



Photos: Getty Images

In Moscow, President Obama met with Boris Nemtsov(right) and other opposition leaders.

## The Values Gap

How Obama looked past the Kremlin.

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Barack Obama's schedule during his visit to Moscow was symbolic: after he dedicated the first day to official talks with President Dmitry Medvedev, he spent much of the second day in meetings with representatives of civil-society organizations, the business community, and leaders of the political opposition. With this gesture, the U.S. president sent a clear message that he does not consider Russia to be limited to the ruling circle around Medvedev and Prime Minister Vladimir Putin, and that he intends to "reset" relations not just with the Kremlin, but also with Russian society. This dual-track approach involves discussing urgent practical matters (such as securing a transit route to Afghanistan or agreeing on a joint position on North Korea) with the government of the day, while simultaneously engaging in a broader dialogue on values with the Russian people.

At the meeting with opposition leaders, including myself, Obama reiterated his view that in the 21st century only democracies can be truly successful at home and on the world stage. This question of values, indeed, is among the most difficult obstacles to his declared policy of "resetting" relations with Moscow. For while the United States promotes the ideas of freedom and competition, the current Russian leaders believe in censorship and monopoly in every sphere—politics, ideology, and economy. Politically, the year that has passed since Medvedev formally assumed the presidency has changed nothing: television coverage remains strictly controlled, elections are heavily manipulated, independent political activity is all but forbidden, judges are wholly subservient to the executive. It is clear that, contrary to our Constitution, which assigns the principal power prerogatives to the president, Putin remains the real ruler of Russia.

Economically, monopolization and bureaucratization have led to rampant corruption (according to Transparency International, Russia under Putin has descended to a shameful 147th place in its world corruption index) and has severely crippled our economy. Despite relatively high oil prices, the principal source of Russia's wealth, GDP contracted by 10 percent in April, while industrial production fell by 17 percent in May. Unemployment has already surpassed 10 percent. These are official government figures.

The very fact of Obama's meeting with the leaders of Russia's opposition infuriated the authorities. The signal he sent to Medvedev and Putin by meeting with us is clear: his administration will engage not only with those who are in the Kremlin today, but also with those who may be in the Kremlin tomorrow. In other words, the current rulers do not, in the view of the U.S., possess a monopoly on Russia. And increasingly, the voices of democratically minded Russians are being heard. In April, I ran for mayor of Sochi, host city of the 2014 Winter Olympics. Despite heavy manipulation by the regime during the campaign and of the vote count, I came in second place. The forthcoming legislative elections in Moscow this October will be another test of what the democratic opposition can achieve even in today's repressive environment.

Obama's approach differs greatly from that of his predecessor. When George W. Bush met with representatives of the Russian opposition a few years ago, it was to give us a public lecture on democracy and then walk off the stage. This time, Obama invited us so that he could hear our views on the internal situation in Russia and U.S.-Russia relations. I suggested to him that the necessary precondition for any reset in relations is mutual trust, and no trust is possible while such a pronounced values gap exists between the U.S. and Russian leaders. Indeed, the virulent anti-American propaganda, a constant feature on Russian television for the past several years, ceased for only two days during Obama's stay, and resumed immediately after he left Moscow.