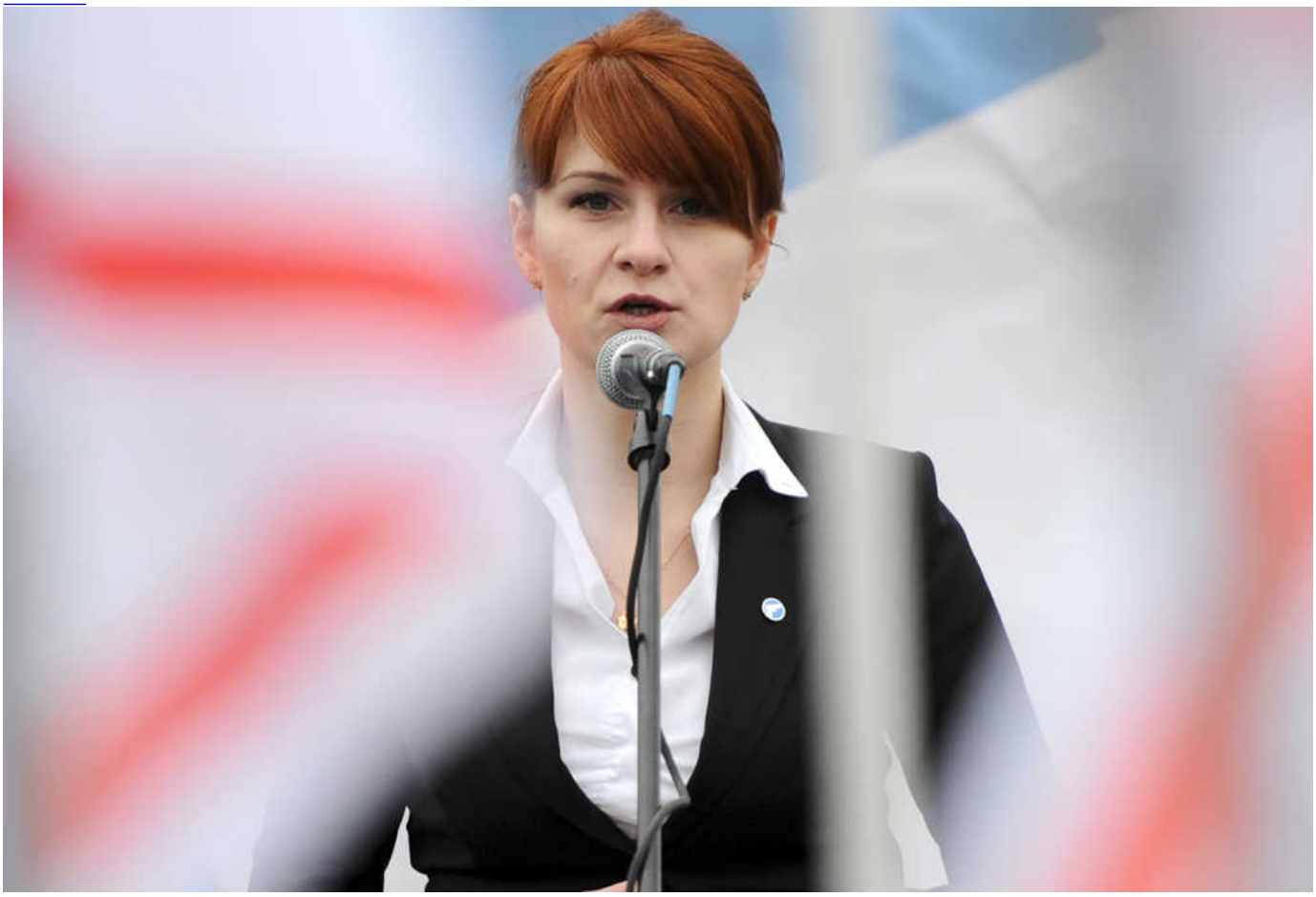
News



Mariia Butina, leader of a pro-gun organization in Russia, speaks to a crowd during a rally in support of legalizing the possession of handguns in Moscow, on April 21, 2013. Butina, a 29-year-old gun-rights activist, served as a covert Russian agent while living in Washington, gathering intelligence on American officials and political organizations and working to establish back-channel lines of communications for the Kremlin, federal prosecutors charged July 16, 2018. (RNS/AP)

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The unsealing of an affidavit this week charging 29-year-old Mariia Butina with "conspiracy to act as an agent of the Russian Federation" was yet another bombshell in the investigation into what U.S. intelligence agencies describe as Russian attempts to influence American elections and politics throughout 2016.

But buried within the Justice Department's affidavit was a peculiar detail: Butina, a Russian citizen living in the U.S., allegedly sought to influence U.S. officials not only through organizations such as the National Rifle Association, but also by exploiting the National Prayer Breakfast, an annual event in Washington, D.C., that typically includes a speech by the president of the United States.

According to the affidavit, Butina intended to use the 2017 prayer breakfast as a way to gather a group of influential Russians in the U.S. to "establish a back channel of communication" with Americans. She allegedly described the list of Russian attendees to the prayer breakfast as "populated by important political advisors to Russian President [Vladimir] Putin, university presidents, mayors, and substantial private businessmen."

She also reportedly discussed with a colleague the possibility of bringing Putin to meet President Trump at the event, although that meeting did not ultimately occur.

Using a religious event to broker unsanctioned political communication may seem like an unorthodox ploy. But evidence suggests sustained links between Russian officials and the National Prayer Breakfast that potentially opened the gathering up to exploitation.

Glenn Simpson, co-founder of the investigative firm Fusion GPS, noted the possibility of Russian efforts to infiltrate American religious groups during his appearance before the House Intelligence Committee on Nov. 14, 2017. (Fusion GPS has become a controversial organization in its own right because of a dossier it produced that included salacious claims about Trump and his alleged connections to Russia.)

These interactions alone do not inherently imply nefarious intent, but they do provide context as to why Russia would target faith groups to influence American politics.

The National Prayer Breakfast is notable, even in Washington, for its political spectacle and for the suspicion surrounding the group that organizes it — namely, the entity often referred to as the International Foundation, sometimes called "the Family" or "the Fellowship."

Broadly devoted to Jesus but not tied to any Christian denomination, the foundation — which is often described as a network instead of an organization — holds almost mythical status among D.C.'s power brokers. Its organizers often refuse to divulge guest lists, preferring to offer sanctuary to meetings between American politicians and global leaders, without government or media scrutiny.

What's more, participants appear to see ultimate value in meetings and relationships seemingly irrespective of the motives of those present.

"We don't really care why they come because God's a big guy, he can take care of himself," one organizer, Tony Hall, told academic Michael Lindsay when Lindsay studied the prayer breakfast in 2006.

But if the charges against Butina are true, it shows how the fusion of the foundation's influence and dedication to anonymity may have allowed it to become a target for political exploitation and potential international espionage.

The affidavit released this week cites a 2017 email from Butina to a prayer breakfast organizer in which she thanks the person for allowing her group to attend "and the very private meeting that followed." The organizer in the affidavit is unnamed, but the de facto director of the prayer breakfast is Doug Burleigh, who effectively took over after the death of its previous leader (and Burleigh's father-in-law) Doug Coe, in February 2017.

In April 2018, Alexander Torshin, a Russian politician who reportedly worked with Butina and closely matches the description of an unnamed "Russian official" in the affidavit, was sanctioned by the U.S. government, but only after he spent years forging alliances with American leaders — including religious ones.

According to Yahoo News, Torshin initially set up a meeting with Trump before the 2017 prayer breakfast on Feb. 2. But White House officials canceled after learning that Torshin, who is also a close ally of Putin, has suspected ties to organized crime and a money-laundering ring.

One year later, Russian interest in the National Prayer Breakfast only strengthened. Some outlets reported that an atypically large delegation of Russians — as many as 60 — planned to attend the 2018 event.

Jim Slattery, a former Democratic congressman from Kansas who maintains ties to the National Prayer Breakfast and attended in 2018, acknowledged Russia "probably had the largest group" of any country that year.

Slattery, who said he has seen prayer breakfast guest lists, did not respond to requests to confirm whether Torshin had attended. The former congressman did, however, say that Torshin was formally invited.

It was unclear why the delegation had descended on the gathering, but as one unnamed Russian evangelical bishop told CNN's Dan Burke: "I suppose the majority of members of the [Russian] delegation don't want to pray; they want to mingle" and "try to solve their own problems, that is — their name possibly appearing in future sanctions lists."

Torshin was sanctioned two months after the prayer breakfast.

As for Butina, Slattery said in an email, "I do not believe Maria Butina attended the 2018 breakfast," adding, "I do not know for sure but I am 95% sure."

Torshin's connection to the foundation spans two continents. The network operates globally, as other nations hold prayer breakfasts modeled after the American version — including Russia.

But Russians created what appears to be an entirely new "business" prayer breakfast in May 2017. The glitzy event featured Torshin and Burleigh as speakers.

Burleigh, who also once headed up the American Christian youth organization Young Life, has spoken in the past about his extensive work in Russia. According to the Topeka Capital-Journal, he delivered a speech at a 2016 event in Kansas alongside then-Gov. Sam Brownback — now U.S. ambassador for religious freedom — where he mentioned his 50 years leading evangelical efforts in Russia.

Burleigh appeared to repeat these remarks at the business prayer breakfast in Russia. A YouTube video of the event shows Burleigh noting that he has visited the country "for 52 years."

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The same video also shows an interview with Burleigh after the event, where he praised dialogue between Trump and Putin and said the "press hates Trump" in the United States.

Burleigh declined requests for a full on-the-record interview with Religion News Service but did confirm that he keynoted the event where Torshin also spoke, adding that he did not personally organize the event. Neither Burleigh nor the FBI would officially confirm whether he has been contacted by the bureau.

Prayer breakfast diplomacy was hardly Torshin's or other Russian officials' only attempt to use American religious leaders to connect with Trump and his family.

It has been widely reported that Torshin and Butina allegedly attempted to broker a 2016 meeting between Trump and Putin in Moscow at a "Persecuted Christians Summit" organized by American religious leader Franklin Graham, whose father, Billy Graham, played a crucial role in organizing the first National Prayer Breakfast in 1953.

According to Yahoo News, conservative activist Rick Clay conveyed Torshin's offer to Jared Kushner, who ultimately declined, saying "Be careful."

The Kremlin reportedly teamed up with leaders from the Russian Orthodox Church — such as church head Patriarch Kirill, who has been accused of being a former KGB agent — to use religious power to exert influence across Europe, according to The New York Times.

Meanwhile, U.S.-based groups such as the American Family Association, American Center for Law and Justice and National Organization for Marriage all endorsed various anti-gay legislation in Russia.

It remains to be seen what action, if any, the foundation and its leaders will take in response to Butina's arrest. But a line from one of the Russian national's alleged emails with a National Prayer Breakfast organizer — penned as she, according to the Justice Department, was actively conspiring against the United States — may prove haunting.

"A new relationship between two countries always begins better when it begins in faith," she wrote.