

Former Soviet military officer joined Trump's son's meeting, too

WASHINGTON (AP) — A prominent Russian-American lobbyist and former Soviet military officer attended a meeting with President Donald Trump's son, son-in-law and campaign chairman last year, the lobbyist said Friday, adding a new wrinkle to the Trump team's evolving explanations about the June 2016 session.

Rinat Akhmetshin confirmed his involvement to The Associated Press in an interview. He had not been previously identified as a participant in the meeting at Trump Tower in New York, which was billed as part of a Russian government effort to help the Republican's White House campaign.

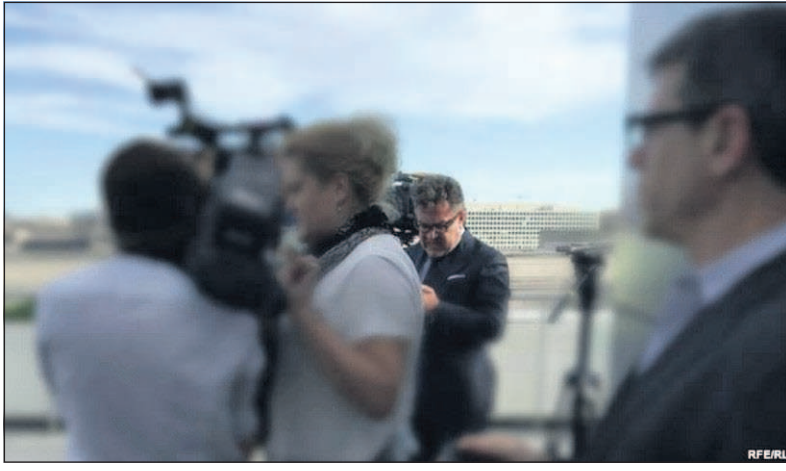
The meeting has heightened questions about whether Trump's associates coordinated with Russia to meddle in the presidential election — to help him and thwart Hillary Clinton — and whether they've been forthcoming about their foreign contacts. Federal and congressional investigators are probing possible connections between the campaign and Moscow.

Akhmetshin has been reported to have ties to Russian intelligence, a characterization he dismisses as a "smear campaign." He's a well-known presence, lobbying for Russian interests trying to undermine the allegations of a lawyer who died in a Russian prison and is the namesake of a U.S. sanctions law.

Akhmetshin told the AP he served in the Soviet military in a counterintelligence unit but he was never formally trained as a spy.

In emails posted by Donald Trump Jr. earlier this week, a publicist said he arranged the meeting because a Russian lawyer wanted to pass on negative information about Democrat Clinton. The go-between stated that the discussion was part of a Russian government effort to help the GOP candidate.

While Trump Jr. has confirmed that Russian attorney Natalia Veselnitskaya was in the meeting,



In this photo provided by Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, Rinat Akhmetshin is photographed at the Newseum in Washington in June 2016 after a documentary screening. Rep. Adam Schiff, ranking member on the Senate Intelligence Committee says reports that a second Russian person was in a meeting with Donald Trump Jr. last summer "adds another deeply disturbing fact about this secret meeting."

he has not disclosed Akhmetshin's presence. The president's son has publically discounted the meet, saying he did not receive the information he was promised.

In a statement Sunday, Trump Jr. said the attorney had said she had information that people tied to Russia were funding the Democratic National Committee and supporting Clinton, a description that Akhmetshin backed up in his interview.

Akhmetshin said he accompanied Veselnitskaya to Trump Tower where they met an interpreter. He said he had learned about the meeting only that day.

Veselnitskaya brought with her a plastic folder with printed-out documents that detailed what she believed was the flow of illicit funds to the Democrats, Akhmetshin said. Veselnitskaya presented the contents of the documents to the Trump associates and suggested that making the information public could help the campaign, he said.

"This could be a good issue to expose how the DNC is accepting bad money," Akhmetshin recalled

her saying.

Trump Jr. asked the attorney if she had sufficient evidence to back up her claims, including whether she could demonstrate the flow of the money. But Veselnitskaya said the Trump campaign would need to research it more. After that, Trump Jr. lost interest, according to Akhmetshin.

"They couldn't wait for the meeting to end," he said.

Akhmetshin said he does not know if Veselnitskaya's documents were provided by the Russian government. He said he thinks she left the materials with the Trump associates. It was unclear if she handed the documents to anyone in the room or simply left them behind, he said.

Jared Kushner, Trump's son-in-law and current White House senior adviser, and then-campaign chairman Paul Manafort also attended the meeting. Akhmetshin said he recognized Kushner and Trump Jr. He also said he recognized Manafort because they worked in "adjacent political circles" but never together.

He said there were others in the room but he didn't know them. Publicist Rob Goldstone, who brokered the meeting via email with Trump Jr., has told the AP that he was there.

Asked about Akhmetshin's participation, Manafort spokesman Jason Maloni declined comment. Trump Jr.'s attorney did not respond to inquiries, nor did a spokesman for Kushner. Veselnitskaya has denied having any ties to the Russian government. When reached by the AP this week, she declined comment. She did not respond to additional attempts to contact her Friday.

The confirmation of Akhmetshin's participation in the meeting drew swift reaction from the top Democrat on the House intelligence committee, Rep. Adam Schiff of California, who said he wanted Akhmetshin to appear before the committee and provide "any relevant documents and information."

Schiff said whether Akhmetshin is connected to Russian intelligence or not "it is clear the Kremlin got the message that Donald Trump welcomed the help of the Russian government in providing dirt on Hillary Clinton." Schiff said Trump Jr.'s omission of Akhmetshin's role in his public account of the meeting and the president's son's shifting explanations "paint a portrait of consistent dissembling and deceit."

Kushner disclosed the meeting on his security clearance paperwork, but Schiff said the Akhmetshin revelation raises questions about how much Kushner disclosed about it. He said he believes Kushner's clearance should be reviewed, and "if he was not perfectly candid," the clearance should be revoked.

Akhmetshin, who spoke to the AP while on vacation in France where he said he has been surfing, said the meeting was "not substantive" and he "actually expected more serious" discussion.

"I never thought this would be

such a big deal, to be honest," he said.

The Russian government has denied any involvement or knowledge of the June 2016 meeting. Asked Friday about Akhmetshin, Russian President Vladimir Putin's spokesman, Dmitry Peskov, told reporters: "We don't know anything about this person."

Akhmetshin has been identified in media reports as a former officer in Russia's military intelligence service known as the GRU. He has denied that, saying he served in the Soviet Army from 1986 to 1988 after he was drafted but was not trained in spy tradecraft. He said his unit operated in the Baltics and was "loosely part of counterintelligence."

Akhmetshin said he has not been contacted by the U.S. special counsel's office or the FBI about the meeting with Trump Jr. He said he's willing to talk with the Senate Judiciary Committee, whose chairman has pressed the Justice Department about why Akhmetshin has not registered as a foreign agent.

The chairman, Republican Chuck Grassley of Iowa, said in a March letter that Akhmetshin has "reportedly admitted to being a 'Soviet counterintelligence officer' and has a long history of lobbying the U.S. government for pro-Russia matters."

Akhmetshin said that the Justice Department's Foreign Agents Registration Act unit sent him a letter in April and told him, "it has come to our attention you should have filed for FARA." He said he didn't believe he needed to file. He has previously registered with Congress for the lobbying work, and he plans to raise this issue before Grassley's committee.

"I think I have a legal right to tell my story," he said.

Separately on Friday, the data and digital director for Trump's presidential campaign said he will speak with the House Intelligence committee later this month as part of its own Russia probe.

BRIEFLY

Winners and losers complicate GOP's path on health bill

WASHINGTON (AP) — Republicans' latest health care plan would create winners and losers among Americans up and down the income ladder, and across age groups.

It would give consumers more responsibility for their insurance choices, a goal long held by conservatives who argue that's key to a true health care market. Younger adults and healthy people in the solid middle class may find more agreeable options. But low-income people may not be able to afford coverage, along with older and sicker adults.

And there are potential unintended consequences for people with employer-provided insurance, currently about 170 million Americans. Allowing individuals to pay premiums from tax-sheltered accounts may create incentives for employers to stop offering coverage, say some independent analysts.

The legislation would put limits on federal spending for Medicaid, a partnership program with states to cover low-income people, the disabled and nursing home residents. The drawback is that state officials could eventually face no-win choices, such as having to pick between paying for coverage for

low-wage working mothers and support services for elderly people trying to stay out of nursing homes.

Pence tells U.S. governors it's time for 'end of Obamacare'

PROVIDENCE, R.I. (AP) — Vice President Mike Pence told a bipartisan gathering of governors on Friday that he and President Donald Trump believe the revised health care bill before the U.S. Senate is the "right bill at the right time to begin the end of Obamacare."

"The president said he wanted a health care system that in his words is far less expensive and far better," the Republican vice president said during a conference of the National Governors Association. "We believe the Senate health care bill begins to make the president's vision a reality."

Pence urged governors to support the plan, which was written by Republicans and would make major changes to the signature domestic policy of former President Barack Obama, a Democrat.

"I want to challenge each one of you to work together with this administration, to give the American people access to the world-class health care they deserve," he said.

But several governors, Democratic and Republican, expressed concern about the bill and even outright opposition.

Modest gains push U.S. stocks to record highs

(AP) — Gains by big technology and health care companies pushed U.S. stocks modestly higher Friday, lifting several major indexes to new highs.

The Standard & Poor's 500 index, Dow Jones industrial average and Russell 2000 index of smaller-company stocks each set records as the market posted its third straight day of gains.

Energy companies helped lift the market as crude oil prices rose. High-dividend stocks like real estate companies and utilities also posted big gains following a drop in bond yields. The lower yields and a weak forecast from JPMorgan Chase weighed on banks. Financial stocks were the only sector in the S&P 500 to end lower.

Investors brushed off a report showing U.S. retail sales declined in June and drew encouragement from data indicating industrial production rebounded last month. Traders also welcomed a report showing inflation at the consumer level was flat in June, which suggests that the Federal Reserve may have more reason to delay another interest rate increase.

"The low inflation data will put the Fed more in a wait-and-see mode to really determine if the low inflationary environment is really transitory," said Lindsey Bell, investment strategist at CFRA Research.

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