

Top NRA officials knew Russians were using ties to NRA to establish connection with next US President, report says

CNN —

Top officials at the [National Rifle Association](#) knew Russians were using their ties to the gun rights group to try to bolster their status with lawmakers or the winner of the 2016 presidential election, a new report from Democrats on the Senate Finance Committee shows.

In 2015, [Russian national Maria Butina](#), who last year pleaded guilty to conspiracy as an unregistered foreign agent, tapped her political operative boyfriend Paul Erickson to help her convince a top NRA official to come to Moscow, according to the committee report made public Friday.

“Russia believes that high level contacts with the NRA might be the BEST means of neutral introduction to either the next American President OR to a meaningful re-set in relations with the Congress under a (God forbid) President Clinton,” Erickson, a GOP political operative wrote to Peter Brownell, the chief executive of a firearm accessories company and, at the time, the incoming president of the NRA. “This simple good will trip would have enormous diplomatic consequences for a future U.S. / Russia bilateral relationship to the world.”

Butina dangled a potential meeting, apparently with Russian President Vladimir Putin, as well as meetings with companies in the Russian firearms industry that would be “really very good” for Brownell’s business, to entice him to attend the 2015 Moscow trip. Brownell joined the trip, although his lawyer told the committee there was never a plan to meet Putin. Brownell’s lawyer also told the committee that Brownell planned to explore business opportunities while in Russia.

The findings come amid a report from Democrats on the committee as they concluded their investigation into the NRA’s interactions with Russian nationals. The Democrats raised questions about whether the gun rights group violated its nonprofit status, and concluded the NRA openly fostered relationships with Russian nationals, including Butina and former Russian central banker Alexander Torshin, who sought to build relationships in US political circles.

The criticism also comes amid a tumultuous period for the NRA. The group has been plagued by infighting, high-profile staff departures and questions about its spending practices.

The NRA has previously said it has acted appropriately to maintain its nonprofit status. The group did not immediately respond to a request for comment Friday.

“During the 2016 election, Russian nationals effectively used the promise of lucrative personal business opportunities to capture the NRA and gain access to the American political system,” Sen. Ron Wyden of Oregon, the top Democrat on the Senate Finance Committee, said in a statement. “The totality of evidence uncovered during my investigation, as well as the mounting evidence of rampant self-dealing, indicate the NRA may have violated tax laws.”

The committee also uncovered indications the NRA was footing the bill for some of the group’s top officials to travel in pursuit of business interests or under the cover of a nonprofit group in order to meet with sanctioned individuals and entities in Russia.

Wyden added that “the NRA lied about the 2015 delegation trip to Moscow. This was an official trip undertaken so NRA insiders could get rich – a clear violation of the principle that tax-exempt resources should not be used for personal benefit.”

Wyden called on the IRS to investigate further, as did Senate Minority Leader Chuck Schumer, who said the group’s “status as a tax exempt entity needs to be thoroughly investigated.”

Republicans did not join Democrats in their report but rather issued a brief accompanying report that concluded, “the Minority report reads more like a political document directed at an organization well known in U.S. politics to be despised by Democrats because of its advocacy for Second Amendment rights. This Majority finds no wrongdoing by the NRA or its officials that would reasonably call into question the NRA’s tax-exempt status, based on the documents provided to the Committee.”

On Friday, the NRA’s outside counsel slammed the report from Senate Democrats as a “politically motivated and contrived narrative.”

“This report goes to great lengths to try to involve the NRA in activities of private individuals and create the false impression that the NRA did not act appropriately. Nothing could be further from the truth,” William A. Brewer III, counsel to the NRA, said in a statement.

2015 trip scrutinized

As for the Russians, Butina is currently serving 18 months in prison for her working as an unregistered foreign agent, part of her efforts to infiltrate political groups and bolster Russian interests. In 2018, the Trump administration slapped a handful of Russian government officials and oligarchs with sanctions in retaliation for Russian meddling in the 2016 election. Torshin was among those sanctioned, though he has since left the central bank.

Much of the report focuses on a December 2015 trip to Moscow arranged by Butina and former NRA president and board member David Keene.

The trip’s attendees included top NRA officials, such as Keene, Brownell and Joe Gregory, who runs a high-dollar NRA fundraising program. Ryan Repp, a spokesman for Brownell, said he was a “last-minute addition” to the trip.

“He went to support the NRA as the incoming President, and would not have gone if it was not an NRA trip. Pete received absolutely no business for his company as a result of this trip. He has fully cooperated with all inquiries into this matter and will continue to do so,” Repp said. Messages left with Keene and Gregory seeking comment were not immediately returned.

Torshin and Butina were playing host. The trip was to include a visit to the Red Square, tours of a Russian tank and car museum and a Russian gun factory, meetings with Russian VIPs (including some on the US sanctions list) and the “best restaurants of Russian cuisine,” according to an email Butina sent one of the participants, which is detailed in the report.

But when a key NRA official canceled ahead of the trip, other NRA leaders got a glimpse into the motives Russian officials had for cozying up to the NRA.

During the planning, Allan Cors, who was then serving as NRA president, dropped out of the Moscow junket. He blamed health issues at the time, although later the NRA would claim it was because NRA chief executive Wayne LaPierre had misgivings about the trip.

Losing Cors set off a frenzy.

“Your canceling will risk—I think completely burn—all the inroads NRA volunteers have worked on so hard for so long. It will hurt Torchin’s (sic) pro-American career,” according to an email David Keene’s wife, Donna Keene, sent to Cors. She added: “we’ve worked for 7 years to build trust with the Russians. They are status-conscious and have spent untold hours and dollars on us. Allan, please, please come.”

Donna Keene also forwarded Cors an email from Butina. “Many powerful figures in the Kremlin are counting on Torshin to prove his American connections – a last minute important member cancellation could affect his political future. It cannot be certain,” Butina said in the email, according to the committee report.

In recent months, the NRA has claimed the trip was an unofficial event.

The gun rights group reiterated that position on Friday. “Certain NRA members made the trip of their own accord,” Andrew Arulanandam, NRA managing director of Public Affairs, said in a statement. “The record reflects it was not an official NRA trip. NRA CEO Wayne LaPierre was opposed to it and, at his directive, no NRA staff members or employees attended.”

But the documentation included in the report reveals NRA staffers helped arrange trip logistics and the NRA picked up at least some of the bill. And while staff-level members may not have attended, top NRA officials did.

At one point, as Cors is bowing out of the trip, he notes other officials who will be attending and writes to Torshin that they “will represent the NRA and our five million members better than anyone else.”

A week after Wyden opened an initial inquiry into the relationship between the NRA and Torshin, the NRA sought additional reimbursements from the Moscow trip from Brownell, according to the report. Brownell’s attorney, who cooperated with the committee for its report, characterized the reimbursement, as a way of “getting the trip off the NRA’s books,” according to the report.

Questions over whether activities ran afoul under US sanctions law

The report also raised concerns about members of the NRA delegation using their roles in a nonprofit organization to meet with sanctioned entities in Russia and advance personal business interests.

“This report concludes that some members of the NRA delegation traveled to Russia to cultivate future business opportunities. Some of these NRA members also met with sanctioned individuals,” the report states. “These interactions raise significant concerns under U.S. sanctions law.”

Wyden also called on the Treasury Department to “investigate whether Russian arms manufacturers are evading sanctions to do business in the United States.”

Ultimately, the committee’s investigative resources were limited. Democrats make up the minority in the Senate and do not control the committees or have subpoena power. While some members of the 2015 Moscow delegation provided information and documents, including Brownell, others did not. The NRA provided some documents but refused to answer many of the committee’s questions or provide financial documents.

Still, the report comes as the NRA’s [finances are under investigation](#) by attorneys general in Washington, as well as New York. The gun-safety group, Everytown for Gun Safety, has also said it filed a complaint about the NRA’s tax-exempt status with the IRS.

