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The BBC has learned that US officials "verified" a key claim in a report about Kremlin involvement in Donald Trump's election - that a Russian diplomat in Washington was in fact a spy.

So far, no single piece of evidence has been made public proving that the Trump campaign joined with Russia to steal the US presidency - nothing.

But the FBI Director, James Comey, told a hushed committee room in Congress last week that this is precisely what his agents are investigating.

Stop to let that thought reverberate for a moment.

"Investigation is not proof," said the president's spokesman.

Trump's supporters are entitled to ask why - with the FBI's powers to subpoena witnesses and threaten charges of obstructing justice - nothing damning has emerged.

Perhaps there is nothing to find. But some former senior officials say it is because of failings in the inquiry, of which more later.

The roadmap for the investigation, publicly acknowledged now for the first time, comes from Christopher Steele, once of Britain's secret intelligence service MI6.

He wrote a series of reports for political opponents of Donald Trump about Trump and Russia.

Steele's "dossier", as the material came to be known, contains a number of highly contested claims.

At one point he wrote: "A leading Russian diplomat, Mikhail KULAGIN, had been withdrawn from Washington at short notice because Moscow feared his heavy involvement in the US presidential election operation… would be exposed in the media there."

There was no diplomat called Kulagin in the Russian embassy; there was a Kalugin.

One of Trump's allies, Roger Stone, said to me of Steele, scornfully: "If 007 wants to be taken seriously, he ought to learn how to spell."

The Russian Foreign Ministry said Kalugin was head of the embassy's economics section.

The Russian embassy in the USImage copyrightGETTY IMAGES

Image caption

The Russian embassy in Washington, where Kalugin worked

He had gone home in August 2016 at the end of a six-year posting.

The man himself emailed journalists to complain about a "stream of lies and fake news about my person".

If anyone looks like a harmless economist, rather than a tough, arrogant KGB man, it is the bland-faced Kalugin.

But sources I know and trust have told me the US government identified Kalugin as a spy while he was still at the embassy.

It is not clear if the American intelligence agencies already believed this when they got Steele's report on the "diplomat", as early as May 2016.

But it is a judgment they made using their own methods, outside the dossier.

A retired member of a US intelligence agency told me that Kalugin was being kept under surveillance before he left the US.

In addition, State Department staff who dealt with Russia did not come across Kalugin, as would have been expected with a simple diplomat.

"Nobody had met him," one former official said. "It's classic. Just classic [of Russian intelligence]."

Last month, the McClatchy news website said he was under "scrutiny" by the FBI as he left the US. They did not report, as my sources say, that he was a member of one of Russia's spying organisations, the SVR or GRU.