

Salvini's party under investigation over alleged deal to profit from Russian oil sale

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Italian prosecutors have launched an investigation into allegations the League, the party of the far-right interior minister, Matteo Salvini, sought funds via a Russian oil deal.

Prosecutors in Milan have opened an inquiry into possible charges of international corruption in the case, after an investigation by L'Espresso magazine, reported by the Guardian in February, that alleged an arrangement to sell 3m tonnes of diesel fuel to an Italian oil company by Russian representatives close to the government of Vladimir Putin.

The inquiry was launched by the magistrates in February but its existence was only announced yesterday.

Milan's chief prosecutor, Francesco Greco, told the Ansa news agency: "We are carrying out investigations to understand if there are crimes or not."

According to L'Espresso, on 18 October 2018 a member of Salvini's entourage, Gianluca Savoini, met two Italians and three Russians in Moscow's Hotel Metropol to discuss a deal that would divert profits to the League before the campaign for May's European elections.

On Wednesday, BuzzFeed News



▲ The League's Matteo Salvini, right, with fellow minister Giulia Bongiorno

published an audio recording it said was of that meeting "in which a close aide of [Salvini] and the other five men can be heard negotiating the terms of a deal to covertly channel tens of millions of dollars of Russian oil money to Salvini's party, the League".

It alleged that such a deal would represent "a breach of Italian electoral law, which bans political parties from accepting large foreign donations".

When contacted by the Guardian in February, Savoini, described as the League's emissary in Moscow, declined in an email to comment on "[this] fake news".

The League has denied the reports in L'Espresso and BuzzFeed, and on Wednesday Salvini threatened legal action. "I have already sued for libel in the past, I'll do it again today, tomorrow and the day after tomorrow," he said.

Although L'Espresso said it had no evidence that the deal was ever executed, the claims raised questions about the relationship between the Kremlin and the anti-immigration party, which is in a coalition government with the anti-establishment Five Star Movement.

Giovanni Tizian, a journalist from L'Espresso, said: "We have documented that the meeting between Savoini and the Russians at the Metropol hotel in Moscow is just the outcome of a series of meetings held in June and July 2018 where Savoini was pushing for a deal with the Russians." Tizian co-wrote a book titled The Black Book of the League with the investigative journalist **Stefano Vergine**.

Opposition parties described the claims as worrying. "Roubles from Russia to the League? Salvini has to immediately clarify to parliament," said the centre-left Democratic party's leader, Nicola Zingaretti.

