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INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

French Presidential Hopeful Le Pen Meets Putin on Russia Trip

French far-right leader is being welcomed at Kremlin weeks before French election

By Ola Cichowlas

March 24, 2017



Mikhail Klimentyev / TASS / Kremlin Press Service

France's far-right presidential hopeful Marine Le Pen met Vladimir Putin in Moscow on Friday, just one month before the first round of France's presidential elections.

Until Russian state television announced the meeting, it was unclear whether Le Pen would meet the Russian president during the right-wing candidate's visit to Moscow.

“Russia does not want to influence the French election but reserves the right to meet with any French politician it wants,” Putin told Le Pen, in reference to allegations that Russia is attempting to influence the election's outcome.

France's Front National leader first held talks with Russian Parliament Speaker Vyacheslav Volodin and the Russian parliament's International Relations Committee on Friday.

Both the Russian and French sides said the visit was the result of a “personal invitation” from Leonid Slutsky, the committee's chairman who is a member of Russia's nationalist Liberal Democratic Party.

“We do not believe in the EU's diplomacy of threats, sanctions, and blackmail against Russia," Le Pen told the Duma committee. "Sanctions are stupid.”

“The Russian role in saving the world from Islamic fundamentalism needs to be praised,” she added.

Slutsky and other Russian parliamentarians greeted her with open arms in the Duma.

Embed:

> Марин Ле Пен в Государственной Думе. pic.twitter.com/hPb46gSaqg
>
> — Леонид Слуцкий (@l_slutsky) March 24, 2017

Other Russian politicians including ultra-patriotic celebrity Maria Katasonova even brought flowers, hoping to catch a glimpse of the French politician.

Embed:

> Marine Le Pen is in Moscow meeting top officials and @KatasonovaMaria, head of her Russian fan club, has brought her some blue roses pic.twitter.com/BWtB64QOt0
>
> — max seddon (@maxseddon) March 24, 2017

But, neither Katasonova nor the journalists waiting for Le Pen at her planned conference after the Duma meeting were able to ask her a question because Le Pen failed to show up.

Embed:

> We turned up for the Le Pen press briefing at the Russian parliament. Sadly, she didn't. pic.twitter.com/KJypzCMPaH
>
> — Steve Rosenberg (@BBCSteveR) March 24, 2017

Journalists were told that Le Pen had to leave the building to attend an art exhibition and to attend another “important” meeting. This immediately raised questions whether she was going to finally meet her longtime hero Vladimir Putin in the Kremlin.

This is Le Pen's fourth visit to Russia since 2011 — including a visit to Russian-occupied Crimea. But, unlike today, Le Pen had only ever been greeted by low ranking Russian officials.

Unlike France's other presidential hopeful Francois Fillon, who has a personal relationship with Putin and was recently accused of accepting $50 thousand to fix a meeting between a Lebanese oligarch and the Russian leader, Le Pen has never invited into the Kremlin.

Le Pen's right-hand man and Vice President Florian Philippot said he “did not have information” on whether his boss would meet Putin prior to the meeting.

Embed:

> Le Pen en Russie: Philippot ne sait pas si elle rencontrera Poutine, mais "nous n'aurons pas de financement d'une banque russe" #8h30Aphatie pic.twitter.com/sf6k46ViLW
>
> — franceinfo (@franceinfo) March 24, 2017

Philippot said that the Front National will not be receiving another loan from a Russian bank, as it has previously done. “I can assure you for 100% that we will not be financed from Russia,” Philippot said.

Minutes after Le Pen's meeting with Putin, one of Russia's main news agencies Interfax published two conflicting reports of alleged loans to the candidate's campaign.

The first read: "BREAKING: The Kremlin announces a Russian bank will finance Marine Le Pen's electoral Le Pen.”

Seconds later, the agency had a change of heart, and published: “BREAKING: The Kremlin announces that it has no information on a Russian bank financing Marine Le Pen's campaign.“

Embed:

> Russian newswire:
> BREAKING: KREMLIN SAYS RUSSIAN BANKS WILL SPONSOR LE PEN'S CAMPAIGN
>
> 2 mins later:

> RETRACTION: KREMLIN SAYS THEY WON'T
>
> — Alexey Kovalev (@Alexey___Kovalev) March 24, 2017

Russia's pro-Kremlin tabloid LifeNews seemed equally unsure, deleting a tweet that said: "Russia will help Le Pen win the election."

Embed:

> MOSCOW WILL HELP LE PEN TO WIN THE ELECTION
>
> Tweeted by #Kremlin-loyal TV and deleted 5 minutes later.
>
> Let it sink in.#PutinAtWar pic.twitter.com/kp66QF8XJp
>
> — Julian Röpcke (@JulianRoepcke) March 24, 2017

Then, Putin's spokesman Dmitry Peskov stepped in. "I do not thing that this [Russian financing of the Front National] is possible," he said

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