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Obama Adviser Nudges Russia on Democracy

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Russia should uphold democratic rights and increase political competition if the Kremlin's plans to modernize its economy are to become reality, U.S. President Barack Obama's top adviser on Russia said Thursday.

Michael McFaul's critical comments at a Kremlin-backed conference in Yaroslavl appeared to fulfill a promise that he and Undersecretary of State William Burns made to Russian opposition activists on Wednesday to speak openly about Russia's human rights record.

"Democracies in the developed world grow at a steady rate and do not have the economic disruptions that autocracies do," McFaul told the conference about modernization.

"Just as in the market, competition makes for better products and better companies, and just as in sports, competition makes for better sports teams, competition in a political system makes for better government," McFaul said.

His comments, though couched in academic terms, sent a clear signal to Kremlin officials,

many of whom say the chaos after the fall of the Soviet Union has discredited democracy and that Russia needs a tightly controlled system to preserve stability.

“I wanted to tackle some of the mythologies about the instrumental role that autocracy plays in economic modernization,” McFaul said at the conference, which President Dmitry Medvedev is expected to address.

McFaul and Burns met with about 10 opposition activists at the U.S. ambassador’s Moscow residence on Wednesday and pledged to offer “public criticism” in an effort to improve the situation with human rights in Russia, activists said.

In Yaroslavl, McFaul also said the opposition should be allowed freedom of assembly, a nod to authorities’ steadfast refusal to authorize activists to hold rallies over their constitutional right to free assembly. Prime Minister Vladimir Putin said last week that people who protest without permission deserved to be beaten.

In answer to the U.S. criticism, Medvedev’s first deputy chief of staff Vladislav Surkov told reporters that Russian had its own type of democracy. “Russia has its own democracy. … There are good cars and there are cars that break down, but they are still all cars,” he said. “I don’t know if I am a democrat, but I am a free person.”

News reports said McFaul would hold a meeting on Thursday of the Civil Society Working Group, which he co-heads with Surkov. But a Kremlin spokeswoman said the group would not meet Thursday, although Surkov and McFaul might hold private one-on-one talks.

Maria Kannabikh, a member of the group and the Public Chamber, said a meeting would be held soon.

(MT, Reuters)

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