

A SECRET RECORDING RAISES QUESTIONS ABOUT TIES BETWEEN ITALY'S FAR-RIGHT AND RUSSIA

Russian President Vladimir Putin visited Rome last week, attending a dinner with Italian Deputy Minister Matteo Salvini, Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte and Deputy Minister Luigi Di Maio. (Filippo Attili/Chigi Palace Press Office/Handout/EPA-EFE/REX/Shutterstock) By Chico Harlan and Chico Harlan Rome bureau chief covering southern Europe and sometimes parts beyond Email Bio Follow Stefano Pitrelli Stefano Pitrelli Email Bio Follow July 11 at 4:48 PM MONTEBELLUNA, Italy During his rapid ascent as one of Western Europe's most powerful politicians, Italian far-right leader Matteo Salvini made clear that he was a good friend of Russia. He called sanctions against Moscow "madness." He called Vladimir Putin "one of the best statesmen" in the world.

But this week, his party's ties to Russia have come under renewed scrutiny because of a leaked recording from a Moscow hotel lobby in which one of Salvini's close allies is alleged to be discussing how to funnel Russian funds into the coffers of the far-right League.

No evidence has yet surfaced suggesting that the deal went through, or showing Salvini's direct involvement. But the audio recording, published by BuzzFeed, has ignited questions about whether the League broke Italian political laws and about the extent to which Russia and one of Europe's most prominent nationalist parties might be working together.

Some Italian opposition members want a parliamentary inquiry. Former Italian prime ministers say Salvini owes answers. On Thursday, a public prosecutor in Milan reportedly said that his office was looking into possible criminal activity an inquiry that was said to be opened in February after the Italian newsmagazine L'Espresso published its own account of the alleged League-Russia scheme, though without the audio recording.

The Washington Post has not been able to independently verify the audio recording.

That recording, documenting a 75-minute meeting with three Italians and three Russians at Moscow's swanky Metropol Hotel, comes to light two months after a separate secret recording showed the Austrian far-right leader, in an apparent setup, offering government contracts in exchange for Russian funding or investments.

The revelations in Austria were enough to swiftly bring down the government. But analysts say that Salvini is not as vulnerable. Italy's opposition parties are weak. Salvini has a deep well of political capital. His anti-migrant policies have turned his once-fringe party into the country's most popular. His coalition partner, the Five Star Movement, has amiable ties with Russia and Five Star leaders have so far avoided criticizing Salvini because of the leaked audio. Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte on Thursday said he had "trust" in Salvini.

Meantime, Salvini has adeptly pushed Italians, who have long been less skeptical than other Europeans about Russian intentions, to fully consider Moscow as a partner. Many conservative Italians view Putin, the Russian president, as the embodiment of an in-command leader.

"The chance that this scandal may eat away at Salvini's strength is extremely low," said Massimiliano Panarari, who teaches political communication at LUISS Guido Carli, a university in Rome.

Salvini has not spoken in depth about the recording, but he said he has "never taken one ruble, one euro, one dollar, or one liter of vodka in financing from Russia." He suggested on Wednesday that he would sue BuzzFeed.

The recording purports to reveal a Salvini aide, Gianluca Savoini, along with two other unidentified Italians, discussing a complicated energy deal: one in which a Russian oil company would sell fuel to the Italian energy giant Eni, with the money being channeled through middlemen, some of it being funneled to the League. BuzzFeed estimated the

potential sum at \$65 million over a year.

Eni, in a statement, said that it "strongly reiterates that in no way it took part in transactions aimed at financing political parties."

"Moreover," the company said, "the described supply operation never took place."

Salvini was not present at the meeting. But he is referenced several times in the recording, at one point described by a Russian as the "European Trump."

Salvini was in Moscow at the time of the meeting, which took place last October, and he gave a speech to a group of Italian business leaders in which he decried sanctions against Russia as causing Italy to lose "20 billion in total revenue." L'Espresso reported that Salvini, during that trip, met with Dmitry Kozak, the Russian deputy prime minister and a close Putin ally.

In the recording from the Metropol Hotel, Savoini allegedly says that "Europe is changing" and that a "new Europe has to be close to Russia."

Savoini has no official role in the Italian government nor inside the League, but he has often been described as Salvini's de facto emissary to Moscow. Savoini is the president of the Lombardy-Russia Cultural Association, a group that on its Facebook page frequently posts news stories from Russian government-owned sources. The association has previously posted photographs of Savoini in Moscow alongside Salvini. BuzzFeed reported that Savoini was part of the delegation that dined with Putin during the Russian president's visit to Rome last week.

L'Espresso had followed Savoini to Moscow last October, investigating his relationship with Russia. The newsmagazine's reporters, **Stefano Vergine** and Giovanni Tizian, also published a book about the League's ties to Russia. In a phone interview Thursday, Tizian said he was in the hotel lobby "a few tables away" when Savoini met with the Russians. He said the meeting likely took place in public because Savoini felt at ease in Moscow.

"Judging by the way Savoini moves around Moscow, that is his second home," Tizian said. "He probably felt quite certain of himself and protected from unwanted listeners."

Salvini, like the Italian government, has tried to maintain good ties with Washington as well as Moscow. But he has been muted on the issues that concern analysts and many Western politicians, particularly Russia's alleged meddling in democratic elections.

Salvini's League signed a cooperation agreement in 2017 with United Russia, the ruling Russian party. And earlier, Salvini had been photographed wearing a Putin T-shirt while touring the Red Square. The signs of friendship were clear enough that billionaire philanthropist George Soros wondered aloud last year whether Salvini was being funded by the Kremlin.

Salvini at the time denied accepting money from Russia, and responded that his admiration of Putin had been earned for free.

"There is a relationship of esteem with Putin," Salvini said then, according to the Italian news agency ANSA. "I believe he has done a lot for his people."

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