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FOREIGN POLICY

Russia accuses Ukraine of sabotaging Trump

A Foreign Ministry official says Ukrainian officials intentionally damaged Trump by targeting Manafort.

By KENNETH P. VOGEL and JULIA IOFFE | 12/01/2016 02:40 PM EST | Updated 12/02/2016 02:39 PM EST



"Ukraine seriously complicated the work of Trump's election campaign headquarters," said a top Russian official. | Getty

A top Russian official is accusing the Ukrainian government of undermining Donald Trump's presidential campaign by trashing him on social media and disseminating dirt on one of his close associates.

A spokeswoman for Russia's Foreign Ministry on Thursday contended that the Ukrainian government over the summer damaged Trump's campaign by implicating his then-campaign chief Paul Manafort in a corruption scandal involving a pro-Russian Ukrainian political party funded by oligarchs.

"Ukraine seriously complicated the work of Trump's election campaign headquarters by planting information according to which Paul Manafort, Trump's campaign chairman, allegedly accepted money from Ukrainian oligarchs," Maria Zakharova said at a press briefing, according to a transcript of her remarks posted on the Foreign Ministry's website. "All of you have heard this remarkable story," she told assembled reporters.

In a follow-up exchange with POLITICO, Zakharova went further, suggesting that the Ukrainian government was intentionally trying to undermine Trump's campaign by releasing records from the oligarch-backed party naming Manafort.

"That's exactly what it looks like," she wrote.

The renewed scrutiny of Manafort's dealings in Ukraine comes at an awkward time for the veteran operative and for Trump. As the president-elect works to assemble his foreign policy team, his stance toward Russia and its neighbors is being closely watched by the international community.

Manafort, who had been pushed out of Trump's campaign in late August because of growing press scrutiny of his work in Ukraine in recent weeks has re-emerged as an informal adviser as President-elect Trump has assembled his administration, according to a handful of people around the transition team.

And Thursday's allegation from Moscow also seems at least mildly ironic, coming amid calls from Washington Democrats for an investigation into Russian meddling in the presidential election in a manner that damaged Trump's Democratic rival Hillary Clinton. The U.S. intelligence community during the campaign accused Russia of directing hacks of the Democratic National Committee and of Clinton campaign chairman John Podesta, yielding emails that raised questions about Clinton's connections to Wall Street and her family's foundation and financial interests.



DEFENSE

Trump picks General 'Mad Dog' Mattis as defense secretary

By **BRYAN BENDER** and **ANDREW HANNA**

The hacking elevated Russia as a major issue in the presidential race. Clinton and her allies cast Trump as the preferred candidate of Russia, one of the U.S.'s top geopolitical foes, citing the hacking, as well as Trump's ties to Russia and his laissez-faire stance on Russian aggression toward Ukraine, not to mention Manafort's connections to pro-Russian Ukrainian politicians.

Manafort's work in Ukraine started becoming a more serious liability for Trump's campaign when the New York Times in August reported that The National Anti-Corruption Bureau of Ukraine was investigating a "secret ledger" that listed \$12.7 million in cash payments earmarked for Manafort by the party of the deposed former Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovich.

While the anti-corruption agency stressed that Manafort's inclusion on the ledger "does not mean that he actually got the money" (and Manafort denied that he had received any cash payments) its officials did not challenge characterizations that Manafort was among the targets of their investigation into Yanukovich's party.

But, after Trump's stunning victory over Clinton in last month's presidential election, officials with the corruption bureau appeared to backpedal. One was quoted in the Russian tabloid Komsomolskaya Pravda saying, "Mr. Manafort does not have a role in this case."

The National Anti-Corruption Bureau earlier this week didn't respond to questions from POLITICO about its investigation into the Party of Regions ledger, or whether the bureau was investigating Manafort.

On Thursday, Manafort told POLITICO that the bureau had never contacted him.

"I never understood why I was the target," he said. "I wasn't the candidate. I was just caught in the crossfire."



2016

Clinton and Trump strategists still throwing punches

By SHANE GOLDMACHER and GABRIEL DEBENEDETTI

Manafort wouldn't comment on his role in Trump's transition.

But he was spotted at Trump Tower last week, and a handful of sources around the transition team told POLITICO that Manafort has spoken to Trump periodically since the election. They said that Manafort, who spent the last three decades collecting huge paydays

from businesses and politicians all over the world, has acted as a sort of informal matchmaker, advising foreign policy operatives on how to join the transition.

Additionally, close Manafort associates have worked for Trump's transition, as well as his inaugural committee.

Hope Hicks, a Trump spokeswoman, rejected the suggestion that Manafort was playing even an informal role. "Paul Manafort has absolutely no involvement with the transition team or communication with the president-elect," she said.

Trump's team did not respond to questions about Zakharova's comments at Thursday's briefing, nor did representatives from the Ukrainian and Russian embassies in Washington.

Zakharova contended during the briefing that Ukrainian officials were desperate to protect their favorable relationship with the U.S. after having run afoul of Trump — and Manafort — during the campaign.

"It appears that keeping this sponsorship is a big challenge for the Kiev authorities, who were uncivilized and rude toward President-elect Donald Trump when he was a presidential candidate," Zakharova said, according to the transcript.

In her follow-up exchange with POLITICO, Zakharova accused Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko of not making the time to meet with Trump on the sidelines of the United Nations meeting in New York in September, though multiple media outlets reported that Trump's team didn't respond to a meeting request from the Ukrainians.

Trump and Poroshenko did connect after the election, when the Ukrainian leader called to congratulate the president-elect and the two agreed to a bilateral meeting.

But Zakharova suggested during her Thursday briefing that there was cause for lingering bad blood between Trump and the Ukrainian government.

"You probably remember that Ukrainian officials and diplomatic representatives abroad did not express their views or political assessments but openly insulted the person whom the American people elected their president. You may remember that they later tried to delete these statements from their social networks accounts and their sites, saying that they had been wrong and had rushed to conclusions," she said.

That appears at least in part to be a reference to since-deleted July social media posts by a recently retired Ukrainian diplomat and Ukraine's minister of internal affairs, Arsen

Avakov.

In a tweet, the retired diplomat had called Trump a “clown” and asserted that he was “an even bigger danger to the U.S. than terrorism.”

And Avakov, in a Facebook post, lashed Trump for saying that Putin would not invade Ukraine, despite the fact that the Russian strongman already presided over the 2014 annexation of Crimea, which is internationally recognized as Ukrainian territory.

Trump’s assessment was “a diagnosis of a dangerous misfit,” Avakov wrote, according to one account. He called Trump “dangerous for Ukraine and the U.S.” and noted that Manafort worked with Yanukovich when the former Ukrainian leader “fled to Russia through Crimea. Where would Manafort lead Trump?”

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