

Rand Paul talks nuclear weapons with ex-Soviet Union leader Gorbachev

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U.S. Sen. Rand Paul discussed nuclear disarmament with former Soviet Union President Mikhail Gorbachev on Tuesday one of many stops in Moscow that the Kentucky Republican has made this week.

The senator, who has compared his trip this week in Moscow to former President Ronald Reagan's relations with Russia during the Cold War, praised his meeting with the former Soviet leader.

"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."

Gorbachev was a key figure in the last days of the Soviet Union in the mid-1980s and early 90s when he attempted to democratize the nation and decentralize its economy, ultimately leading to its collapse.

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. "to continue a dialogue on vital issues such as nuclear non-proliferation and combating terrorism," according to the senator's office.

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.

A spokesman for Paul declined to provide comment Tuesday morning.

Paul was the lone member of the Senate to made 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. with 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, according to the New York Times.

In another meeting, Paul spoke with Deputy Foreign Minister Sergey Ryabkov about arms control and discussed opportunities to develop contacts between the Russian parliament and Congress, according to a statement from Russia's Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

According to the Washington Post, Paul also met with Sergey Kislyak, the former Russian ambassador to the U.S. Kislyak has since been identified as a key figure in the investigation of Russian interference during the 2016 election.

When a wave of backlash from both sides of the aisle came over President Donald Trump during his meeting with Russian President Vladimir 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.”

Gorbachev was a vocal supporter of Trump's meeting with Putin last month, according to the Associated Press.