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Trump Defends Congratulatory Phone Call to Russia's Putin

By Reuters

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Carlos Barria / Reuters

U.S. President Donald Trump defended his congratulations to Vladimir Putin on the Russian president's disputed re-election victory on Wednesday, saying he wants Putin's help in solving crises from North Korea to Syria and beyond.

Trump drew fire from Republicans and Democrats alike for telling reporters on Tuesday that he had congratulated Putin on his re-election and that the two leaders had made tentative plans to meet in the "not too distant future."

The Washington Post reported that Trump, in his briefing papers to prepare for the phone call with Putin on Tuesday, was specifically warned :"DO NOT CONGRATULATE" the Russian president. White House officials did not dispute the report, but said whoever leaked it could be subject to dismissal.

A Trump confidant who asked not to be named said Trump was angry about the leak, and a White House official said John Kelly, Trump's chief of staff, was "frustrated and deeply disappointed."

In a pair of tweets on his call with Putin, Trump said U.S. news organizations "wanted me to excoriate him. They are wrong! Getting along with Russia [and others] is a good thing, not a bad thing."

"They can help solve problems with North Korea, Syria, Ukraine, ISIS, Iran and even the coming Arms Race," Trump said.

Trump's congratulations to Putin, which came shortly after he joined Britain in blaming Russia for a poison nerve gas attack against a former Russian spy in southern England, has revived criticism that Trump has been too tolerant of the Russian leader.

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Trump is under investigation by U.S. Special Counsel Robert Mueller on whether he or his aides colluded with Russia during the 2016 presidential election that Trump won. Trump calls the probe a political witch hunt.

Trump's overture to Putin has drawn heavy fire by critics who called Sunday's election rigged.

Senate majority leader Mitch McConnell said there was a "lack of credibility in tallying the result." Senator John McCain, a longtime Putin critic, was even blunter, saying: "An American president does not lead the Free World by congratulating dictators on winning sham elections."

Administration officials said it was unclear if the president had seen the briefing memo that was leaked to the Post.

"If this story is accurate, that means someone leaked the president's briefing papers. Leaking such information is a fireable offense and likely illegal," said a senior White House official, who requested anonymity.

Republican Senator Marco Rubio said he did not like Trump's congratulations to Putin but thought the leak was worse.

"If you don't like the guy, quit. But to be this duplicitous and continue to leak things out, it's dangerous," Rubio told reporters.

White House officials have said that Trump is less trusting of Putin because of Russian activities in Ukraine, Syria and elsewhere.

Last week, after initially equivocating about the chemical attack on the former Russian double agent in Salisbury, England, the White House joined a statement by the leaders of Britain, France and Germany in which they said they "abhor the attack" and blamed it on Moscow.

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Moscow has denied any involvement in the poisoning.

The issue came up on Wednesday in a telephone call between Trump and French President Emmanuel Macron, who is scheduled to visit the White House in late April, according to a White House statement.

"The presidents reiterated their solidarity with the United Kingdom in the wake of Russia's use of chemical weapons against private citizens on British soil and agreed on the need to take action to hold Russia accountable," it said.

But the poisoning incident did not appear to come up in Trump's call with Putin.

"I don't believe that was discussed in today's call," White House spokeswoman Sarah Sanders told reporters on Tuesday.

The leak incident was likely to revive questions about whether Trump would embark on more turnover in his senior staff after the departure of Rex Tillerson as secretary of state.

Trump's national security adviser, H.R. McMaster, is widely seen as likely to leave at some point, and Kelly himself is said by Trump confidants to have tested the nerves of the president.

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