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Rogozin Asks Seagal to Lobby for Arms Sales

By Alexander Bratersky

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Putin and Seagal at the Sambo-70 sports complex in Moscow last week. **Aleksey Nikolskyi**

Correction appended

Deputy Prime Minister Dmitry Rogozin asked American action film star Steven Seagal to lobby for easing restrictions on the sale of Russian sporting rifles to the United States.

Seagal, a long-time acquaintance of President Vladimir Putin, met with Rogozin on Tuesday in the Cabinet building. The official asked the movie star to lobby U.S. hunting and rifle associations.

"Your connections within the American establishment could help resolve this issue," Rogozin said while addressing Seagal, who wore black clothes and a big sports watch.

Rogozin said his question concerns a 1996 U.S. government regulation allowing Russia and other former Soviet countries to export hunting and sport rifles to the United States.

Russia sees the regulation as discriminatory, since it only allows it to export weapons made before 1996 and because it does not cover all types of rifles.

"Those restrictions are detrimental for our country," Rogozin said.

Russia, which was able to reach a deal with the U.S. in 2004 to export more types of weapons, has found a lucrative market there for its hunting rifles.

The U.S. imports 80 percent of sporting and hunting rifles and air guns made by Izmash, Yelena Filatova, an executive at the company, said earlier. In 2012, the exports of rifles manufactured by Izmash, the country's leading small arms producer, rose 12 percent.

In 2011, the company signed a contract to supply Saiga-12 shotguns, which resemble the famous AK-47 assault rifle, to U.S. police departments. The value of the contract was not disclosed, but a Saiga-12 can be purchased in U.S. stores for about $800.

Rogozin told Seagal during their meeting that he would discuss the issue of sales restrictions on Russian guns with the Obama administration but did not elaborate.

Defense analyst Igor Korotchenko said that by raising the issue of Russian guns with Seagal, Rogozin was "creatively" trying to bring attention to the issue.

"Russian hunting and sporting rifles attract interest from around the world and especially in the U.S. Americans are practical people and our guns are affordable and reasonably priced," Korotchenko said.

Seagal's remarks about the subject were not made public, since the meeting continued behind closed doors. But the actor seemed to be aware of the issue and spoke about it with a group of his subordinates and government officials before the meeting.

Seagal is not known to be a member of National Rifle Association, a powerful gun lobby that has recently opposed President Barack Obama's plans to ban sales of nearly 160 types of assault weapons.

But the actor has taken part in training volunteers who patrolled school areas to protect schoolchildren. In February, Seagal teamed up with Arizona sheriff Joe Arpaio, the commander of a 3,500-strong volunteer force put on alert after the Sandy Hook Elementary School massacre in Newtown, Connecticut, in December 2012.

Twenty children and six adults in Sandy Hook were shot by two school students. A semi-automatic rifle and a handgun were used in the shooting, local police said, adding that the suspects also had a Saiga-12 shotgun in their car.

In the Cabinet building, Seagal was cheered by police officers and security personnel, fans of his films "Lawman" and "Under Siege."

He told The Moscow Times before the meeting with Rogozin that he was "very impressed with the Federal Security Service and special forces training in Russia."

He was also asked whether he had any plans to lecture Russian police on martial arts.

"I do not consider myself a great operator, but if they are interested, I will be willing to offer," he replied.

Seagal, who is on a "social visit" in the country, said he is discussing business plans with his Russian partners but declined to elaborate. The actor owns an energy drink brand named after him.

Last week, Seagal accompanied President Vladimir Putin at an opening ceremony for a new martial arts school building in Moscow. Kommersant reporter Andrei Kolesnikov wrote that Seagal even acted as a bodyguard for Putin, getting him out of the crowd of children who surrounded the president.

**The front-page article titled "Seagal Asked to Lobby for Arms" in the March 20 issue incorrectly stated that 20 children and six adults were shot in Sandy Hook by two school students. In fact, there was only one suspected killer and he was not enrolled at that school.*

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