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Sen. Rand Paul goes to Moscow and invites Russians to Washington in unofficial bid to boost ties

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Sen. Rand Paul, one of President Trump's more eager defenders on Russia, jetted into Moscow on Monday in a bid to increase engagement with the country.

Paul (R-Ky.) met with several Russian senators including Sergey Kislyak, Russia's former envoy to Washington and a key player at the heart of the election meddling scandal that continues to rock relations between the United States and Russia.

In a meeting at Russia's upper house of parliament, Paul also invited Russian lawmakers to meet with U.S. Congress members, in Washington or elsewhere, Interfax news agency reported him as saying. "I think this is incredibly important," Paul said after the high-profile sit-down.

That meeting could take place as soon as this fall, said Konstantin Kosachev, head of the foreign relations committee in the upper house.

Monday's whirlwind visit to Moscow, however, was not part of official diplomacy. "Sen. Rand Paul is visiting Russia as part of a private group," said a spokesman from the U.S. Embassy in Moscow.

The senator, who was once a foe of the president, has emerged as a unique and somewhat renegade voice, coming as both Republicans and Democrats criticize the president for not taking a tougher stance against Russia. The relationship between the two countries has sunk to lows not seen since the Cold War days, as they spar over a range of issues from election interference to the crises in Syria and Ukraine.

Paul was accompanied by Republican Don Huffines from the Texas Senate, and the president and chief executive of the libertarian Cato Institute, Peter Goettler. The group also planned to visit St. Petersburg, Russia's second-largest city and President Vladimir Putin's hometown, Russian state-run media reported.

His visit comes just weeks after a delegation of Republican lawmakers visited Moscow for meetings with the Russian parliament, as well as Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, the

first time the two sides had direct contact in some years. That largely conciliatory meeting, held over the July 4 holiday, was met with bipartisan scorn at home.

Paul is a key backer of Trump's controversial interactions with Putin, heralding the two leaders' Helsinki summit last month as exactly the sort of action Washington should be taking to mend ties between the two.

The summit drew sharp criticism at home after Trump suggested he was inclined to believe Putin's version of events regarding the 2016 U.S. presidential election — that is, Russia's denial of meddling — over the conclusions of the U.S. intelligence community.

Paul has also long insisted that Russia did not interfere, a sentiment reiterated by Kosachev after his meeting with the senator. “And it will certainly not happen during the ongoing election campaign, either,” he told reporters, referring to the midterms, Interfax reported