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France's Marine Le Pen Meets With Top Russian Official

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Marine Le Pen

French far-right National Front leader Marine Le Pen met a senior Russian official in Moscow on Tuesday, underlining her party's regular ties with the Kremlin despite East-West tensions smouldering over Ukraine.

Le Pen, whose anti-immigrant, euro-skeptic party previously secured a major loan from a Russian-owned bank, has fiercely criticized the West's policy towards Russia over the conflict in Ukraine as overly hostile to Moscow.

She emerged from the building of Russian parliament's lower chamber, the State Duma, on Tuesday after holding more than an hour of talks there with speaker Sergei Naryshkin, a senior Russian statesman close to the Kremlin.

"Mr. Naryshkin and I see each other roughly once a year," said Le Pen, who is seen a major contender in presidential elections due in France in 2017.

"It is important that the representative of the leading party of France, which is what I am, should be able to discuss the situation in Europe, in the world. We touched on the situation in Ukraine, we also talked about the very serious situation with the Islamic State (insurgents)."

Le Pen's party won the highest share of the vote in France in last year's European Parliament elections. But the centre-right UMP party emerged as the clear leader in local elections in March and Le Pen herself is seen as only an outside bet for the presidential election due in 2017.

Naryshkin told Le Pen that her party was "among the leading political forces in France", according to a short statement on the meeting posted on the Duma website.

Le Pen's party secured loans worth 9 million euros ($9.83 million) from a Russian-owned bank but Le Pen said on Tuesday getting any further loans was "not at all the purpose" of her visit.

She declined to say what other meetings she had during her "very short" visit to Moscow, which cherishes ties with certain European figures who could apply further pressure on the EU's increasingly troubled unity over Ukraine.

The bloc slapped sanctions on Russia after its annexation of Crimea from Ukraine last year and has stepped them up since, saying Moscow is driving a pro-Russian separatist rebellion in east Ukraine that ensued. Moscow denies the accusations.

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