



## **Sen. Rand Paul meets Russian senators in Moscow, invites them to the US**

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Republican Sen. Rand Paul of Kentucky met with Russian politicians during a trip to Moscow on Monday and invited members of the country's upper house of parliament to visit Washington, D.C., this year.

Paul has become one of the few defenders of President Donald Trump's controversial summit meeting with Russia's president Vladimir Putin in Finland last month. He said he traveled to Moscow with the goal of fostering dialogue between Russia and the United States.

Paul led a small delegation of Americans in meetings with officials from Russia's parliament and the Federation Council, the equivalent of the U.S. Senate, where he met with members of its international relations committee.

Speaking after the meeting with the senators that lasted about an hour, Paul said it had been "wonderful" and announced he had invited members of the Russian committee to meet with their counterparts in the U.S. from the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, on which he sits.

"My goal in coming to Russia is to say that we want to have open lines of communication," Paul said at a press conference after the meeting. "I'm pleased to announce that we will be furthering this conversation. We have invited members of the foreign relations committee of Russia to come to the United States and meet with us in Washington."

In addition to the invitation to the U.S., Paul said he'd like to organize a larger, future meeting.

"We've also agreed, if it can be arranged, to meet as well in a neutral country with all of our committees," Paul said.

The chairman of the Russian international relations committee, Konstantin Kosachev, thanked Paul and said he hoped the meetings could happen before the end of the year. Kosachev said a preliminary agenda had already been agreed upon, which would focus on arms control, improving economic ties and establishing better contacts on terrorism and cyber-security.

"We know you as an authoritative, independent American politician," Kosachev told Paul as they began their meeting, saying his visit was "especially valuable given the attitudes of other American politicians," who he said presented any contact with Russian officials as "toxic."

The delegation with Paul included Phillip Huffines, a Texas Republican who ran unsuccessfully in a primary race this spring, and Peter Goettler, president and CEO of the Cato Institute, the conservative Washington-based think tank.

Among the Russian senators sitting across from Paul was Moscow's former ambassador to the U.S., Sergey Kislyak, whose meetings with members of the Trump campaign provoked uproar in 2016.

Paul's was the second unusual diplomatic overture to Russia by Senate Republicans in a month, following the visit of a larger delegation led by Sen. Richard Shelby of Alabama that traveled to Moscow around July 4.

Shelby's delegation said it had come with the similar goal of reviving communications with Russia, but had also delivered a warning to the Russians not to interfere in the U.S. mid-terms this November.

Paul, known for some of his unorthodox positions in the Senate, has recently emerged as a champion of Trump's outreach to Russia. He was one of the very few on Capitol Hill to defend Trump after the Helsinki summit. Trump was heavily criticized by both Republicans and Democrats for being too deferential to Putin in his remarks and appearing to side with him over U.S. intelligence agencies' assessment of Russian interference in the 2016 election.

In the days after the summit, Paul called the criticism partisan and overblown, saying it was too dangerous not to seek dialogue when relations were so tense.

"The hatred of the president is so intense that partisans would rather risk war than give diplomacy a chance," Paul said in a long defense of Trump on the Senate floor, days after the summit. "It's crazy."

In Moscow, he made a similar case for engagement.

"Those that believe, in either country, that we should not have diplomacy are greatly mistaken," Paul said. "It does not mean we don't have differences. But discussions are incredibly important."

In Russia, Paul was received warmly by officials who have eagerly called for the U.S. to embrace the detente proposed by Trump in Helsinki, condemning the criticism of Trump had faced over Helsinki as politically motivated. Leonid Slutsky, a Russian MP, urged Paul to call for the release of Maria Butina, a 29 year-old Russian woman arrested in the U.S. on charges that she was acting as an undeclared agent of the Kremlin to infiltrate the NRA and Republican establishment circles.

"If you, Senator Paul, are able to raise your voice in defense of Maria Butina, to help at least change her pretrial detention...you would show yourself to be a man with a capital 'M'," Slutsky said, the news agency Interfax reported.

Paul's trip comes amid fresh anxiety in Congress over warnings from U.S. intelligence that Russia is seeking to influence the midterm elections using similar tactics, such as social media campaigns, as in 2016.

This week, both Democratic and Republican senators introduced a bill that would impose the harshest sanctions yet on Moscow as punishment for its U.S. election interference, as well as its activities in Ukraine and Syria. The bill would place restrictions on Russia's sovereign debt transactions, as well as oil and energy projects. Republican Senator Lindsey Graham told reporters earlier in the week that he wanted "a sanctions bill from hell."

Paul suggested he did not believe raising the issue of election interference would have been productive in his meetings with Russian officials.

"We had general discussions about a lot of issues and basically we've decided that, right now, what we're trying to do is have dialogue," he said. "The biggest issue right now is no dialogue. So we're not going to get into any of the differences other than we are trying to agree to have dialogue."

Kosachev was less reserved, telling reporters that Russia's position was simple -- there had been no Russian interference in the 2016 election "and consequently, there won't be any in this year either."