

Russian oligarch's story could spell trouble for Team Mueller

BY JOHN SOLOMON,

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Sometimes it is the quiet, elusive ones who come back to haunt you. And for ex-special prosecutor [Robert Mueller](#), one of those might be a Russian billionaire named [Oleg Deripaska](#).

The oligarch who once controlled Russia's largest aluminum empire has been an international man of intrigue in the now-completed and disproven Trump [collusion investigation](#).

Deripaska was a disaffected former business client of [Donald Trump's](#) fallen campaign chairman [Paul Manafort](#). He also was a legal research client of Trump-hating, Clinton-aiding British spy Christopher Steele. In his spare time, he was an occasional friendly cooperator with the FBI and its fired deputy director, Andrew McCabe.

And, at the height of the Russia collusion hysteria, Deripaska [was sanctioned](#) by the Trump administration to financially punish Russian President [Vladimir Putin](#) for his meddling in the 2016 U.S. presidential election.

With the Russia case, in which he had so many connections, now completed, Deripaska is breaking his silence. And what he has to say could impact Mueller's [July 17 testimony](#) before Congress.

In a wide-ranging interview with me, Deripaska confirmed [a story told to me](#) more than a year ago by law enforcement sources: He was indeed interviewed by FBI agents in September 2016 during the early Russia probe, and he told them he strongly doubted the bureau's theory that the Trump campaign, through Manafort, was colluding with Moscow to hijack the 2016 election.

"I told them straightforward, 'Look, I am not a friend with him [Manafort]. Apparently not, because I started a court case [against him] six or nine months before But since I'm Russian I would be very surprised that anyone from Russia would try to approach him for any reason, and wouldn't come and ask me my opinion,'" he said, recounting exactly what he says he told the FBI agents that day.

"I told them straightforward, I just don't believe that he would represent any Russian interest. And knowing what he's doing on Ukraine for the last, what, seven or eight years."

OK, so why should you care if a Russian denied Trump campaign collusion with Russia during the election?

First, Deripaska wasn't just any Russian. He was closely aligned with Putin and had been helpful to the FBI as far back as 2009. So he had earned some trust with the agents.

Most importantly, Deripaska's interview with the FBI reportedly was never provided by Team Mueller to Manafort's lawyers, even though it was potential proof of innocence, according to Manafort defense lawyer Kevin Downing. Manafort, initially investigated for collusion, was convicted on tax and lobbying violations unrelated to the Russia case.

That omission opens a possible door for appeal for what is known as a [Brady violation](#), for hiding exculpatory information from a defendant.

"Recent revelations by The Hill prove that the Office of Special Counsel's (OSC) claim that they had a legitimate basis to include [Paul Manafort](#) in an investigation of potential collusion between the Trump presidential campaign and the Russian government is false," Downing told me. "The failure to disclose this information to Manafort, the courts, or the public reaffirms that the OSC did not have a legitimate basis to investigate Manafort, and may prove that the OSC had no legitimate basis to investigate potential collusion between the Trump presidential campaign and the Russian government."

Deripaska's second relevance to Mueller's congressional hearings has to do with a series of events that first gained him trust inside the FBI.

Deripaska [confirmed a story I reported last year from FBI sources](#) that he spent more than \$20 million of his own money between 2009 and 2011 on a private rescue operation to free Robert Levinson, a retired FBI agent captured in Iran in 2007 while on a CIA mission.

Deripaska confirmed he paid for the operation at the request of the FBI, which was then under Mueller's direction. And he added that McCabe, then a rising FBI supervisor who was a former colleague of Levinson and later became a key figure in the Russia collusion probe, was one of those who asked him to help.

"I was approached, you know, by someone that he is under a lot of scrutiny now — McCabe," Deripaska said. "He also said that it was important enough for all of them [FBI officials]. And I kind of trusted them."

Deripaska said his privately funded rescue team came very close to a deal with the Iranian captors to secure Levinson's release but he was told by his FBI handlers that the deal ran into difficulties at Hillary Clinton's State Department and was scuttled. "I heard that some Russian 'hand,' or whatever you call people who are expert on the Russians at the State Department, [said], 'We just don't want to owe anything to this guy,'" Deripaska told me, adding that he never expected any U.S. favors for his personal efforts to free Levinson.

Asked if he thought the former FBI agent is alive, some dozen years later, Deripaska answered: “I don’t think so.” He pointed out that if Levinson had been alive, he likely would have come home in 2016, after the Obama administration struck [a nuclear deal with Iran](#).

Deripaska said he is continuing to investigate what really happened at State with Levinson, as he tries to fight the sanctions levied against him in 2018. His company, Rusal, has been [removed from the sanctions](#) list.

Deripaska’s tale has the potential to raise questions about a conflict of interest, since Mueller’s FBI first received a gift in the form of the privately funded rescue mission before Mueller, as special prosecutor, investigated Deripaska’s ties to key figures in the Russia case.

And Deripaska’s complicated tale goes on: His legal team in 2012 hired Steele, the former British MI6 agent, to do some research for a lawsuit involving a business rival that Deripaska was fighting in London: “It was a research project to support what was the case against me in London. But my understanding is that the lawyers trusted him for some reason, and he was for quite a time on retainer.”

Deripaska was unaware, though, that Steele also was working for the FBI on, among other things, a special program to recruit Russian oligarchs to provide intelligence on Putin and Russian organized crime.

He told me that Steele invited him to a September 2015 meeting with some Justice Department officials, under the guise that they might be able to help with the Russian’s long-running battle with State to get visas to visit the U.S. He said the offer to help with his visa problem was a “pretext” to recruit him.

“They actually never talk, you know, about the [visa] problem. They start talking about anything else. They ask, ‘Do you have anything? Give me names. Cases, whatever,’ ” Deripaska recalled.

He said he later was shocked to learn that Steele eventually went to work for the Clinton campaign through Fusion GPS, and the FBI, and spread allegations of the now-disproven Russia-Trump collusion.

Deripaska’s willingness to do an American interview at this moment undoubtedly has a motive. It’s likely rooted in an American charm offensive, [as he sues](#) not only to reverse the sanctions that Trump imposed on him but to challenge the State Department’s 15-year effort to keep him from getting normal visas.

He recently won a lawsuit and forced State to produce the so-called evidence it used to justify denying him a visa for years and imposing the sanctions. It was a thinly sourced file, he said, mostly of old newspaper articles with no real secret intelligence.

So I asked him about the most common allegation levied by his detractors at State — that, earlier in his life while consolidating power in the aluminum industry, he had ties to Russian mobsters and may have killed or encouraged killing critics.

He quickly responded, noting that the file released by the courts offered no such direct proof: “There is no evidence. What is there to dispute? Do you believe that I could kill someone 25 years ago and there will be no victims, no corpses, no names?”

Throughout the interview, it was clear Deripaska chose his words in English carefully. But there was one word he offered only twice — once in response to the [Steele dossier](#)’s allegations of Trump-Russia collusion, and the other time to respond to the allegations used to sanction him. “Balderdash,” he insisted.

Now it’s time for Team Mueller to answer the same questions.

John Solomon is an award-winning investigative journalist whose work over the years has exposed U.S. and FBI intelligence failures before the Sept. 11 attacks, federal scientists’ misuse of foster children and veterans in drug experiments, and numerous cases of political corruption. He serves as an investigative columnist and executive vice president for video at The Hill. Follow him on Twitter [@jsolomonReports](#).