

THE PAPADOPOULOS INTERFAX INTERVIEW AND ANOTHER SYRIA DATA POINT

The other day, the WaPo had a story reviewing the larger role in the Trump campaign George Papadopoulos had than the Trump folks admit. Much of this work has appeared elsewhere, but I'm particularly interested in the WaPo's account of the direction Deputy Comms Director Brian Lanza gave to George Papadopoulos regarding an Interfax interview he would do. He emphasized that the campaign wanted the message that it wanted a partnership with Russia on Syria.

When a Russian news agency reached out to George Papadopoulos to request an interview shortly before the 2016 election, the young adviser to then-candidate Donald Trump made sure to seek approval from campaign headquarters.

"You should do it," deputy communications director Bryan Lanza urged Papadopoulos in a September 2016 email, emphasizing the benefits of a U.S. "partnership with Russia."

[snip]

"Received a request from Interfax Russian News Agency with Ksenia Baygarova on U.S.-Russia ties under a President Trump. What do you think?" he wrote to Lanza on Sept. 9, 2016. "If the campaign wants me to do it, can answer similar to the answers I gave in April while in Israel."

Lanza gave the go-ahead, citing the conflict in Syria as a reason to work with the Russians. Papadopoulos then offered to send the campaign a copy of

the interview after it was published.

"You're the best. Thank you!" Lanza responded.

Lanza declined to comment.

In the interview, published Sept. 30, 2016, Papadopoulos told the Russian media outlet that Trump had been "open about his willingness to usher in a new chapter in U.S.-Russia ties," specifically citing the need for cooperation in Syria.

As WaPo notes, the resulting interview is one Papadopoulos made sure ~~Ivan Timofeev~~ Joseph Mifsud saw, in what may be part of a signaling process to Russia on Trump policy questions. In it, Papadopoulos specifically came out against regime change, one of the US policies Putin especially loathes.

Q.: Do you share the opinion that the Assad regime should be immediately removed from power in Syria?

A.: We do not support aggressive changes of regimes anywhere including Syria. Look what had happened in Lybia and Iraq. We all remember this. However, it does not mean that we support Assad either.

Syria was key in other signaling – and in Jared's top policy priorities immediately after the election.

The focus on Syria is key: remember that Jared Kushner explained his request to Sergei Kislyak for a Russian-run secure back channel as an effort to cooperate on Syria.

The Ambassador expressed similar sentiments about relations, and then said he especially wanted to address U.S. policy in Syria,

and that he wanted to convey information from what he called his “generals.” He said he wanted to provide information that would help inform the new administration. He said the generals could not easily come to the U.S. to convey this information and he asked if there was a secure line in the transition office to conduct a conversation. General Flynn or I explained that there were no such lines. I believed developing a thoughtful approach on Syria was a very high priority given the ongoing humanitarian crisis, and I asked if they had an existing communications channel at his embassy we could use where they would be comfortable transmitting the information they wanted to relay to General Flynn.

So it’s possible the attacks on Hillary’s Syria policy were a signal – as the earlier speech’s call for engagement with Russia apparently was – to Timofeev.

The Papadopoulos interview was published on September 30, just 11 days before Don Jr. flew to Paris to meet with some pro-Russian Syrians.

One meeting that Donald Trump Jr. has not fully explained is a speech in Paris on October 11, 2016, just weeks before the election.

In his capacity as a key member of the Trump campaign, Trump Jr. spoke at the meeting at the request of a French think tank, The Center of Political and Foreign Affairs. Trump Jr. was likely

paid about \$50,000 for the speech, according to the speaking fees listed by talent booking agency that represents him.

The CFPR has a reputation in the French press as being “openly connected to the Russians.” It is difficult, however, to track just how connected they are, as France does not require it’s nonprofit organizations to disclose their finances.

The founders of the center have worked closely with the Russian government to end the conflict in Syria and in 2016, nominated Russian President Vladimir for the Nobel Peace Prize. The center’s director, Fabien Baussart, has been described as “a former lobbyist for Russian oligarchs in France.” He cited Putin’s “peace-making efforts” as reason for his nomination. One of the founders, Baussart’s wife Randa Kassis, heads a political party called the Movement for a Pluralistic Society, which is in part endorsed by Russia in support of Syrian president Bashar al-Assad.

Now we know, then, that even at the level of flacks, the emphasis in this period was on publicizing (to Russians, in a Russian outlet) the Trump willingness to work together on Syria, and specifically to depart from US efforts to remove Assad.

Update, May 24, 2019: Corrected Mifsud for Timofeev error.