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Texas Sen. Don Huffines says Russia promised not to meddle in future elections

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Sen. Don Huffines, R-Dallas, has been in Russia meeting with officials as part of a group led by Sen. Rand Paul, R-Kentucky. Paul's father Ron Paul was a long-time congressman from Texas and a 2012 candidate for the Republican nomination for president.

Invited by Paul, Huffines spent three nights in Moscow, where he met with Russia's deputy foreign minister and the chairman of the foreign relations committee in the Russian legislature's upper house.

We caught up with Huffines early Thursday morning, which was late afternoon in St. Petersburg, where the party had traveled. He'll be back in Texas on Saturday.

Good afternoon, Senator. Let's start by just asking what you've been doing, what you've seen and whom you've talked to while in Russia.

We have met with Konstantin Kosachev, a member of the Russian senate and a chairman of the foreign relations committee, and with Sergei Ryabkov, the deputy of what's really their state department. We were supposed to meet with their secretary of state but he was on vacation and was too far away to make it.

[Note: Kosachev is among the Russians personally targeted by U.S. sanctions, and has repeatedly denied Russian interference in the 2016 election. Ryabkov has been a leading figure in efforts to calm tensions between the U.S. and Russia, especially after last year's tit-for-tat decisions to expel hundreds of diplomats from each country.

It was mainly a meeting with Sen. Paul, and a chance for him to visit with the Russian government. My role was to -- I came over here very concerned about meddling in our elections. We have a committee in the Senate on elections security, and I am a member of that committee and it's something I've worked on and have been talking about - the need to make sure our elections are safe and secure. So, my message is that we're very concerned about the meddling and I wanted to come look them in the eye and tell them Texas is upset, and we don't want any foreign government meddling in our elections.

I came here -- spending my money, as you know I don't take a legislative salary or accept government benefits; I certainly paid for the whole trip -- to tell them that we don't want them meddling. And it succeeded. They said they would not meddle in our elections.

In fact, Kosachev said so in a press conference [after the meeting.] He said that because I asked him to say that.

Did any of the officials admit they have meddled in the previous election?

No, they did not. They denied that they were doing it. But I asked them, I specifically phrased my question to ask them to commit that neither Russia nor its contacts would interfere in our elections. And they agreed.

Do you believe the Russians when they say they did not meddle in previous elections?

No, I do not.

Then why do you believe them when they say they won't in the future? What value is their promise if you don't believe their denials?

There is a lot of value, because they need to hear from someone. The more people they hear from about this issue, the more powerfully we communicate that this is a big problem, the more they are going to listen.

I told them, if Texas were its own country, our GDP would be 10th in the world, larger than Russia's GDP. They were quite surprised. At our next Census, we'll have a population of 30 million, and we are a world player. What happens in Texas is extremely important to the world.

[Note: The CIA estimates Russia's 2017 GDP was \$1.47 trillion. The U.S. government estimated Texas 2017 GDP at \$1.75 trillion.]

Can you paint a picture for us of how these meetings went? How were you able to convey your message to the Russians?

Sen. Paul and I, mainly Sen. Paul, were sitting across from their committee and their interpreters. It was a big table and a very, very formal setting. Not casual at all. In the middle of the very wide table were flowers and everyone had name cards in front of their place.

How did the conversations go?

They responded [to our concerns about the meddling.] The conversation lasted about 10 minutes. They had done some homework on Texas. Nothing significant, but they had points they made about Texas to just add to the discussion. The chairman spoke mostly, but many of the others at the table were English speakers so we had quite a bit of conversation in English, which was then relayed by individual translators for the Russians who did not speak English.

Some have criticized Paul's decision to go to Russia, arguing that it softens the U.S. response to the Russian aggression, ranging from its annexation of Crimea, which triggered the sanctions, to its interference in the election. Did you have concerns with going on the trip?

I disagree with that. I think we were very successful in communicating the seriousness of meddling in this election. They seemed to be concerned -- very concerned -- about the current state of relations between our nation and Russia. They feel there is not enough communication. They said they have not seen communication so low before, even in the height of the Cold War. They have not heard from Senate Foreign Relations Committee, for instance.

In your view, why have the two countries stopped talking?

Ultimately, it's about trust and it's political. Sen. Paul's main goal here is to establish communications so we can be open and able to talk to each other. That's just common sense.

That doesn't mean we agree with what someone else is saying, but we have to simply be able to listen to each other.

We have a great message, our message is about liberty, and it's a message of personal responsibility. That's important to communicate to Russia.

They have their messages too. But it's hard to solve an issue when you aren't talking.

What did you come away understanding their most urgent message to America to be?

Their top concern is there is not enough communication between two countries. They are only going to act in what they think is in their best interest. I was here [in Russia] to convince them it is not in their interest to interfere in our elections. If they want better communications, then the meddling is not in their best interest.

It's like they are taking one step forward [by trying to have a dialogue] and two steps back [by meddling.] I think they really understand that now. So now, it's like Reagan said, trust and verify. Unfortunately, we don't have a great history of being able to trust them.

You also met with former Soviet president Mikhail Gorbachev. What was that like?

That was a real highlight of the trip so far. He's doing quite well physically; he is approaching 90 years old. One thing he said, that when he was [in power] he got a lot of pushback for meeting with Reagan and, remember, Reagan did too. He said it was politically risky not only for him but politically risky for Reagan. But they were able to make progress when they took all the handlers out of the room - all the people from the State Department and everyone, and it was just he and Reagan and it worked.

It got rid of the Soviet Union. It worked great and was fantastic. He was encouraging about what we just talked about, the need for communications.

Gorbachev has said the time is long past when his nation should embrace democracy, and welcome multi-party elections, a stronger judiciary and tolerate dissent. Did he raise any criticisms of Putin with you?

Well I wasn't in on all the meeting with Gorbachev. Sen. Paul had a private meeting with him, and he may well have raised those issues in private. When I was visiting with him, he did not mention Putin.

This week, the U.S. has announced new sanctions against Russia for meddling in the 2016 election. Given your experience there, do you think that's appropriate?

I really stayed focus on election issue. I know that I got that accomplished and got them to publicly admit, well to admit that they aren't going to do it in the future.

There were other issues the Russians brought up beyond that. Quite a few. They've all been recorded and noted and he's bringing them back to Washington to follow up on.

I had asked earlier what the Russians' concerns were. What were the top issues they've asked Paul to raise in Washington?

I really believe that's for Sen. Paul to disclose that. For me, the number one issue I heard was having an open dialogue.

Can you give us a better sense of what the trip has been like? Surely, not all work?

No, not all work. We are going to the Hermitage tonight and we've seen the Peterhof [home of the Grand Palace], which is, as you know, the top tourist attraction here. It has actually been quite crowded with tourists here. I've enjoyed experiencing the Russian people.

We take for granted our liberty, our economic liberty and our personal liberty. When you come to a country like this, they would love to have the liberty and economic prosperity we have. People here are hungry and thirsty for liberty.

What makes you say that? Did you have specific interactions with folks there that led you to conclude they want those things?

We are visiting with different people here, not only the tour guide and people like that, but they have brought in other people. I am with the organizers, from the CATO Institute, and they've brought in speakers to do some lectures. They speak Russian and give us their views.

What have the Russians you've encountered said about President Donald Trump? Do they think he is part of the problem or perhaps offering a solution to better relations between the countries?

That hasn't come up a lot. But I have learned they pay a lot of attention to American politics and elections, and are aware of who is running for different positions in the Senate, for instance. My overall impression is that they are mostly aware of the fact that, unlike in their system, the leadership in this country can change every four years.

Has the president been sufficiently clear about the Russian's meddling in our elections?

I don't want to second-guess the president. I do think people underestimate him sometimes. But I am here to communicate how important it is to keep our elections safe and secure from any meddling at all.