

Talk With Putin Will Test Bush's Inaugural Pledges

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The last time they sat down, President Bush politely asked President Vladimir Putin about Russia's retreat from democracy. Putin, according to U.S. officials, responded with a testy tirade on Russian history, filibustering for so long that Bush, left with an extended list of other issues to cover in a short private lunch, let the matter go without challenging the former KGB colonel.

Three months later, Bush will meet Putin again this week, and this time faces pressure not to let it go. The Bush-Putin summit in Slovakia, according to White House aides and outside critics, will be the first test of the grand promise laid out in the president's inauguration address last month to promote democracy abroad and confront "every ruler and every nation" about internal repression with the goal of "ending tyranny in our world."

Aides have carved out at least 2 1/2 hours in Bratislava on Thursday for the two to talk privately at length so the president would have enough time to get into a genuine exchange with his Russian counterpart about the rollback of democratic institutions and the elimination of political opposition. Some administration officials have been privately disappointed that the president has not been more forceful in the past, and worry that if he fails to take a tougher stance now, it will undermine the new Bush doctrine of putting freedom at the center of U.S. foreign relations.

"You couldn't have a bigger test -- it's incredibly important," said Jennifer Windsor, executive director of Freedom House, a U.S.-funded group that promotes liberty around the world and recently downgraded Russia to "not free" in its regular survey for the first time since 1989. "People will be judging what he says publicly and saying, 'Oh, we addressed this privately'; that's not going to be enough."

Administration officials said they grasp the stakes in Bratislava. "Everybody realizes this is the first meeting after the president's inaugural address, that this will be a test, his first encounter with a leader that people have on their list" of world autocrats, said one senior official who insisted on anonymity because he is not an official administration spokesman. "Everyone is aware of that. They realize there will be extra attention because of the inaugural speech."

Yet Bush, who famously declared that he had seen Putin's soul during their first meeting nearly four years ago, still harbors a personal friendship for the Russian, aides said, and he remains reluctant to jeopardize that with a scolding that might prove counterproductive. The administration has just completed a review of its Russia policy led by national security aide Thomas E. Graham Jr. that called for no radical changes in Bush's first-term practice of engaging Putin and promoting cooperation without conditioning relations primarily on Russia's democratic reversals, officials said.

Excessive focus on Russia's internal situation, they added, could get in the way of other important priorities. The administration has been pleased with recent Russian cooperation in pressuring Iran to abandon any nuclear weapons program.

But Moscow plans to sign an agreement with Tehran this week on spent nuclear fuel that will accelerate construction of a civilian nuclear reactor in southern Iran near the city of Bushehr despite U.S. concerns, and Putin on Friday pronounced himself convinced that Iran does not want to build nuclear arms and announced that he will visit there soon. U.S. officials are also peeved at fresh Russian arms sales to Syria.

Russia poses a particular challenge to Bush as a case study in authoritarian retrenchment. In recent years, the Kremlin has seized control of independent television, imprisoned or forced critics into exile, effectively renationalized the country's largest oil company, evicted pro-Western democrats from parliament and canceled the election of governors. Russia's attempts to influence neighboring countries, especially during the recent Ukrainian election, have also strained ties to Bush.

"This is the only country that's had a democratic reversal on his watch," said Michael McFaul, a Russia scholar at Stanford University. "This is the one where the rubber hits the road."

Bush signaled no significant change in his approach to Russia in interviews with European journalists on Friday. For the Russians, he chose to talk with Itar-Tass, the state news agency, rather than one of the remaining independent news organs fighting government attempts to stifle free speech. Accordingly, Bush was not even asked about Putin's rollback of democracy, and the only discussion of freedom came up in relation to the Middle East.

It fell to a Slovak journalist to ask Bush about Russia's wilting democracy in a separate interview that likely will not be shown on Moscow's state-controlled television. Bush gave the same answer he has in the past, stressing his friendship with Putin, playing down the situation in Russia and blandly characterizing it as a question of "checks and balances" rather than using the term "democracy."

"I have a good relationship with President Putin," Bush said. While Putin has "done some things that [have] concerned people," Bush said their relationship means "I can explain to him as best I can, in a friendly way of course, that Western values are, you know, are based upon transparency and rule of law, the right for the people to express themselves, checks and balances in the government."

In recent days, Bush has come under increasing pressure both from the political right and left to sharpen his approach to Putin. Amnesty International, the liberal human rights group, sent the president a letter Thursday urging him to raise cases of torture, killings and other abuses in Russia. The Weekly Standard, a leading neoconservative magazine, posted an article by McFaul and George Washington University professor James M.

Goldgeier warning that if Bush does not publicly confront Putin, "then the critics were right and authoritarian leaders everywhere can sleep easy."

The chorus has been growing on Capitol Hill, as well. Sens. John McCain (R-Ariz.) and Joseph I. Lieberman (D-Conn.) reintroduced a measure Friday calling for Russia to be suspended from the Group of Eight industrialized nations. McCain, who two years ago warned of a "creeping coup" in Russia, said that "the coup is no longer creeping -- it's galloping."

Sen. Joseph R. Biden Jr. (Del.), the ranking Democrat on the Foreign Relations Committee, challenged incoming Deputy Secretary of State Robert B. Zoellick during a confirmation hearing Tuesday. "When are we going to get tough with Russia?" Biden asked. "The bottom line is you're being silent on Russia. They're bad guys, what they're doing right now."

Sen. Richard G. Lugar (R-Ind.), the committee chairman, convened a separate hearing Thursday on Russian democracy featuring representatives of Yukos Oil Co., which was broken apart in a politically charged strike against Putin rival Mikhail Khodorkovsky. Lugar complained that Bush is cutting 13 percent from the Freedom Support Act, which assists democracy programs in the former Soviet Union. "President Bush must make democracy, human rights and the rule of law priorities of the discussion" in Bratislava, Lugar said.

Bush advisers said they want to balance the democracy issue against what they consider an otherwise constructive relationship. "It's a very tough one," said a senior official, who asked to remain unidentified, "because of the whole 'freedom' thing and how you balance it. It's a very legitimate tension, and we knew we were buying it when we started talking about democracy."

Moreover, some administration officials said they can hardly afford to focus much on Russia's domestic climate when they have their hands full in the Middle East. "There's still a lot of thrashing about," said Robert Nurick, a scholar at the Monterey Institute of International Studies. "There are parts of the administration that want to proceed more or less as before. They're under a lot of pressure. They're not happy, but they don't see any good alternative."

Others said pushing the sometimes-prickly Putin would backfire. "Yeah, it's a test, but I think the Bush foreign policy team is too smart to push too hard on it, because it could blow up in their face," said Celeste A. Wallander, a specialist at the Center for Strategic and International Studies. "It's just not going to work because the Russian soil isn't fertile -- I don't mean for democracy but for listening to the United States on such things."

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President Bush will meet with Russian President Vladimir Putin. (Michel Porro -- Getty Images)