

The New York Times

Fact Check: Stories of Foreign Election Influence, Separate and Not Equal

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July 12, 2017

Following the revelation that Donald Trump Jr. met with a Russian lawyer connected with the Russian government, defenders of the president's eldest son have offered a familiar argument: Hillary Clinton's actions were more egregious.

President Trump alluded to these comparisons in a Twitter post on Wednesday morning: "Why aren't the same standards placed on the Democrats. Look what Hillary Clinton may have gotten away with. Disgraceful!"

But the same standards don't apply to the cases surfaced by Mr. Trump's supporters, experts agreed. Here is an assessment.

Sean Hannity distorted the Chinese ambassador's request to meet with Clinton campaign officials.

"Is this Hillary Collusion?" Mr. Hannity, the Fox News host, asked in a tweet on Tuesday linking to a WikiLeaks post from February of an email thread between Clinton campaign officials and supporters regarding a meeting with the Chinese ambassador to the United States, Cui Tiankai.

Mr. Cui "wants to have an informal, private, off-the-record get-together with a few of us to discuss the next year and the current state of U.S.-China affairs," Kurt Campbell, the former assistant secretary of state for East Asia under President Barack Obama, wrote to John D. Podesta, the Clinton campaign chairman, and others in January 2016.

The replies do not indicate whether the get-together ever took place, though a meeting to discuss foreign policy is common, former diplomats said.

J. Stapleton Roy, a career Foreign Service officer who served as ambassador to Singapore, China and Indonesia, said he had engaged in such activities, staying in touch with opposition leaders during the rule of President Suharto of Indonesia and, after Suharto stepped down, multiple parties during open elections. Husain Haqqani, then Pakistan's ambassador to the United States, met with both the Obama and the McCain campaigns during the 2008 election.

An email that led to the meeting between Donald Trump Jr. and the Russian lawyer, on the other hand, offered to provide damaging information on Mrs. Clinton, characterized as “part of Russia and its government’s support” for his father. The younger Trump replied, “I love it.” Both Mr. Roy and Mr. Haqqani said this was not normal or appropriate.

Mr. Hannity’s comparison is also misleading from a legal standpoint. Though the law prohibits accepting things of value from foreign sources in connection with federal elections, meeting with foreign diplomats is not illegal.

Unlike Mr. Trump’s emails, the Clinton campaign email does not prove that a foreign entity was offering things of value to the campaign for the purposes of affecting the election, said Stephen Vladeck, a professor of law at the University of Texas.

Bill Mitchell, a conservative radio host, claimed the ‘Hillary Ukraine Story’ was ‘far worse.’

In a tweet on Tuesday, Mr. Mitchell was referring to a January report in Politico that detailed how Mrs. Clinton’s allies coordinated with Ukrainian officials to research damaging information on the president and his advisers, including Paul Manafort, the former chairman of Mr. Trump’s campaign.

According to the report, Alexandra Chalupa, a consultant for the Democratic National Committee from 2004 to 2016, worked to expose ties between Mr. Manafort and Russia with help from officials at the Ukrainian Embassy. She told Politico that she shared her findings with the D.N.C. and journalists during the 2016 election.

Ukraine’s involvement is a more comparable example than the Chinese ambassador’s request, but it goes only so far. The “Hillary Ukraine Story” still differs from the younger Trump’s actions in several ways.

Mr. Trump’s meeting also involved two other top Trump aides: Mr. Manafort and the president’s son-in-law, Jared Kushner. There is no indication that their peers in the Clinton campaign were involved with Ms. Chalupa’s efforts or coordinated with the Ukrainian Embassy.

“Donald Trump Jr. went to his meeting with the understanding that he was going to meet a Russian government lawyer with information designed to help his father,” said Jonathan Turley, a law professor at George Washington University. “The Clintons were far more sophisticated in the use of surrogates and shields to protect the candidates. This was truly amateur hour at Trump Tower.”

Nor did the relevant people like Ms. Chalupa “evade and lie about it like the Trump people did with their meeting,” said Benjamin Friedman, a research fellow in defense and homeland security at the Cato Institute, a libertarian think tank.

Mr. Trump’s son himself called allegations that Russia was helping the Trump campaign “phony” and “disgusting” on July 26, 2016, a month after he met with the Russian lawyer.

While Mr. Manafort stepped down from the Trump campaign in part because of the research on his ties to Russia, Ukraine’s efforts were “far less concerted or centrally directed than Russia’s

alleged hacking and dissemination of Democratic emails,” Politico reported. Intelligence officials have characterized Russia’s interference as unprecedented in scale.

And Ms. Chalupa’s work does not appear “to have been part of a larger pattern of cooperation, as with Trump-Russia, or to involve a U.S. promise or offer of sanctions relief in exchange for help,” Mr. Friedman said.