

The NRA Has Deep Ties to Accused Russian Spy Maria Butina

Here is the years' worth of evidence.



Maria Butina in Moscow, in a photo she posted to Facebook in October 2013

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For decades, the National Rifle Association has promoted its hardline politics with appeals to patriotism, freedom, and the staunch defense of the Second Amendment. But now, the controversial gun lobbying group finds itself deeply caught up in a wide-ranging effort to sabotage American democracy by an enemy foreign power.

Federal prosecutors unsealed charges this week against 29-year-old Russian national Maria Butina, a self-styled gun activist with long-running ties to the NRA who worked for Alexander Torshin, a high-level Russian government and banking official from President Vladimir Putin's party. Butina, who was a graduate student at American University until this spring, began traveling to the United States in 2014 and operated as a "covert Russian agent," according to an FBI affidavit. She acted as an unregistered foreign agent and participated in a multiyear conspiracy to infiltrate conservative political groups including the NRA, federal prosecutors say, in order to "advance the interests of the Russian Federation."

Butina and Torshin worked together in attempts to cultivate Republican politicians and eventually Donald Trump's presidential campaign. Under Torshin's direction, "the covert influence campaign involved substantial planning, international coordination, and preparation," according to court documents, which detail some of the evidence gathered by the FBI on Butina's connections to a Russian intelligence agency and **Russian oligarchs**. Torshin, who for years also traveled to America for NRA events and was among Russian officials **sanctioned** by the Treasury Department in April, is referred to only as a "Russian official" in the court documents. But his identity has since been confirmed in multiple news reports, and he appears with Butina in the United States and Russia throughout **several years' worth of social-media posts previously documented by Mother Jones**.

The pair of Russians spent years building ties with the NRA, as we reported in our recent investigation. And according to a *New York Times* report this week, the NRA "repeatedly brought Butina from her native Russia to the United States for events until she obtained a student visa in August 2016."

Beginning back in 2013, Butina developed a relationship with an unnamed "American political operative" described in the court documents, who has been identified in media reports as GOP activist and NRA member Paul Erickson. In her private communications with Erickson, Butina spoke of the key influence of the NRA on the Republican Party, noting that the gun group is "the largest sponsor of the elections to the US congress." Through Erickson and her connections with the NRA, Butina sought to establish "'back channel' lines of communication" to influential political figures. In **photos** that she posted to her Facebook page, she posed with Republican politicians, including former presidential candidates Scott Walker and Bobby Jindal, and former US Sen. Rick Santorum.



Butina at an NRA shooting range in Fairfax, Virginia, posted to her VK page in May 2014

As the putative founder of a Russian group called The Right to Bear Arms, Butina forged connections with NRA executives, including former NRA President David Keene, with whom she was in extensive contact over several years. [Keene traveled to Moscow in November 2013](#) at the invitation of Butina and Torshin to attend a Right to Bear Arms event. That same month, future Trump national security adviser John Bolton—then a member of the NRA’s “international affairs subcommittee”—[recorded a video address](#) talking up gun rights at Keene’s request, which Right to Bear Arms purportedly used to lobby the Russian legislature. (Private gun ownership is [relatively minimal](#) in Russia.)

The following January, Torshin published a gun appreciation piece in the *Washington Times*, where Keene was the op-ed editor at the time. That April, Torshin and Butina attended the NRA convention in Indianapolis, where Butina joined Keene for meetings. In the fall of 2014, Erickson traveled to Moscow to attend a Right to Bear Arms meeting with Butina.

Then, in late March 2015—two days before Butina emailed Erickson a plan for further building political connections—she [posted](#) on Facebook that she was again headed to the NRA annual convention. Butina and Torshin both traveled to Nashville for the event that April, one of multiple NRA conventions that Torshin attended between 2011 and 2016. There, Butina and Torshin met Scott Walker. According to a report in Bloomberg, Torshin also met and [had a “joyful exchange”](#) with Trump.

Three months later, in July 2015, Butina went to Wisconsin to attend Walker’s presidential campaign launch. The Wisconsin trip came just two days after Butina had traveled to Las Vegas for FreedomFest, an annual conservative event where Trump was speaking. Trump, who had announced his White House run in June, fielded questions from the audience. Butina took a turn at the microphone: “I am visiting from Russia,” she said.

“Ahhhhh, Putin!” Trump interjected, prompting laughter from the crowd as he added a mocking riff about the current president: “Good friend of Obama, Putin. He likes Obama a lot. Go ahead.”

“My question will be about foreign politics,” Butina said, and then asked Trump if he would continue “damaging” economic sanctions against Russia as president. Trump appeared not to know who Butina was. After going off on Obama and digressing into trade talk, he responded that he would “get along very nicely” with Putin. “I don’t think you’d need the sanctions,” [Trump said](#).

When senior Trump campaign aides later saw [video of the exchange](#) (first highlighted in the national media by our investigation published in March), they found it [strange and disconcerting](#).

The NRA junket to Moscow

In December 2015, an NRA delegation including Erickson, Keene, NRA Vice President Pete Brownell, major NRA donor Joe Gregory, and Milwaukee Sheriff David Clarke traveled to Moscow, where they met with Kremlin officials—including Deputy Prime Minister Dmitry Rogozin, one of the first Russians sanctioned by the Obama administration after Putin annexed Crimea in 2014. The delegation dined on lavish meals and [visited a Russian gun manufacturer](#). Butina and Torshin participated in and helped host the gathering.

Sheriff Clarke, who has served on NRA subcommittees and spoken at NRA political events dating back to 2014, filed an ethics [report](#) showing that The Right to Bear Arms, Butina’s group, had paid \$6,000 for his trip expenses. The report also noted that Brownell, who became NRA president in 2017, personally paid nearly \$14,000 for Clarke’s airfare and visa expenses for the Russia trip.

The NRA has tried [to downplay](#) the junket. This May, NRA national spokeswoman Dana Loesch, who [speaks directly](#) for the NRA leadership, commented on a story from my colleague David Corn about [a Russian sniper rifle that the NRA helped promote](#) by participating in a video recorded at the gun manufacturer during the Moscow trip. Loesch asserted in a tweet that “[there was no NRA trip](#).” But when I raised that exchange again after the news of Butina’s arrest this week, Loesch confirmed the NRA delegation’s visit to Moscow—though she now claimed it was an unofficial one. “I said it wasn’t an official trip,” she [tweeted](#) at me.

The gun manufacturer’s promotional [video](#) opens with a title card reading, “The delegation of National Rifle Association of America (NRA), headed by the first vice-president of the association Pete Brownell, visited the Moscow firearms factory ORSIS on December 11, 2015.” The video shows the NRA leaders and representatives in talks with the Russians, touring the premises, and enthusiastically firing various weapons. In one segment, Butina can be seen sitting just behind Clarke.



Butina and Clarke (right); screen shot from video recorded at the December 2015 gathering in Moscow

The NRA has not commented publicly so far about the federal case against Butina. Two NRA spokespersons declined to respond to a detailed inquiry from *Mother Jones*. David Keene and Paul Erickson also did not respond to multiple separate requests for comment.

Targeting the 2016 election

When the NRA annual convention kicked off in May 2016 in Louisville, Kentucky, Torshin met Donald Trump Jr. during a private dinner the night before his father gave a much anticipated speech. (“The only way to save our Second Amendment,” his father told the crowd the next day, “is to vote for a person that you all know named Donald Trump.”) A lawyer for Don Jr. later said the exchange between his client and Torshin at the dinner “was all gun-related small talk.” The *Washington Post* reported this week that [Butina also met Don Jr.](#) briefly at the convention.

Butina and Torshin are both [lifetime members of the NRA](#), according to Torshin, who [posed](#) for photos in Louisville armed with a large rifle, an NRA “Ring of Freedom” donor ID badge hanging around his neck.



Torshin at the 2016 NRA annual convention in Louisville

That same month, as the *New York Times* previously [reported](#), Erickson emailed a high-level Trump campaign official with the message that “Russia is quietly but actively seeking a dialogue.” He noted that the “international reach of the NRA placed me in a position a couple of years ago to slowly begin cultivating a

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back-channel to President Putin's Kremlin."

Three months earlier, Erickson and Butina had formed Bridges LLC; Erickson later told *McClatchy* that they created the South Dakota-based company for Butina to get financial assistance for her graduate studies—"an unusual way to use a LLC," as *McClatchy* dryly noted.

After Trump won the presidential election, according to the court documents made public this week, Butina contacted Torshin. "I am ready for further orders," she told him.

A lawyer for Butina has denied the federal charges, calling them "overblown." Butina appeared at a hearing in federal court on Wednesday in Washington, where her lawyer said she had cooperated with an FEC inquiry in March regarding contributions to a political committee (no further details of which were specified at the hearing). The latest court filing from prosecutors on Wednesday alleged that Butina offered sex to another American, whose identity is unknown, in "exchange for a position within a special interest organization."

According to a report earlier this year from *McClatchy*, the FBI has been investigating whether Torshin illegally funneled money to the Trump campaign through the NRA. (The FBI would "neither confirm nor deny" the investigation to *Mother Jones*.)

The Butina case is being prosecuted by the US Attorney's Office for the District of Columbia and the National Security Division of the Justice Department; it is unclear to what degree the case may relate to the ongoing investigation by special counsel Robert Mueller. But a near certainty is that additional significant details from the case will emerge.



Butina in Moscow with former NRA President David Keene; posted November 2013

Facebook

The NRA seemed emboldened by the 2016 election. Sheriff Clarke gave another speech for the political arm of the organization at the 2017 annual convention in Atlanta, where he boasted, "You know I worked hard to get Donald Trump elected president of the United States." As the crowd applauded, he added, "You see, these rat bastards on the left never give up. For them, election defeats don't matter. It's simply a time to regroup and continue their assault on our constitution, the rule of law, liberty, and American exceptionalism."

Two weeks after the high school massacre this February in Parkland, Florida, NRA Executive Director Chris Cox met privately in the Oval Office with Trump and Vice President Mike Pence, and then announced, "POTUS & VPOTUS support the Second Amendment, support strong due process and don't want gun control. #NRA #MAGA."

Yet, as the federal government prosecutes an alleged Russian spy whose mission flourished thanks to her deep ties with the NRA, the gun group may no longer be able to so easily declare itself a patriotic defender of America.

Additional reporting contributed by Denise Clifton and Dan Friedman.