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# Biden 'Opposes' 3rd Putin Term

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In an indication that the U.S. White House opposes a third presidential term for Prime Minister Vladimir Putin, U.S. Vice President Joe Biden told Russian opposition leaders Thursday that it would be better for Russia if Putin did not run for re-election next year, two participants said.

At a separate meeting with human rights activists, Biden linked Russia's human rights record to its bid to join the World Trade Organization, one activist said.

Biden and other U.S. officials offered no public comment about what the vice president had discussed with the opposition and rights leaders at the U.S. ambassador's Spaso House residence.

But Russian participants said they had been offered assurances that their plight would not be forgotten amid Washington's efforts to continue to improve relations with Moscow.

"At the end of the meeting, Biden said that in Putin's place he would not stand for president

in 2012 because this would be bad for the country and for himself," opposition leader Boris Nemtsov wrote on his blog.

Leonid Gozman, co-leader of the pro-business, Kremlin-linked Right Cause party, confirmed Biden's statement in a telephone interview with The Moscow Times.

The question of who will take over as president is a sensitive one, with Putin and President Dmitry Medvedev saying they will make a decision at a later date. U.S. officials have not weighed in on the issue publicly, but they did deny a report in Nezavisimaya Gazeta last week that Biden's main goal for visiting Moscow was to press Medvedev into seeking re-election. The report said Putin would be offered the presidency of the International Olympic Committee as consolation.

Gozman said Biden also told the opposition leaders that he had "looked into Putin's eyes and saw no soul" — and personally told Putin about his observation. The quote is an apparent play on former President George W. Bush's famous summary of his first meeting with Putin in 2001, when he said: "I looked the man in the eye. I was able to get a sense of his soul."

Biden met with Putin right before the gathering with the opposition, which also included Vladimir Ryzhkov, Garry Kasparov and Grigory Yavlinsky, among others. He visited Medvedev at the Gorki presidential residence outside Moscow on Wednesday.

"[He] was very reactive and asked tons of questions," Nemtsov wrote. "He wanted to know in detail about falsification methods and pressure on the opposition."

Kasparov gave Biden a list of the country's political prisoners, Nemtsov said.

Earlier Thursday, Biden received a large group of civil society representatives at Spaso House.

"He said that human rights and democracy are highly important and that [the U.S. administration] would regularly bring it up," veteran human rights campaigner Lyudmila Alexeyeva said after the meeting, Interfax reported.

Alexeyeva, who heads the Moscow Helsinki Group, added that she discussed free and fair elections and the registration of opposition parties.

Alexeyeva sounded more upbeat than a day earlier, when she said Biden would probably not criticize Russia on human rights because of its oil wealth.

"Our oil is the main stumbling block to our human rights record. The West fears criticizing us harshly because it depends on oil and gas," she told Interfax on Wednesday.

Memorial head Oleg Orlov said Biden had linked human rights and fair elections to ongoing WTO negotiations. "Biden told some of my colleagues that Russia's WTO accession depends to some degree on an improvement in the field of human rights," Orlov said, according to Interfax.

He added that Congress would link any repeal of the Jackson-Vanik amendment to both issues. The repeal of the Cold War-era sanctions, which restrict trade with Russia, is a thorn in Moscow's side and a barrier in WTO talks.

Orlov also said he had raised concerns that anti-terrorism measures in both Russia and the United States had led to a deterioration of human rights.

"Here state terror is used to fight terrorism, and as it is well-known, in America there are secret prisons, torture and abductions," he said. As an example, he named the U.S. prison in Guantanamo Bay. "Right now the administration cannot fulfill its promise to close the illegal prison in Guantanamo," he said.

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