

Margelov Says Lack of Mail Harming U.S. Ties

By [Ivan Nechepurenko](#)

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ST. PETERSBURG — Russia might be closer to the U.S. than Moldova and Armenia geographically, but the two countries are too often a world apart when it comes to maintaining close contacts, a senior Russian official said Thursday.

Mikhail Margelov, chairman of the Federation Council's International Affairs Committee, complained at a St. Petersburg forum session that he has written numerous letters to U.S. lawmakers in recent months but received no reply.

"I am bored of resetting Russia-U.S. relations during every political cycle," Margelov told the Russia-U.S. session. "For instance, we used to have a good dialogue with the U.S. legislature. But now my colleagues in Congress do not respond to my letters."

Margelov's irritation could be seen as ironic by some, because officials from other countries have leveled the same complaint against Russians in the past. Notably, U.S. intelligence

officials have said that they never heard back from the Federal Security Service when they requested additional information about Boston bombing suspect Tamerlan Tsarnaev before the April attack.

But U.S. Under Secretary of Commerce Francisco Sanchez, who spoke just before Margelov, disagreed with his assessment.

"Our governments are very well engaged," he said. "Earlier this week our presidents demonstrated a high level of engagement."

Presidents Barack Obama and Vladimir Putin met Monday on the sidelines of a Group of Eight summit in Northern Ireland. The meeting, however, has been described by insiders as sour and cold, with presidents facing tough disagreements over the ongoing Syria crisis.

Alexander Shokhin, president of the Russian Union of Industrialist and Entrepreneurs, held up his iPad at Thursday's session to show participants a photo of the two presidents sitting beside each other at a G8 news conference.

"They do not look optimistic, do they?" he said. "Diverging internal and foreign policies are hindering efforts to improve economic ties."

The Russia and the U.S. have a history of communicating through letters, with Putin and Obama most recently exchanging notes through U.S. National Security Adviser Thomas Donilon and Security Council Secretary Nikolai Patrushev.

John Chambers, CEO of California-based Cisco Systems, pointed out that even though the U.S. is only 4 kilometers away from Russia, if you measure from Little Diomed Island, Alaska, to Big Diomed Island in the Chukotka region, a lot of unrealized opportunity remains in terms of boosting bilateral trade and investment.

While U.S. exports to Russia increased by 29 percent, reaching \$10.7 billion last year, Russian exports to the U.S. shrank from \$34.6 billion to \$29.4 billion, narrowing the U.S. trade deficit to \$18.7 billion, according to the U.S. Department of Commerce.

"The investors who come to Russia and invest here are happy because they understand the complexities of working here and also receive a lot of returns," said James Turley, CEO of Ernst & Young. "But many investors who have not yet come here are afraid and scared of the many issues they will have to wrestle with, such as infrastructure development, entrepreneurship and most of all administrative reform."

Several proposals have been floated to build a bridge connecting Russia with the U.S. via the Bering Strait. But those plans, which could stimulate trade, have been put on hold because of their excessive costs and engineering difficulties, leaving the two countries to try to boost communication in order to capitalize on the unfulfilled potential.

Not all Russians at the session agreed with Margelov's downbeat evaluation. At the end of the session, Deputy Economic Development Minister Alexei Likhachyov said, "I have a more optimistic outlook on Russia-U.S. relations than before this roundtable."

Contact the author at i.nechepurenko@imedia.ru

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