

## Agents Tried to Flip Russian Oligarchs. The Fallout Spread to Trump.

By Kenneth P. Vogel and Matthew Rosenberg  
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Justice Department officials tried to turn the oligarch Oleg V. Deripaska into an informant as they sought information on Russian organized crime and, later, on possible Russian aid to President Trump's 2016 campaign. Andrey Rudakov/Bloomberg

WASHINGTON — In the estimation of American officials, Oleg V. Deripaska, a Russian oligarch with close ties to the Kremlin, has faced credible accusations of extortion, bribery and even murder.

They also thought he might make a good source.

Between 2014 and 2016, the F.B.I. and the Justice Department unsuccessfully tried to turn Mr. Deripaska into an informant. They signaled that they might provide help with his trouble in getting visas for the United States or even explore other steps to address his legal problems. In exchange, they were hoping for information on Russian organized crime and, later, on possible Russian aid to President Trump's 2016 campaign, according to current and former officials and associates of Mr. Deripaska.

In one dramatic encounter, F.B.I. agents appeared unannounced and uninvited at a home Mr. Deripaska maintains in New York and pressed him on whether Paul

Manafort, a former business partner of his who went on to become chairman of Mr. Trump's campaign, had served as a link between the campaign and the Kremlin.

The attempt to flip Mr. Deripaska was part of a broader, clandestine American effort to gauge the possibility of gaining cooperation from roughly a half-dozen of Russia's richest men, nearly all of whom, like Mr. Deripaska, depend on President Vladimir V. Putin to maintain their wealth, the officials said.

Two of the players in the effort were Bruce G. Ohr, the Justice Department official who has recently become a [target of attacks](#) by Mr. Trump, and Christopher Steele, the former British spy who compiled [a dossier of purported links](#) between the Trump campaign and Russia.

The systematic effort to win the cooperation of the oligarchs, which has not previously been revealed, does not appear to have scored any successes. And in Mr. Deripaska's case, he told the American investigators that he disagreed with their theories about Russian organized crime and Kremlin collusion in the campaign, a person familiar with the exchanges said. The person added that Mr. Deripaska even notified the Kremlin about the American efforts to cultivate him.

But the fallout from the efforts is now rippling through American politics and has helped fuel Mr. Trump's campaign to discredit the investigation into whether he coordinated with Russia in its interference in the election.

The contacts between Mr. Ohr and Mr. Steele were detailed in emails and notes from Mr. Ohr that the Justice Department turned over to Republicans in Congress earlier this year. A number of journalists, including some at conservative news outlets, have [reported on elements](#) of those contacts but not on the broader outreach program to the oligarchs or key aspects of the interactions between Mr. Ohr, Mr. Steele and Mr. Deripaska.

The revelation that Mr. Ohr engaged with Mr. Steele has provided the president's allies with fresh fodder to attack the investigation led by Robert S. Mueller III, the special counsel, casting it as part of a vast, long-running conspiracy by a "deep state" bent on undermining Mr. Trump. In their telling, Mr. Ohr and his wife — who worked as a contractor at the same research firm that produced the dossier — are villainous central players in a cabal out to destroy the president.

Mr. Trump himself has seized on the reports, threatening to pull Mr. Ohr's security clearance and claiming that his family "received big money for helping to create the phony, dirty and discredited Dossier."

While Mr. Steele did discuss the research that resulted in the dossier with Mr. Ohr during the final months of the campaign, current and former officials said that Mr. Deripaska was the subject of many of the contacts between the two men between 2014 and 2016.

A timeline that Mr. Ohr hand-wrote of all his contacts with Mr. Steele was among the leaked documents cited by the president and his allies as evidence of an anti-Trump plot.

The contacts between Mr. Steele and Mr. Ohr started before Mr. Trump became a presidential candidate and continued through much of the campaign.

Mr. Deripaska's contacts with the F.B.I. took place in September 2015 and the same month a year later. The latter meeting came two months after the F.B.I. began investigating Russian interference in the election and a month after Mr. Manafort left the Trump campaign amid reports about his work for Russia-aligned political parties in Ukraine.

The outreach to Mr. Deripaska, who is so close to the Russian president that he has been called "Putin's oligarch," was not as much of a long shot as it might have appeared.

He had worked with the United States government in the past, including on a thwarted effort to [rescue](#) an F.B.I. agent captured in Iran, on which he reportedly spent as much as \$25 million of his own money. And he had incentive to cooperate again in the run-up to the 2016 election, as he tried to win permission to travel more easily to the United States, where he has long sought more freedom to do business and greater acceptance as a global power broker.

Mr. Steele sought to aid the effort to engage Mr. Deripaska, and he noted in an email to Mr. Ohr in February 2016 that the Russian had received a visa to travel to the United States. In the email, Mr. Steele said his company had compiled and circulated "sensitive" research suggesting that Mr. Deripaska and other oligarchs were under pressure from the Kremlin to toe the Russian government line, leading Mr. Steele to conclude that Mr. Deripaska was not the "tool" of Mr. Putin alleged by the United States government.

The timeline sketched out by Mr. Ohr shows contacts stretching back to when Mr. Ohr first met Mr. Steele in 2007. It also shows what officials said was the first date on which the two discussed cultivating Mr. Deripaska: a meeting in Washington on Nov. 21, 2014, roughly seven months before Mr. Trump announced that he was running for president.

The officials spoke on the condition of anonymity to discuss an initiative that remains classified. Most expressed deep discomfort, saying they feared that in revealing the attempts to cultivate Mr. Deripaska and other oligarchs they were undermining American national security and strengthening the grip that Mr. Putin holds over those who surround him.

But they also said they did not want Mr. Trump and his allies to use the program's secrecy as a screen with which they could cherry-pick facts and present them,

sheared of context, to undermine the special counsel's investigation. That, too, they said they feared, would damage American security.

The program was led by the F.B.I. Mr. Ohr, who had long worked on combating Russian organized crime, was one of the Justice Department officials involved.

Mr. Steele served as an intermediary between the Americans and the Russian oligarchs they were seeking to cultivate. He had first met Mr. Ohr years earlier while still serving at MI6, Britain's foreign spy agency, where he oversaw Russia operations. After retiring, he opened a business intelligence firm, and had tracked Russian organized crime and business interests for private clients, including one of Mr. Deripaska's lawyers.

To facilitate meetings, the F.B.I. pushed the State Department to allow Mr. Deripaska to travel to New York on a Russian diplomatic passport as part of a Russian government delegation to the United Nations General Assembly. The State Department had previously rejected some of Mr. Deripaska's efforts to secure visas to enter the United States — even as part of prior diplomatic delegations — but it approved diplomatic visa requests in 2015 and 2016.



One of the players in the effort to cultivate Mr. Deripaska was Bruce G. Ohr, the Justice Department official who has recently become a target of attacks by Mr.

Trump over his ties to the former British spy Christopher Steele. Erin Schaff for The New York Times

Mr. Steele helped set up a meeting between the Russian and American officials during the 2015 trip. Mr. Ohr attended the meeting, during which the Americans pressed Mr. Deripaska on the connections between Russian organized crime and Mr. Putin's government, as well as other issues, according to a person familiar with the events. The person said that Mr. Deripaska told the Americans that their theories were off base and did not reflect how things worked in Russia.

Mr. Deripaska would not agree to a second meeting. But one took place the next year, in September 2016, when F.B.I. agents showed up unannounced at his door in New York. By then, they were [already investigating possible ties](#) between Russia and the Trump campaign, and they pressed Mr. Deripaska about whether his former business partner, Mr. Manafort, had served as a link to the Kremlin during his time as Mr. Trump's campaign chairman.

It was not only the F.B.I. that was concerned about Russian interference in the final months of the campaign. American spy agencies were sounding an alarm after months of intelligence reports about [contacts between Trump associates and Russians](#), and [Moscow's hacking of Democratic Party emails](#). (American intelligence agencies [would later conclude that the interference was real and that Russia had acted](#) to boost Mr. Trump's candidacy.)

There was also a growing debate at the highest levels of the Obama administration about how to respond [without being seen as trying to tip the presidential election](#) toward Hillary Clinton.

Mr. Deripaska, though, told the F.B.I. agents that while he had no love for Mr. Manafort, with whom he was in a bitter business dispute, he found their theories about his role on the campaign "preposterous." He also disputed that there were any connections between the Trump campaign and Russia, according to the person familiar with the exchange.

The Justice Department's efforts to cultivate Mr. Deripaska appear to have fizzled soon after, amid worsening relations between the United States and Russia.

This past April, the Treasury Department imposed potentially crippling sanctions against Mr. Deripaska and his mammoth aluminum company, saying he had profited from the "malign activities" of Russia around the world. In announcing the sanctions, the Trump administration [cited accusations](#) that Mr. Deripaska had been accused of extortion, racketeering, bribery, links to organized crime and even ordering the murder of a businessman.

Mr. Deripaska has denied the allegations, and his allies contend that the sanctions are punishment for refusing to play ball with the Americans.



Yet just as it was becoming clear that Mr. Deripaska would provide little help to the Americans, Mr. Steele was talking to Mr. Ohr about an entirely new issue: the dossier.

In summer 2016, Mr. Steele first told Mr. Ohr about the research that would eventually come to make up the dossier. Over a breakfast in Washington, Mr. Steele said he believed that Russian intelligence had Mr. Trump “over a barrel,” according to a person familiar with the discussion. But the person said that it was more of a friendly heads-up, and that Mr. Steele had separately been in touch with an F.B.I. agent in a bid to get his work to investigators.

The research by that point [was being funded by the Democratic National Committee](#) and Mrs. Clinton’s campaign, and Mr. Steele believed that what he had found was damning enough that he needed to get it to American law enforcement.

F.B.I. agents would later meet with Mr. Steele to discuss his work. But former senior officials from the bureau and the Justice Department have said that the investigation into ties between Mr. Trump’s campaign and Russia was well underway by the time they got the dossier.

Nonetheless, Mr. Trump and his allies have seized on the fact that Mr. Ohr and Mr. Steele were in touch about elements of the dossier to attack the investigation into Russian election interference as a “rigged witch hunt.”

Mr. Trump and his allies have cast Mr. Steele’s research — and the serious consideration it was given by Mr. Ohr and the F.B.I. — as part of a plot by rogue officials and Mrs. Clinton’s allies to undermine Mr. Trump’s campaign and his presidency.

The role of Mr. Deripaska has gotten less attention, but it similarly offers fodder for the theory being advanced by the president’s defenders.

Among the documents produced to Congress by the Justice Department is an undated — and previously unreported — note handwritten by Mr. Ohr indicating that Mr. Deripaska and one of his London-based lawyers, Paul Hauser, were “almost ready to talk” to American government officials regarding the money that “Manafort stole.”

Even after the concerted effort to cultivate Mr. Deripaska appeared to have broken down, and as he was emerging as a subject of increasing interest in inquiries into ties between Mr. Trump’s circle and Russia, both sides continued sporadic outreach.

Last year, Mr. Ohr asked someone who communicated with Mr. Deripaska to urge the oligarch to “give up Manafort,” according to a person familiar with the exchange. And Mr. Deripaska sought to engage with Congress.

The oligarch took out newspaper advertisements in the United States last year volunteering to testify in any congressional hearings examining his work with Mr. Manafort. The ads were in response to [an Associated Press report](#) that Mr. Manafort had secretly worked for Mr. Deripaska on a plan to “greatly benefit the Putin government” in the mid-2000s.

Mr. Deripaska deplored that assertion as “malicious” and a “lie,” and subsequently sued The A.P. for libel, though he later dropped his appeal of a judge’s ruling dismissing the lawsuit without receiving a settlement or payment.

Soon after the advertisements ran, representatives for the House and Senate Intelligence Committees called a Washington-based lawyer for Mr. Deripaska, Adam Waldman, inquiring about taking his client up on the offer to testify, Mr. Waldman said in an interview.

What happened after that has been in dispute. Mr. Waldman, who stopped working for Mr. Deripaska after the sanctions were levied, said he told the committee staff that his client would be willing to testify without any grant of immunity, but would not testify about any Russian collusion with the Trump campaign because “he doesn’t know anything about that theory and actually doesn’t believe it occurred.”

“I told them that he would be willing to talk about Manafort,” Mr. Waldman added.

Mr. Waldman said he did not hear back from the committee’s staff members, but he contends that they played a role in pushing the claim that the talks over Mr. Deripaska’s potential testimony had fallen apart because he demanded immunity.

“We specifically told them that we did not want immunity,” Mr. Waldman said. “Clearly, they did not want him to testify. What other conclusion could you possibly draw?”

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