

# The Farage staffer, the Russian embassy and a smear campaign against a Kremlin critic

Worker for Farage's group in EU parliament was 'frequent visitor to embassy' and accused of role in propaganda stunt

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Nigel Farage is part of the Europe of Freedom and Direct Democracy group (EFDD) in the European parliament.  
Photograph: Jean-Francois Badias/AP

A senior member of Nigel Farage's parliamentary group staff in Brussels was known for making trips to the Russian embassy in Belgium and was accused of orchestrating a smear campaign against a critic of the Kremlin, the Guardian has been told.

Two former staffers who worked for Farage's [Europe of Freedom and Direct Democracy](#) group (EFDD) and who spoke to the Guardian on condition of anonymity said a senior member of the group's staff, a native of Malta named Kevin Ellul Bonici, was known to have a relationship with the Russian embassy.

Ellul Bonici was part of a small team who worked in the administration of the secretariat office at the EFDD until at least 2015. The EFDD would not answer questions about his current status. Several sources said Ellul Bonici was close at that time to Farage, who relied on the core secretariat staff to help manage the EFDD, a rightwing Eurosceptic group that is still led by the former Ukip chief and comprises 45 MEPs.

According to the accounts of two former parliamentary staffers, in June 2015 a top aide to Farage named Michael McManus, who works for the EFDD, claimed to them that Ellul Bonici was a frequent visitor to the Russian embassy and had a relationship with officials there.

"I was told in June 2015 that this gentleman had a relationship with the Russian embassy in Brussels and that every time he came back from the Russian embassy he would return with a bootload of propaganda," one former staffer told the Guardian.

The remarks were confirmed by another former staffer who also allegedly heard them from McManus.

Ellul Bonici did not respond to questions from the Guardian.

McManus did not respond to requests for comment by phone, text and email.

Ellul Bonici speaks fluent Russian and was educated in the former Soviet Union in the early 1980s, according to a [biographical essay](#) he published

about his experience.

“Kevin was part of the secretariat, one of Farage’s senior staff members, and he has always kept them very close,” said Gary Cartwright, a journalist who covers the EU parliament and who previously worked in Farage’s parliamentary group.

The new allegation comes as some British MPs have started to raise questions about whether [Russia may have sought to influence the Brexit vote](#).

Theresa May, the British prime minister, has [accused Russia of meddling in elections](#) as part of its drive to sow discord in the west.

Farage, a leading force behind the vote to leave the EU, has ridiculed the suggestion. He has also [denied taking money](#) from the Kremlin. There is no evidence that Ellul Bonici was ever involved in Farage’s pro-Brexit campaign.

Unlike most conservatives in the UK, who have traditionally taken a tough stance on [Russia](#), the former Ukip chief has been a consistent cheerleader in support of Vladimir Putin, whom he once described as the leader he most admired.

Farage also has a relationship with Dana Rohrabacher, a US congressman from California who, according to [a recent report](#) in the New York Times, was seen as such a valuable source of intelligence to the Kremlin that he was given a codename.

Farage’s proximity to pro-Kremlin actors was first made apparent in late 2014, after alleged actions by Ellul Bonici became the source of a complaint.

In December that year, the Maltese staffer walked into the European parliament and distributed hundreds of books to members’ pigeonholes without authorisation, according to the results of an internal investigation

that was later conducted by the parliament's security service.

The book was called *Red Dalia*, a highly critical biography of Dalia Grybauskaitė, the president of [Lithuania](#) and Putin critic, who weeks earlier had referred to Russia as a “terrorist state”.

The EU parliament investigated the incident after a Lithuanian MEP named Antanas Guoga issued a complaint. “I was really concerned that books were distributed by the help of the Russians. Russian propaganda issues are very sensitive in Lithuania and the EU,” Guoga told the Guardian.

A confidential 2015 memo by the EU parliamentary security service that was obtained by the Guardian stated that their investigation had found that Ellul Bonici – who was working at the secretariat of the EFDD – and three other men had distributed the books. The men had entered the parliament with Ellul Bonici. One was a Russian and the other was a Polish citizen who was born in Moscow. The fourth person was never identified.

The Guardian understands that the EU parliament did not take further action.

The EFDD said in a statement at the time that it had not authorised or supported the distribution of the books and that the issue would be subject to an internal review and “adequate follow-up”. Ellul Bonici's wife, who is a Eurosceptic member of the European parliament and works closely with Marine Le Pen, denied in reports at the time that her husband had been involved.

There is no evidence that Farage knew about Ellul Bonici's alleged relationship with the Russian embassy or that he knew anything about the *Red Dalia* stunt.

The EFDD would not answer questions about how long he had been employed and whether he still worked for the group.

A report published by Bloomberg in August 2015 said EFDD had said that the culprit behind the book controversy – who was not named in the story – had been sacked.

But the two former EFDD staffers who spoke anonymously to the Guardian said they believed Ellul Bonici was working on the group's YouTube channel while they were working in Brussels as late as 2016.

A spokesman for Farage in London declined to respond to questions about Ellul Bonici.

Ellul Bonici's wife, Sharon, told the Guardian: "My husband is a very private person. He does not speak to the press." She received several emails with questions but did not respond to them.

Rohrabacher, a conservative Republican, has denied being a Russian asset. A spokesman for Farage declined to respond to questions about their relationship.

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