

Putin, Obama Meet Ahead of G20

By [Nikolaus von Twickel](#)

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Obama extending his arm for a handshake with Putin at their meeting in Mexico. Body language hinted at chilly relations between the presidents. **Carolyn Kaster**

Presidents Vladimir Putin and Barack Obama finally had their first meeting since Putin's third term began last month, but after two hours of talks both leaders had a hard time convincing the world that the "reset" in relations is still in full swing.

Obama called the talks "candid, thoughtful and thorough," while Putin characterized them as "meaningful and subject-oriented," when they addressed reporters after the meeting late Monday in Los Cabos, the Mexican resort where they were due to attend a summit of the Group of 20 major economies.

The leaders issued a 1,580-word joint [statement](#) in which they vowed to continue their "commitment to strengthening close and cooperative relations."

In their remarks to the press they invited each other to visit their respective countries, with Obama [saying](#) he looked forward "to visiting Russia again, and I look forward to hosting you

in the United States.”

The talks, in a hotel called Esperanza (Spanish for “hope”), marked only the second time that both had met directly after Obama’s visit to Moscow in 2009.

Last month, Putin canceled trips to the Group of Eight and NATO summits in the United States in what many saw as a snub to the West.

Subsequent media reports said Obama might not attend the Asia-Pacific Economic summit in September in Vladivostok because of his re-election bid, although the APEC summit is scheduled for Sept. 8 and 9, two days after the Democratic National Convention winds up.

Putin subsequently made his first foreign visit as president to controversial Belarussian leader Alexander Lukashenko, who is facing sanctions by the West for his ongoing crackdown on the opposition.

The statements were vague on many of the thorny issues that have strained ties between Moscow and Washington for almost a year, including missile defense, Syria and human rights.

Critics pointed out that no mention was made of the so-called Sergei Magnitsky bill, proposed by U.S. lawmakers to punish Russian officials for human rights abuses.

On Tuesday, the Senate foreign relations committee was supposed to vote on the [bill](#), named after the former Yukos lawyer who died in prison in 2009. The committee postponed the vote, however, to an undetermined date.

“Foreign laws that punish Putin’s crooks and thugs are not anti-Russian. They are pro-Russian people and anti-Putin,” veteran opposition activist Garry Kasparov [wrote](#) on Twitter.

The Obama administration opposes the legislation, arguing that it has already put sanctions against some Russian officials in place. Monday’s joint declaration says the administration is working closely with Congress to terminate the Jackson-Vanik Amendment, a set of Soviet-era trade sanctions.

U.S. lawmakers have announced that they want to replace Jackson-Vanik with the Magnitsky act, a plan that Putin’s foreign policy aide, Yury Ushakov, called “unacceptable.”

But observers said the presidents’ body language made it clear that their meeting was a professional necessity rather than a welcome pleasure.

[Footage](#) provided by The Associated Press showed a tired looking Putin telling reporters that both leaders found “many commonalities” on international issues, “including the Syrian affair.” A stern-looking Obama then says both presidents agree that the violence in Syria needs to stop and “that a political process has to be created to prevent civil war, and the kind of horrific events that we’ve seen over the last several weeks.”

At the end of the briefing, both presidents demonstratively shake hands without getting up, and Obama pats Putin on his left upper arm, to which Putin briefly raises his left hand a few centimeters from his chair’s armrest.

U.S. Ambassador Michael McFaul, who had traveled to Mexico for the summit, later tried to assuage negative impressions from the body language.

“Press read too much into ‘body language’ of Obama and Putin in press spray,” McFaul wrote on Twitter. “They did same thing after Obama-Medvedev meeting in Deauville, France.”

Media reports after that meeting said the body language of Obama and then-President Dmitry Medvedev showed mistrust. The Associated Press reported that Obama’s expression was stern and that Medvedev leaned away from Obama when he talked.

Analysts also suggested that Obama’s relative lack of cordiality confirmed his remarks during the “hot mic” incident, when the U.S. president was overheard telling his Russian counterpart that he would have “more flexibility” to deal with contentious issues after the Nov. 6 U.S. presidential election.

Nikolai Zlobin of the World Security Institute, a Washington-based think tank, argued that while he had not expected Putin to be very emotional, Obama’s reserved performance at Los Cabos was clearly connected to the U.S. election campaign.

“Any overt advances [toward Putin] would be immediately exploited by the Republicans,” he said.

Republican front-runner Mitt Romney has criticized Obama as being soft on Russia and has famously dubbed the country the United States’ “No. 1 geopolitical foe.”

Polls suggest an open race between Obama and Romney, and experts have said that some among Moscow’s current political elite would actually prefer Romney.

“Obama is seen as someone who does not fear Moscow,” Zlobin explained. He added that a Republican U.S. president was attractive to those who sought to re-establish Soviet power. “They like being referred to as a global power,” he said.

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