

Rand Paul personally delivered a letter from Trump to Vladimir Putin

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U.S. Sen. Rand Paul said Wednesday that he personally delivered a letter to Russian President Vladimir Putin on behalf of President Donald Trump.

"I was honored to deliver a letter from President Trump to President Vladimir Putin's administration," Paul tweeted Wednesday. "The letter emphasized the importance of further engagement in various areas including countering terrorism, enhancing legislative dialogue and resuming cultural exchanges."

This is the latest in a series of connections Paul has made with the Russian government this week during a solo journey in Moscow "to continue a dialogue on vital issues such as nuclear non-proliferation and combating terrorism."

The senator, who has compared his trip this week to former President Ronald Reagan's relations with Russia during the Cold War, met with former Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev on Tuesday.

"President Gorbachev was instrumental in bringing down the Iron Curtain and restoring ties with the West, and he knows firsthand the critical necessity of engagement," Paul said in a statement to the Courier Journal. "While our discussion focused on various items, the importance of nuclear disarmament was greatly discussed."

In addition to discussing nuclear disarmament, Paul has had numerous conversations with other Russian officials. He has invited a group of the country's parliamentary members to the Washington, D.C.

One of the matters discussed included the arrest of Maria Butina, an accused Russian spy who has been charged with acting as a foreign agent and infiltrating American political organizations. Butina met with Donald Trump Jr. and attended an event alongside Kentucky Gov. Matt Bevin during the National Rifle Association's 2016 convention in Louisville.

Leonid Slutsky, the head of the Foreign Affairs Committee in Russia's lower house of parliament, asked Paul to help resolve her arrest, according to Russian state media.

“If you, Senator Paul, stand up in defense of Maria Butina, even in order to get her restrictive measure changed, even to get her released from custody — and we are seeking her release and the opportunity for her to return to her homeland — you will really show yourself to be a real human being,” the Interfax news agency reported Slutsky saying.

Paul was the lone member of the Senate to make the diplomatic trip to Russia. He was accompanied by Peter Goettler, the president of the Cato Institute, a libertarian think tank in Washington, D.C., that has ties to GOP mega-donor Charles Koch. Don Huffines, a Texas state senator and a former chairman of Paul's presidential campaign in the Lone Star State, was also on the trip.

"The Cato Institute handled travel logistics for the group, in addition to setting up meetings with non-government entities," Goettler said in a statement. "Cato also covered travel costs for Senator Paul, his wife, and one member of his staff. Senator Paul's staff acted as the point of contact for all meetings with government officials, and not all members of the group traveling with the Senator took part in the meetings Senator Paul's staff arranged."

When a wave of backlash from both sides of the aisle came over President Trump during his meeting with Putin last month, Paul was one of the few public supporters of the trip.

Paul said in an interview with CBS following Trump's meeting with Putin that Special Prosecutor Robert Mueller's investigation into Russian influence in the 2016 election has left the president rightfully jaded about the U.S. intelligence community.

“The president has undergone an onslaught, a year, a year and a half, of a partisan investigation accusing him somehow of colluding with Russia,” Paul told CBS. “I think he’s sensitive to that.”

The Senate Foreign Relations Committee said Paul's mission is separate from them.

"No invitation has been extended from the Senate Foreign Relations Committee," said a spokesperson for U.S. Sen. Bob Corker, chairman of the committee.

Paul's senior adviser, Doug Stafford, stated that by engaging with officials in Moscow, Paul is "acting in his role as a Senator and member of the Foreign Relations Committee, and in cooperation with President Trump and the State Department."