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Unsealed court filings reveal how Mueller quickly zeroed in on Michael Cohen



Michael Cohen, seen here during a congressional hearing in February, has begun serving a three-year prison sentence at a facility in Otisville, N.Y. (Jonathan Ernst/Reuters)

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In February 2017, a month after President Trump took office, his personal attorney agreed to provide consulting services to a major pharmaceutical company that would be affected if Trump followed through on his campaign pledge to reduce prescription drug prices.

Michael Cohen's consulting contract with Novartis was purposely vague about what services he would perform. One executive wrote to another that Cohen

had pared back their contract “substantially so that it no longer provides details as to precisely what he will do for us,” according to an email quoted in a court document unsealed Wednesday.

“I pushed him on this, but in his view, it would be safer for both of us to say less,” the executive wrote. But, in a separate email, another Novartis executive was clear about what the company was agreeing to pay Cohen \$1.2 million a year to provide: “Access.”

“I want to use him to set up meetings when I am in Washington in May,” the executive added.

[‘I’m crushing it’: How Michael Cohen, touting his access to President Trump, convinced companies to pay millions]

The emails are cited in applications for search warrants that federal prosecutors filed between July and November 2017 seeking permission to seize the contents of Cohen’s email accounts.



Michael Cohen was President Trump’s longtime lawyer and fixer. Here, the two are seen on the campaign trail in 2016. (Jonathan Ernst/Reuters)

Sent a few months after Trump was elected on a promise to drain the Washington swamp, the emails provide a remarkable window into Cohen’s efforts to leverage and profit from his personal relationship with the president.

The documents also provide new insights into the early interest in Cohen's activities exhibited by investigators working for special counsel Robert S. Mueller III.

They show that Cohen had extensive contacts with a U.S.-based investment vehicle linked to a major Russian business mogul — exchanging more than 230 phone calls and 950 text messages with the company's American chief executive in the year after Trump's election. Investigators explored whether Cohen was receiving payments from the company, Columbus Nova, in exchange for promoting a peace proposal for Ukraine that would be friendly to Russia.

The documents also show that by November 2017 — six months after Mueller's appointment to investigate Russia's contacts with members of the Trump campaign — prosecutors had made significant progress collecting Cohen's financial information and internal documents from companies that hired him once his boss was in the White House.

At that time, Cohen was being investigated for making false statements to financial institutions and money laundering, but also for potentially acting as an unregistered foreign agent. He was never charged with acting on behalf of foreign governments or with any wrongdoing related to Novartis or Columbus Nova.

The documents were ordered unsealed by a federal judge in response to requests from a coalition of media organizations, including The Washington Post, which argued that the materials should be made public because Cohen's criminal case has concluded.

Cohen pleaded guilty last year to bank and tax fraud, campaign finance violations and lying to Congress about efforts to build a Trump Tower in Moscow during the presidential campaign. Cohen began serving a three-year prison sentence in May.

Lanny Davis, an attorney for Cohen, said in a statement: “These references widely reported in the media about statements contained in the warrant papers are pure innuendo. In fact, Mr. Cohen was not charged with anything to do with these allegations. Indeed, after Mr. Mueller’s office interviewed Mr. Cohen for 70 hours and 7 days, they publicly praised Mr. Cohen as ‘credible’ offering ‘relevant’ evidence going to the ‘core’ issues under investigation.”

Cohen’s relationship with the president soured after he began cooperating with authorities, telling New York prosecutors that Trump directed him to arrange for illegal payments to be made before the 2016 election to silence two women who alleged that they had had affairs with the Republican candidate several years earlier.

But in the months immediately after Trump’s election, Cohen remained a trusted confidant. The documents show that Cohen stressed to corporate leaders he was having personal meetings with the president, a résumé point that appeared to help Cohen woo major consulting contracts. AT&T gave Cohen a \$600,000 contract as the company sought an \$85 billion merger with Time Warner, a move Trump opposed during the campaign.

The new documents show that both Cohen and AT&T sought to keep the relationship a secret. An AT&T consultant emailed the company’s vice president in February 2017 to assure him that Cohen did not plan to publicize his relationship with the company. “I hope he means it,” the consultant wrote.

The contracts have proved deeply embarrassing to both Novartis and AT&T. Novartis has said that the company decided to end its relationship with Cohen a month after hiring him but continued to pay him for a full year, according to the terms of his contract. A top lawyer for [the company retired](#) as result of the deal last year.

A Novartis spokesman did not immediately respond to a request for comment on Wednesday.

AT&T has likewise apologized for its dealings with Cohen. A company spokeswoman declined to comment Wednesday.

Investigators also were keenly interested in foreign money flowing into a company Cohen created, Essential Consultants, ostensibly to provide real estate consulting services to mostly domestic clients, the documents show. He earned millions to consult on Washington issues for major companies, including some with close links to foreign governments, prosecutors alleged.

Of particular interest, according to the documents, was hundreds of thousands of dollars Cohen received in the first half of 2017 from an investment management firm called Columbus Nova. The firm, according to the documents, is linked to Viktor Vekselberg, a Russian business executive with ties to President Vladimir Putin.

Columbus Nova has said it paid Cohen a total of \$500,000 in 2017 to bring new investors into the company and that Vekselberg was not involved in the decision to hire him.

A company spokesman has acknowledged that chief executive Andrew Intrater introduced Cohen to Vekselberg. Vekselberg, who is Intrater's cousin, was subjected to sanctions by the United States last year. Columbus Nova was launched as an investment management firm in 2000 by Intrater, with a commitment to invest by Vekselberg, whom the firm described last year as its largest client.

[Michael Cohen payments put spotlight on New York investment firm linked to Russian billionaire]

Investigators seemed to be focused on whether the payments to Cohen were meant to influence U.S. diplomacy. Cohen's cellphone records show he had had no contact with the company's chief executive before the presidential election, the documents assert. Over the next year, however, investigators identified more than 1,000 contacts between them.

They also show that investigators explored allegations that Cohen, in early 2017, was involved in presenting then-national security adviser Michael Flynn with a plan that would have the United States drop sanctions against Russia as part of a negotiated end to hostilities in Ukraine.

The New York Times has reported that Cohen said he left the plan in Flynn's office at the White House. Cohen has told The Post that he threw the plan away without opening it. Investigators wanted to explore whether the Columbus Nova payments were connected to Cohen's distribution of the plan, according to the documents.

A spokesman for Columbus Nova said it was not surprising that Cohen and Intrater communicated.

"They were working together, so of course texted and called each other," he said. "This was all known and investigated, and wasn't even deemed worthy of being included in the special counsel's report."

Investigators were eager to learn more about other foreign money flowing into Essential Consultants, including from Korea and the Republic of Kazakhstan. The money from Kazakhstan, authorities alleged, appeared to be tied to a bank's majority shareholder who was the son-in-law of Kazakhstan's ambassador to Russia.

One of the search warrants indicates that a real estate company tied to Cohen's brother and his brother's mother-in-law also came under scrutiny.

The company, Bo and Abe Realty, was created in 2013 with Cohen as the organizer and his relatives identified as "Person 4" and "Person 5" in the court document. They were listed as "members" of the company.

In a footnote to the August 2017 search warrant, investigators wrote that "a sizeable portion of the funds" in the realty company's account came from another account in the name of Person 5. Investigators found that both of

Cohen’s relatives “receive significant funds through a different entity operating under the name Ukrethanol, LLC.”

The search warrant says Ukrethanol “has been involved in a series of suspicious transactions and has been suspected of possible money laundering or structuring. . . . The government continues to investigate the source of the Ukrethanol funds and the ultimate disposition of these monies.”

Trump and his allies have repeatedly alleged that various members of Cohen’s family have committed wrongdoing and should be investigated. In his report, Mueller wrote that Trump’s statements about Cohen’s family “could be viewed as an effort to retaliate against Cohen and chill further testimony adverse to the President.”

Separately, U.S. District Judge William Pauley III of Manhattan, who oversaw Cohen’s criminal case, said a federal investigation related to the lawyer is continuing. Pauley granted a request by federal prosecutors in New York to delay releasing sections of the search warrants issued for Cohen’s office and hotel suite, citing “ongoing aspects” of the government’s investigation.

Devlin Barrett contributed to this report.



[Rosalind S. Helderman](#) Rosalind Helderman is a political enterprise and investigations reporter for The Washington Post. She joined The Post in 2001. [Follow](#)



[Spencer S. Hsu](#) Spencer S. Hsu is an investigative reporter, two-time Pulitzer finalist and national Emmy Award nominee. Hsu has covered homeland security, immigration, Virginia politics and Congress. [Follow](#)



[Matt Zapotosky](#) Matt Zapotosky covers the Justice Department for The Washington Post's national security team. He has previously worked covering the federal courthouse in Alexandria and local law enforcement in Prince George's County and Southern Maryland. [Follow](#)