

WH entertaining Russian proposal to interrogate Americans

By Kevin Liptak and Marshall Cohen

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(CNN) — The White House said on Wednesday it is entertaining a proposal raised by Russian President [Vladimir Putin](#) to interrogate Americans in exchange for assistance in the ongoing US investigation into election interference, putting the White House at odds with the State Department.

Putin raised the idea in his summit talks with President Donald Trump on Monday, according to White House press secretary Sarah Sanders. The Americans wanted for questioning by Moscow include Michael McFaul, the former US ambassador to Russia, and American-born financier Bill Browder, who successfully lobbied the US government to impose new sanctions on Moscow.

Sanders indicated on Wednesday no final decision had been made but that the proposal was under consideration.

"The President's going to meet with his team and we'll let you know when we have an announcement on that," she said.

However, at the State Department on Wednesday, spokeswoman Heather Nauert offered a more forceful denunciation of the Russian allegations than her White House counterpart.

"The overall assertions that have come out of the Russian government are absolutely absurd," Nauert said. "The fact that they want to question 11 American citizens and the assertions American citizens -- we do not stand by those assertions that the Russian government makes. The prosecutor general in Russia is well aware that the United States has rejected Russian allegations in this regard."

On Monday, Putin suggested special counsel Robert Mueller's investigators could come to Russia to question the two dozen Russians that have been charged with interfering in the 2016 presidential election. But in return, Putin said he would expect the US to allow Russian investigators to question what he called fugitives on American soil.

"For instance, we can bring up Mr. Browder in this particular case," Putin said. "Business associates of Mr. Browder have earned over \$1.5 billion in Russia. They never paid any taxes, neither in Russia nor in the United States, and yet the money escaped the country. They were transferred to the United States."

Trump called the notion an "interesting idea" during his press conference with Putin in Helsinki.

Browder grew up in Chicago but gave up his citizenship nearly 20 years ago and is now a British citizen. His Russian associates uncovered a massive tax fraud scheme in Russia that was prosecuted in US courts. But Putin has accused Browder of perpetrating the fraud, which Browder denies. Nonetheless, Browder was tried in absentia and sentenced to prison in Russia, making him a fugitive of Russian law enforcement.

Russian media has said McFaul was named as a "person of interest" in the ongoing investigation into Browder and related matters. McFaul was US ambassador to Russia when President Barack Obama signed the Magnitsky Act into law, imposing harsh sanctions that Browder and McFaul supported.

After Sanders' comments, McFaul wrote on Twitter, "I hope the White House corrects the record and denounces in categorical terms this ridiculous request from Putin. Not doing so creates moral equivalency between a legitimacy US indictment of Russian intelligence officers and a crazy, completely fabricated story invented by Putin."

In tweets this week, Browder denied Putin's claim that he donated to Hillary Clinton's campaign in 2016. He also noted that one of the other Americans that Putin wants to question is former congressional staffer Kyle Parker, who Browder said "single handedly drafted the Magnitsky Act that Putin hates so much."

Browder was briefly arrested in Spain earlier this year, due to his criminal conviction in Russia, but was released after local authorities determined the Russian arrest warrant "wasn't valid."