted, without evidence, that Mr. Mifsud is not a professor with links to Russia, as the special counsel's report states, but a Western intelligence asset working as part of an Obama administration plot to spy on the Trump campaign. That theory, once relegated to the far-right margins, has become a frequent talking point of Mr. Trump's as he seeks to undermine the special counsel's report.

Mr. Barr at least twice visited Rome to investigate the allegations, on Aug. 15 and Sept. 27.

Mr. Conte said on Wednesday that Mr. Barr met on Aug. 15 with Gen. Gennaro Vecchione, who leads the agency coordinating Italy's internal and external intelligence. That meeting, he said, "was meant to decide the extent of the collaboration," adding, "I didn't take part in it, but was informed."

Mr. Barr and the Italian general met again on Sept. 27 and were joined by two other senior Italian agents, the heads of internal and external intelligence, Mr. Conte said. "The meeting clarified, after this was verified, that our intelligence is unrelated to the affair."

"This extraneousness has been acknowledged," he said, apparently referring to an acknowledgment by the Trump administration.

Mr. Barr also asked Italian authorities to "verify the operations of American agents," Mr. Conte said. "That is, his question was to verify what the American intelligence did."

The Italian inquiry is only one aspect of Mr. Barr's review of the origins of the investigation into Russian meddling. American intelligence agencies unanimously concluded that the Kremlin had intervened in the presidential election to benefit Mr. Trump, and the special counsel's report laid out those efforts in detail.

But Mr. Trump has questioned those conclusions and suggested, without evidence, that hostile American officials may have planted false information that led to the Russia inquiry.

Mr. Papadopolous, for his part, has insisted that Mr. Mifsud was actually a spy who was activated by the prime minister at the time, Matteo Renzi, at the behest of Mr. Obama to spread false information about Russian interference.

Mr. Renzi said he would sue Mr. Papadopolous for slander and has rejected the accusation, calling it ridiculous.

Mr. Mifsud has been described by his former bosses at Link Campus University as a "chatterbox" and a know-nothing who sought to leverage relationships to make money.

The revelations of Mr. Barr's visits spurred controversy in Italy, where Mr. Conte's critics argued he had inappropriately allocated the country's intelligence resources to help Mr. Trump win domestic political advantage.

Italian officials have lamented that the unusual requests by the Trump administration complicated what has been a long-lasting collaboration between allies on issues of justice and national security.