

Trump says he believes intelligence assessment that Russia interfered in election — but Putin does not

HANOI — Seeking to clarify comments he made hours before, President Trump said Sunday he believes Vladimir Putin sincerely believes Russia did not meddle in last year's U.S. presidential election — but Trump himself said he sides with conclusions to the contrary by U.S. intelligence agencies.

"I'm with our agencies, especially as currently constituted with their leadership," Trump said at a joint news conference with President Tran Dai Quang of Vietnam, giving a rare (and grudging) endorsement to the idea that the Russians sought to interfere with last year's presidential vote.

Trump spoke the morning after causing a stir when he suggested to reporters that he believed Putin's denials more than the conclusions of U.S. intelligence officials that Russia did in fact intervene in the election via hacked emails and fake news postings on social media.

That interference is the subject of an investigation by Special Counsel Robert Mueller and various congressional committees. They are also looking at possible links between Russians and Trump campaign associates, claims the president vehemently denies.

"I think that he is very, very strong in the fact that he didn't do it," Trump said hours before his news conference, going on to trash former CIA Director John Brennan, former National Intelligence Director James Clapper and ex-FBI Director James Comey, all of whom served during the Barack Obama administration.

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"They're political hacks," Trump said. "I mean, you have Brennan, you have

Clapper, and you have Comey. Comey is proven now to be a liar and he's proven to be a leaker."

Trump's dismissal of Comey back in May is the subject of an obstruction of justice investigation by Mueller's office; Comey has said he believes he was fired over his role supervising the Russia investigation.

In defending Putin, Trump said on Air Force One: "Every time he sees me he says 'I didn't do that' and I really believe that when he tells me that, he means it. But he says 'I didn't do that.' I think he is very insulted by it, which is not a good thing for our country."

Asked to clarify at the Hanoi news conference, Trump said of Putin: "I believe he believes that, and that's very important for somebody to believe. I believe that he feels that he and Russia did not meddle in the election."

Sunday's news conference followed Trump's meetings with President Tran Dai Quang of Vietnam.

Trump also met with other Vietnamese leaders, Prime Minister Nguyen Xuan Phuc and Communist Party Secretary General Nguyen Phu Trong.