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Russian-American lobbyist says he was in Trump son's meeting

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New figure revealed as Russian-American lobbyist in Trump Jr. meeting

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WASHINGTON >> A Russian-American lobbyist says he attended a June 2016 meeting with President Donald Trump's son, marking another shift in the account of a discussion that was billed as part of a Russian government effort to help the Republican's White House campaign.

Rinat Akhmetshin confirmed his participation to The Associated Press today. Akhmetshin has been reported to have ties to Russian intelligence agencies, a characterization he dismisses as a "smear campaign." He told the AP he served in the Soviet military in a unit that was part of counterintelligence but was never formally trained as a spy.

The meeting has heightened questions about whether Trump's campaign coordinated with the Russian government during the election, which is the focus of federal and congressional investigations. In emails posted by Donald Trump Jr. earlier this week, a music publicist who arranged the meeting said a Russian lawyer wanted to pass on negative information about Democrat Hillary Clinton and stated that the discussion was part of a Russian government effort to help the GOP candidate.

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While Trump Jr. has confirmed that Russian attorney Natalia Veselnitskaya was in the meeting, he did not disclose Akhmetshin's presence. The president's son has tried to discount the meeting, saying that he did not receive the information he was promised.

In a statement Sunday, Trump Jr. said the attorney said that she had information that people tied to Russia were funding the DNC and supporting Clinton, a description that Akhmetshin backed up in his interview with the AP.

In his first public interview about the meeting, Akhmetshin said he accompanied Veselnitskaya to Trump Tower where they met an interpreter who participated in the meeting. He said he had learned about the meeting only that day when Veselnitskaya asked him to attend. He said he showed up in jeans and a T-shirt.

During the meeting, Akhmetshin said Veselnitskaya brought with her a plastic folder with printed-out documents that detailed what she believed was the flow of illicit funds to the Democratic National Committee. Veselnitskaya presented the contents of the

documents to the Trump associates and suggested that making the information public could help the Trump campaign, he said.

"This could be a good issue to expose how the DNC is accepting bad money," Akhmetshin recalled her saying.

Trump Jr. asked the attorney if she had all the evidence to back up her claims, including whether she could demonstrate the flow of the money. But Veselnitskaya said the Trump campaign would need to research it more. After that, Trump Jr. lost interest, according to Akhmetshin.

"They couldn't wait for the meeting to end," he said.

Akhmetshin said he does not know if Veselnitskaya's documents were provided by the Russian government. He said he thinks she left the materials with the Trump associates. It was unclear if she handed the documents to anyone in the room or simply left them behind, he said.

Jared Kushner, Trump's son-in-law and current White House senior adviser, and then-campaign chairman Paul Manafort also attended the meeting. Akhmetshin said he recognized Kushner and Trump Jr. He also said he recognized Manafort because they worked in "adjacent political circles" but never together.

He said there were others in the room but he didn't know them. Publicist Rob Goldstone, who brokered the meeting via email with Trump Jr., has told the AP that he also participated in the meeting.

Asked about Akhmetshin's participation in the meeting, Manafort spokesman Jason Maloni declined comment. A spokesman for Kushner did not respond to inquiries, nor did Trump Jr.'s attorney.

The confirmation of Akhmetshin's participation in the meeting drew swift reaction from the top Democrat on the House Intelligence Committee, who said it "adds another deeply disturbing fact about this secret meeting." Rep. Adam Schiff of California said Trump Jr.'s omission of Akhmetshin's role in his public account of the meeting and the president's son's shifting explanations "paint a portrait of consistent dissembling and deceit."

Akhmetshin said the meeting was "not substantive" and he "actually expected more serious" discussion.

"I never thought this would be such a big deal to be honest," he told AP.

The Russian government has denied any involvement or knowledge of the June 2016 meeting. Asked today about Akhmetshin, Russian President Vladimir Putin's spokesman, Dmitry Peskov, told reporters: "We don't know anything about this person."

In reports this week, Akhmetshin has been identified as a former officer in Russia's military intelligence service known as the GRU. He has denied that, saying he served in the Soviet Army from 1986 to 1988 after he was drafted but was not trained in spy tradecraft. He said his unit operated in the Baltics and was "loosely part of counterintelligence."

Akhmetshin said he has not been contacted by the special counsel's office or the FBI about the meeting with Trump Jr. He said he's willing to talk with the Senate Judiciary Committee, whose chairman has pressed the Justice Department about why Akhmetshin has not registered as a foreign agent.

The chairman, Republican Chuck Grassley of Iowa, said in a March letter that Akhmetshin has "reportedly admitted to being a 'Soviet counterintelligence officer' and has a long history of lobbying the U.S. government for pro-Russia matters."

Akhmetshin said that the Justice Department's Foreign Agents Registration Act unit sent him a letter in April and told him, "it has come to our attention you should have filed for FARA." He said he didn't believe he needed to file as a foreign agent. He has previously registered with Congress for the lobbying work, and he plans to raise this issue before Grassley's committee.

"I think I have a legal right to tell my story," he said.

Separately today, the data and digital director for Trump's presidential campaign said he will speak with the House Intelligence committee later this month as part of its own Russia probe.

Brad Parscale said in a statement that he is "unaware of any Russian involvement" in the data and digital operations but will voluntarily appear before the panel and looks forward to "sharing with them everything I know."

AP writers Eric Tucker, Stephen Braun and Julie Pace contributed to this report.

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