

Interview with United Civil Front Chairman Garry Kasparov after meeting with President Barack Obama

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Q: You said at the press conference after the meeting with President Obama that his speech today was “less than what we wanted but more than what we expected.” What did you mean?

Garry Kasparov: Ideally he would have named names. He made some strong statements about democracy being the solution and the failure of totalitarianism, far stronger than anything we heard from the last two administrations. But he avoided directly criticizing Putin and Medvedev, the core of our dictatorial system. Nor did Obama mention Mikhail Khodorkovsky, whose jailing by Putin and continued imprisonment by Medvedev symbolizes everything Obama was criticizing about authoritarian states.

But he was strong and gave a consistent message. He repeatedly emphasized that the important relationship between America and Russia is about the people, not their regimes. That got a very positive reception here. Obama opened direct lines of communication instead of dealing only with official Kremlin channels.

Q: Aside from Obama’s tone, what about specific positions or policy proposals?

GK: It looks like Putin and his gang have finally met someone who won’t play their little game of give and take. Obama’s tough and he didn’t back away from the most difficult issues. Sovereignty of Russia’s neighbors, mentioning Georgia and Ukraine in particular. He refused to link missile defense to Iran or anything else.

In fact, I don’t see anything that Obama gave up, which likely came as a surprise to Putin, who expected the new American president to be eager to make deals to have a success to report back home. Obama likely surprised some Republicans in the US as well. Before he started his trip, several conservative GOP members wrote an open letter to Obama with recommendations. Not linking missile defense to nuclear arms reduction, defending the rights of Ukraine and Georgia, and meeting with the opposition. From what I can tell, Obama followed each one.

Obama seems like a man who doesn’t try to solve problems that don’t have solutions. He saves his energy and political capital on realistic goals. If there’s a big obstacle he simply takes it off the table and deals with what can be done. Perhaps more importantly he is honest about saying that is what he’s doing. For example, instead of making a lot of meaningless statements about Iran, where Putin’s interests are in direct opposition,

Obama moves on to areas where progress can be made. I have to admit I found this practical approach attractive in the end.

Q: What was Obama's message to the opposition members at your meeting this afternoon?

GK: I think he left a positive impression and I felt he was being open and direct with us. He said he "didn't live in the abstract, he lived in history," and that he had to protect the interests of the people who elected him. When he said he wouldn't make any deals that compromised American principles he sounded more like Reagan than what we have heard from US administrations over the past twenty years. And he kept his word to invite opposition figures from across the ideological spectrum instead of just a few liberals whose are considered pro-American.

In my statement I quoted the American civil rights leader John Lewis about not being patient when waiting for freedom. Obama told a story about his time in the state senate of Illinois, how the Republicans were in charge for six years. He felt irrelevant in the opposition, like he couldn't change anything meaningful. Things change, he said. Then [Communist Party leader Gennady] Zyuganov said that was exactly the way things are now in the Russian Duma! Zyuganov also told Obama he'd done a good job nationalizing the banks and auto companies. It was all he could do not to say, "You're on the right track, comrade Obama!"

Q: In your statement you mentioned Khodorkovsky and a Senate resolution Obama signed about him in 2005.

GK: Yes, yes, and I was not the only one. Yelena Lukyanova and Boris Nemtsov also brought up Resolution 322 in our meeting. And it was not only Obama, it was also Biden and McCain – something of a coincidence, no? In the resolution they express concern that the case is politically motivated and that it shows the Russian court system is corrupt. And now here we are four years later with Khodorkovsky still in jail and being tried again for even more absurd charges. Obviously Obama's concerns from 2005 have been more than validated.

So why isn't the name of this prominent political prisoner a topic? I think the term "political prisoner" is too powerful and brings up heavy memories from the Cold War and the USSR. But it is also accurate, so the truth must be spoken. Several of our activists were arrested for protesting in front of the hotel where our meeting took place today, simply for standing there with a sign.

Q: Several members at the meeting broached the topic of the US improving relations with Cuba. What was Obama's reaction?

GK: That came from Ilya Ponomarev and Zyuganov. Obama said his administration was open to contacts with the Cuban government and the opposition. He pointed out, however, that unlike in Russia, it was unlikely the Cuban opposition to Castro in the United States would be eager for the US to have closer relations with Cuba. He also frankly admitted there are political restraints on establishing such contacts.

Q: Did you have any parting advice for President Obama? Or he for you?

GK: Well, we both agree it is not for the United States to interfere in Russia. He said "we are watching but not interfering." I suggested that he have his staff keep an eye on the Russian translations of his remarks, as the Kremlin likes to make little "corrections" to create the image they wish to present. I also presented Obama with a list of victims of state oppression. It helps that Obama's top advisor on Russia, Mike McFaul, is extremely capable and knowledgeable, and that Obama relies on him.

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