

POLITICS

# Firm Hired by Ukraine's Burisma Tried to Use Hunter Biden as Leverage, Documents Show

Blue Star mentioned him to get State Department meetings and burnish image, emails indicate



Hunter Biden served on the Burisma board from 2014 to April of this year. PHOTO: TERESA KROEGER/GETTY IMAGES FOR WORLD FOOD PROGRAM USA

*By Jessica Donati*

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WASHINGTON—A consulting firm hired by Burisma Group mentioned that former U.S. Vice President Joe Biden's son served on the Ukrainian gas company's board so the firm could leverage a meeting with the State Department, according to documents and a former U.S. official.

The documents—email exchanges between State Department staff members made public this week—show that the consulting firm, Washington-based Blue Star Strategies, used Hunter Biden's name in a request for a State Department meeting and then mentioned him again during the meeting as part of an effort to improve Burisma's image in Washington.

Mr. Biden was appointed to the Burisma board in 2014, when the company and its owner faced allegations of corruption, and he remained there until April of this year.

It isn't clear whether the younger Mr. Biden knew his name was being used by Blue Star in its contacts with State Department officials on Burisma's behalf in early 2016. A lawyer for Mr. Biden didn't respond to a request for comment.

Hunter Biden served on Burisma's board when his father, then the vice president, was overseeing U.S. efforts to get Ukraine to reduce corruption. That arrangement has drawn allegations from President Trump and his allies that the younger Mr. Biden sought to profit from his father's name. Mr. Trump asked Ukraine's leader to investigate the Bidens—an act at the center of the House's impeachment inquiry. Both Bidens deny any wrongdoing.

The email exchanges between State Department staffers show that Karen Tramontano, chief executive of Blue Star, cited Mr. Biden's position in trying to secure a meeting with a senior official at the State Department.

“She noted that two high profile U.S. citizens are affiliated with the company (including Hunter Biden as a board member),” the special assistant at the Office of the Undersecretary for Economic Growth, Energy and the Environment wrote in the Feb. 24, 2016, email.

Ms. Tramontano met with the undersecretary, Catherine Novelli, on March 1, 2016, the documents show. During the meeting, Ms. Tramontano mentioned Mr. Biden served on the company's board, according to a former State Department official familiar with the discussion.

In the contacts with the State Department, Ms. Tramontano said that Burisma hadn't engaged in corruption and wanted to change the view of the company in Washington. The former official said that Hunter Biden's position on the board wasn't the reason that Ms. Novelli took the meeting and that no further action was taken after it took place.

The State Department didn't immediately respond to a request for comment. Blue Star declined to comment for this article.

The documents were released in response to a Freedom of Information Act request submitted by John Solomon, who first published the documents on the website Scribd.com. A copy of the emails were subsequently made available to The Wall Street Journal by the law firm that represented Mr. Solomon, Southeastern Legal Foundation, a conservative public interest nonprofit.

The documents don't name Devon Archer, Hunter Biden's longtime business partner, who was also on the Burisma board.

The documents were released after the Southeastern Legal Foundation filed a complaint against the State Department. The U.S. District Court for the District of Columbia ordered the department to release the documents.

Blue Star's efforts for Burisma came as the company and its Ukrainian tycoon founder, Mykola Zlochevsky, faced investigations in Ukraine focused on allegations of tax irregularities, money laundering and illegal enrichment

Mr. Zlochevsky was never charged, and a lawyer for Burisma said at the time that the investigations were closed because of a lack of evidence.

The dropping of the investigations in 2016 came after Ukraine's prosecutor general was dismissed. Vice President Biden and European Union officials had brought pressure on the prosecutor, seeing him as a hindrance to anticorruption efforts. His dismissal has been seized upon by Mr. Trump's personal attorney Rudy Giuliani as evidence that Vice President Biden exerted undue pressure on Kyiv to help his son.

President Trump and Mr. Giuliani have asked Ukraine to investigate the Bidens. State Department and other officials testifying in the House impeachment inquiry have said that military aid and the prospect of a White House meeting were withheld until the Ukrainian government agreed to investigate. Last month, Ukraine's prosecutor general said it was reviewing past investigations, raising the possibility of restarting probes.

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