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A Bone to Pick With Biden

By Victor Davidoff

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In Russia, every high-level U.S.-Russian summit is controversial. Even though Vice President Joe Biden had a modest agenda for last week's visit to Moscow, his trip was no exception. As usual, in the Russian blogosphere the range of opinion on his visit was enormous: from criticism of Biden for his soft stance on human rights violations in Russia to patriotic indignation that representatives of a great nation were speaking with some "crude hick" from America. As it turned out, the "crude hick" opinion was not just held by the kind of hoodlums who give Nazi greetings at rallies on Manezh Square.

Vitaly Tretyakov, a well-known journalist and dean of the Moscow State University School of Television, was truly offended that Biden openly criticized the Russian political system, rigged elections and the lack of an independent judiciary. "I don't understand why in Russia Biden was allowed to publicly discuss ... matters that are strictly the internal affair of Russia, like presidential elections," he wrote on his blog.

Unfortunately, Tretyakov didn't go into detail about who might enforce limitations on the American visitor and how that might be done. When the U.S. vice president comes to Moscow,

should the Kremlin give him a list of topics that he is not "allowed to discuss publicly?" Perhaps more radical measures should have been taken. After Biden spoke, maybe he should have been hauled away in handcuffs to the Khamovnichesky District Court to face the same judge who recently convicted Mikhail Khodorkovsky.

Biden's meeting with oppositional politicians, including Garry Kasparov, Boris Nemtsov and Vladimir Ryzhkov, was a particularly hotly debated topic. As Nemstov described on his blog, the Russian side told Biden about human rights violations, asked for assistance with the international monitoring of the upcoming presidential election, and gave him a list of political prisoners. Undoubtedly to the ire of many bureaucrats, the opposition leaders urged the Americans to be bolder in sanctions against corrupt Russian officials who violate the Constitution and don't uphold the country's international obligations.

Although representatives of the Communist Party were at the meeting with Biden, they didn't change their attitude toward the United States and American political values one bit. The die-hard Communist Sazhi Umalatova, who began her battle against American imperialism, democracy and "selling out the country to the West" as soon as the Cold War ended, called for a trade war with the United States in order to force Congress to repeal the Jackson-Vanik amendment. She wrote: "As a major player and world economic power, Russia should write its own 'amendment' that would put the two-faced U.S. in its place and equal out the balance of power." She suggested an embargo on American chicken until the amendment is repealed.

The nationalist camp reacted with their usual coarse language. They advised Biden "to take the greedy little squirrels of the Washington-funded 'liberal opposition' and go to hell."

But there were people who were displeased with the meeting even within the more mainstream opposition. One of the leaders, Eduard Limonov, criticized his colleagues. "They shouldn't meet with the American vice president. Politicians who get close to the American administration (Ryzhkov said he was a meter away from him) traditionally have problems with our people. We're an independent people, after all. Appealing to Uncle Sam Biden is shameful and kind of childish."

Nemtsov actually felt compelled to justify himself in a post dedicated to the topic: "There's no reason to demonstrate your weakness and psychological problems by being afraid to meet with politicians from America and Europe," he wrote. "Instead, you have to move toward our common goal — a free Russia." Maybe Nemstov should have explained to the indignant Russian patriots that in the 21st century there are some borders more important than national boundaries — like the border between the world that lives in freedom and the world of authoritarian dictatorships. And free countries are the natural allies of everyone who is searching for a path from authoritarianism to democracy.

And he might have quoted the words of one of the most Russian of Russian writers — Leo Tolstoy — who called this kind of patriotism "an emotion that is crude, harmful, shameful and wicked, and most importantly — immoral."

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