



The professor, the prime minister and the attorney general: Italy gets caught up in an unproven theory of Trump's allies

By **Chico Harlan** and **Stefano Pitrelli**

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ROME — Until a few weeks ago, Italian officials had little pressing interest in the unsubstantiated theory that a professor at a Rome-based university had been working on behalf of Western intelligence agencies and the American “deep state” to undermine the Trump campaign in 2016.

But then Attorney General William P. Barr showed up here asking for insight.

In the United States, the visit has fed the narrative promoted by Democrats pursuing impeachment: that the administration has pressed foreign governments for help discrediting President Trump's adversaries and undermining U.S. investigation work on the Trump campaign.

In Italy, the Barr visit created a difficult political situation — and has launched a heated national debate. Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte is under pressure to explain his role, while former prime minister Matteo Renzi is suing for slander.

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“The awkward aspect is that the Italian government is being pulled against its volition into a quarrel between the Trump administration and its own intelligence service,” said Alberto Castelvechi, who has written about U.S. intelligence and is an adjunct professor at LUISS Guido Carli, a university in Rome.

Barr has been tight-lipped about his travel to Italy, but according to Italian newspaper Corriere della Sera, he met in late September with the country’s intelligence heads, in an arrangement approved by Conte.

People familiar with the matter say Barr had developed particular interest in Joseph Mifsud, the professor whom special counsel Robert S. Mueller III cited as the catalyst for the FBI probe into ties between the Trump campaign and Russia.

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Mifsud was known to boast about his international connections, particularly in Russia, and he was said to have told a onetime Trump campaign aide that Russia had “dirt” on Hillary Clinton in the form of thousands of emails.

An alternative account, though, has gained currency in the White House. That theory posits, despite the absence of supporting evidence, that Mifsud was actually a Western intelligence plant who was working to discredit the Trump campaign.

Trump has raised questions about the professor, according to a White House official. And the president’s personal lawyer, Rudolph W. Giuliani, is among those who have asserted a Western conspiracy.

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Corriere reported that Barr pressed Italy on whether it had helped Mifsud go dark — the professor disappeared from public view two years ago. The Daily Beast described the meeting in greater detail, citing an Italian Ministry of Justice source who said Barr and U.S. Attorney John Durham were played a taped deposition from when Mifsud reportedly applied for police protection. Two intelligence sources subsequently offered conflicting information to ANSA, an Italian news agency, saying that Mifsud had not requested protection.

In the aftermath of Barr's visit, much of the focus in the Italian media has been on Conte's role and whether he acted appropriately in handling a meeting that was supposed to be secret.

Conte did not give advance notice of Barr's visit to an oversight committee on intelligence. One Italian official familiar with the matter called the Barr visit "unusual" and said that although Rome and Washington routinely share sensitive matters, the exchanges take place between intelligence agencies — not with intelligence officials speaking to an attorney general.

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"This was a meeting of intelligence service and politics," said the official, who, like others in this report, spoke on the condition of anonymity because they were not authorized to discuss the issues publicly.

Conte will soon appear before a parliamentary oversight committee, his spokesman said.

Meanwhile, George Papadopoulos, the former Trump aide reportedly offered "dirt" by Mifsud, has turned into one of the top purveyors of the theory that the professor was part of a Western conspiracy.

Papadopoulos — who served a brief prison stint for lying to the FBI while hindering the agents’ ability to effectively question or detain Mifsud — has claimed that Mifsud was an “Italian operative handled by the CIA.” Papadopoulos also gave an interview to an Italian right-wing newspaper, describing a scenario in which then-President Barack Obama orchestrated Mifsud’s counterintelligence activities, with the help of Renzi, Italy’s prime minister at the time. Papadopoulos does not mention Renzi in his book, “Deep State Target.”

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Renzi said in an interview with The Washington Post that he had filed a lawsuit against Papadopoulos for slander, asking for \$1 million in damages. Link Campus University in Rome, where Mifsud had briefly worked, is also filing a suit from what its president called a “grave smear campaign” against the school.

“It doesn’t look like a spy story to me as much as a third-class comedy,” said Renzi, who was prime minister from 2014 until 2016. “But when faced with a third-class comedy that won’t even make you laugh, one needs to react.”

Renzi said that “whatever the attorney general, Giuliani or others think, does not concern or interest me. Barack Obama’s seriousness and rigor isn’t up for debate as far as I’m concerned, and I’m ready to attest to that everywhere.”

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The president of Link University, Vincenzo Scotti, said in an email that he had not been contacted by Barr or by Durham, the U.S. attorney who has been appointed to investigate the probe into Russian interference in 2016.

“Absolutely no — nobody, no authority, be it American or Italian, got in touch with us, not even indirectly, on the topic,” said Scotti, a former Italian minister of foreign affairs.

One former senior government official said Mifsud didn’t fit the profile of a spy for either side.

“That this guy is acting as a dangerous spy, no matter whether to discredit Trump or to do him a favor,” the official said. “It looks to be a little bit like fiction.”

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