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Paul defends overseas expenditures, Russian outreach

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Fresh off a diplomacy mission to Russia, U.S. Sen. Rand Paul, R-Bowling Green, is not so diplomatic in defending himself against charges that other overseas trips have been at either taxpayer or campaign-donor expense.

Paul was one of several members of Congress singled out last month in a report produced by the nonpartisan Campaign Legal Center for using Political Action Committee funds to “subsidize lavish lifestyles on their donors’ dimes.”

The report said Paul’s RAND (Reinventing a New Direction) PAC spent \$11,043 at restaurants in Italy and Malta, \$4,492 on a limousine service in Rome and \$1,904 at the St. George Lycabettus Hotel in Athens.

In a phone interview Tuesday morning with the Daily News, Paul didn’t deny such specific expenditures but rather justified them as investments that netted a solid return.

The senator said he has had “a lot of questions” about the Campaign Legal Center report, which he said was motivated by “people who have a political agenda to damage me.”

“When you try to imply that campaign funds have been misspent, I take that personally,” he said. “No campaign funds were spent except to raise more money.”

Paul said he netted more than \$70,000 for his PAC on the European travels.

“If this were a chamber of commerce fundraiser, the story would be that we raised \$70,000,” he said.

Paul has also drawn fire for his support of President Donald Trump’s statements after a meeting with Russian President Vladimir Putin in Finland that were perceived as being perhaps too friendly to the leader of a country that has historically not been on friendly terms with the United States.

Cozying up to the Russian leader at a time when investigations into Russian meddling in the 2016 elections continue predictably evokes a negative reaction. But Paul stands by his support for improving relations with Russia, as his recent trip to meet with members of that country’s legislative bodies attests.

“We should have more dialogue with Russia,” said Paul, who pointed out that his latest trip was paid for by the Cato Institute, a libertarian think tank.

A member of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Paul points out that the two superpowers have an obligation to be on good terms.

“We need better dialogue so we won’t have an accidental nuclear engagement,” the senator said.

In addition to meeting with members of Russia’s parliament, Paul met briefly with former Soviet Union leader Mikhail Gorbachev and held him up as an example of the type of relations that should exist between the U.S. and Russia.

“It was incredible meeting with someone who helped end the Cold War,” said Paul. “Gorbachev mentioned that it’s really important that we have conversations.”

Toward that end, Paul has invited Russian lawmakers to come to the U.S. for meetings.

The timing of such an invitation isn’t ideal, with the election-meddling investigation continuing, but Paul said diplomatic relations can help prevent future meddling. In fact, he and the other legislators who visited Russia elicited a promise from their Russian counterparts that there would be no meddling in this year’s elections.

“I’ve tried very hard to impress on them that meddling in our elections will set back relations,” Paul said. “It’s not in their self-interest.”

As he has in the past, Paul made the point that election meddling is nothing new and that it’s up to local and national officials to ensure that our election process is more secure.

“Absolutely we should protect our elections,” he said. “Countries will continue to try to influence our elections. We live in an era when you can do that electronically.

“I’m of the mind that our constitutional government is strong enough that some country trying to hack into our election is not going to destroy our republic. The important thing is that we protect the integrity of our elections, all the way down to the precinct level.”