

Did Papadopoulos wire up? It sounds like prosecutors wanted him to.

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AFP/Getty Images

George Papadopoulos posed on a street in London for a picture for his LinkedIn profile.

Just how cozy is the relationship between George Papadopoulos and federal prosecutors right now?

Following his arrest in July on charges of lying to investigators looking into possible collusion between Russia and the Trump campaign, could he have worn a wire to help the FBI nab more targets of special counsel Robert Mueller's probe?

Speculation began swirling soon after court records in Papadopoulos's case

were unsealed Monday, including one government motion filed shortly after his arrest asking a judge to temporarily shield all filings and hearings from the public.

“Defendant has indicated that he is willing to cooperate with the government in its ongoing investigation into Russian efforts to interfere in the 2016 presidential election,” prosecutors wrote. “Public disclosure of the defendant’s initial appearance, however, would significantly undermine his ability to serve as a proactive cooperator.”

That last phrase, highlighted in various published reports, could mean the former Trump campaign adviser is doing far more than telling authorities what he knows, legal specialists said Tuesday. It describes a witness who will do undercover work for the prosecution.

“Yes, ‘proactive’ suggests something other than just providing testimony or documents about past events,” Tracy Miner, a top white-collar defense attorney in Boston, said in an e-mail. “It could be wearing a wire, agreeing to have his telephone communications monitored and/or deliberately engaging people in conversations on topics scripted by the Government. It could also mean setting up meetings suggested by the Government where the Government can surveil them.”

Samuel W. Buell, a Duke Law professor and former federal prosecutor, said the use of the “proactive” term shows the government was at least “contemplating the possibility” after Papadopoulos’s arrest that he could help investigators by talking with other people on Mueller’s radar.

“Normally, do federal investigators in that situation seek to create scenarios where such conversations would occur, and do they normally try to record those conversations? The answer to both of those questions is yes.” said Buell, who’s also written a book about white-collar crime. “That doesn’t mean it happened here.”

Papadopoulos pleaded guilty during a closed hearing on Oct. 5 to a charge of lying to FBI agents about his contacts during the election with people linked to high-level Russian officials, including a professor who said the Russians had “dirt” on then-presidential candidate Hillary Clinton.

One of Mueller’s prosecutors, Aaron Zelinsky, said during the plea hearing that the special counsel was conducting “a large-scale ongoing investigation of which this case is a small part,” according to a transcript.

Papadopoulos remains free on personal recognizance. His lawyers declined to comment Tuesday.

They said Monday in a brief statement that they “will have the opportunity to comment on George’s involvement when called upon by the Court at a later date. We look forward to telling all of the details of George’s story at that time.”

Mueller’s office declined to comment.

Papadopoulos’s case was unsealed shortly before Paul Manafort, Trump’s former campaign manager, and Rick Gates, Manafort’s business associate, pleaded not guilty to hiding money from the federal government that they made from political consulting in Ukraine in the years prior to the election.

On Tuesday, Trump dismissed the Russia probe as “fake news,” a mantra he’s turned to repeatedly on Twitter and during combative press briefings.

“The Fake News is working overtime,” the president tweeted. “As Paul Manafort’s lawyer said, there was ‘no collusion’ and events mentioned took place long before he . . . came to the campaign. Few people knew the young, low level volunteer named George, who has already proven to be a liar. Check the DEMS!”

Should Papadopoulos have to testify against anyone else charged in the case, he can expect defense lawyers to attack his credibility in a similar vein, said Martin G. Weinberg, a prominent Boston defense lawyer who has tried several high-profile corruption cases.

“The starting point of any cross examination is that this man is a confessed liar who avoided more significant charges and has been cooperating with the government in his desire to avoid the destiny of those who don’t,” he said.

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