



Restart, time out or draw? Obama's visit to Moscow and its implications for the post-Soviet room

Juraj Marušiak | 14th July, 2009

The visit of US President Barack Obama to Moscow evoked mild optimism. If we take into account that during the era of President George Bush Jr. the relations between Russia and the US were at freezing point, then any shift in the tone of US policy must have been more than welcomed since the US approached Russia as well as own allies as the “younger brother”.

An important change, which needn't be just symbolic, is the very change of atmosphere. In contrast to President Bush, whom the Americans elected despite the outrage of a large part of the world's public, or rather, out of spite, the affection of foreign countries and the US for Obama's election were the same.

Changes of attitude to the US after the election of Barack Obama manifested themselves also in Russia. According to the respected sociological research organisation Yuri Levada Analytical Center the inhabitants of Russia considered the era of Bill Clinton to be the most positive period of Russian-American relations (28%), although right in that period we may speak of the end of Atlanticism within Russian foreign policy in connection with the beginning of NATO enlargement process and the bombing of Yugoslavia during the Kosovo crisis in 1998. George Bush Jr.'s era was evaluated the worst (8%). As many as 39 per cent of respondents regarded the election of the Democrats as more suitable for the commencement of mutual dialogue between Russia and the US while the Republicans were preferred only by 11 per cent of respondents in October 2008. Although almost one third had objections against both presidential candidates and the same amount (29%) failed to answer the question which of the candidates they would like to welcome in the White House, Barack Obama with 27 per cent was clearly ahead of John McCain (15%) (1).

The improvement of US image in Russia following the election of Obama lingered on also after his power assumption in the first half of 2009. In general, sceptical assessment of Russian-American relations prevailed. This was stepped up after the Russian-Georgian war in August 2008. In January 2009, 34 per cent of respondents thought that bilateral Russian-American relations improved and this number remained high, although in July this opinion was shared solely by 29 per cent of respondents. On the other hand as many as 42 per cent of



respondents expected the improvement of Russian-American relations after the meeting of the presidents. When deciding on the holding of a friendly dialogue with Obama, Russia's top representatives had to respect also the will of a considerable part of Russian population, which was not involved in the escalation of tension linked with the US. Nevertheless, Moscow's agreement with Obama's proposal to reduce the number of nuclear warheads without the US openly refraining from the plan to construct anti-missile shield bases attests to the fact that Russian elites are interested in nuclear armament reduction and are not prepared for a new round of the arms race in spite of the massive growth of Russian Federation's economic potential after 1999. This is all the more evident if we consider that according to a poll carried out by the Yuri Levanda Analytical Center Obama's proposal was rejected by as many as 56 per cent of respondents (2).

The results of the visit indicate that not only Russian Federation's population but also its elites are interested in developing good relations with the US. Nowadays, the Russian Federation is indisputably stronger than in the past and even in comparison with August 2008 it has made several crucial steps towards the improvement of its international position. This was confirmed in the course of BRIC meetings (Brazil, Russia, India, China) and Shanghai Cooperation Organisation in Yekaterinburg on 17th June, 2009. Although Russia gained allies, which can question the leading position of the West and the US in global economic, financial and security arrangement, it is not in quest for the complete elimination of the US for now.

Another crucial moment are Obama's speeches, from which clearly emerges that in terms of future policy on the Russian Federation he decided to bet on the current president Dmitry Medvedev. Obama reproached Prime Minister Vladimir Putin for residues of the Cold War era way of thinking prior to his arrival in Moscow. Symbolic gesture implying that the US counts on the new generation of Russian elites was Obama's visit to Russian New Economic School. The US leader preferred it to Lomonosov Moscow State University dominated politically by the party United Russia. It is Russian New Economy School which is considered relatively liberal and independent from current state authority. Arkady Dvorkovich, liberal economic advisor to the Russian President, graduated from it too (3). Obama's gestures show apparently that in spite of polite comments addressed to Putin, the US will try to deepen the dissensions within Russian top power elites, which existence they suppose. It is at the same time not possible to ignore the fact that yet in the period 2002 – 2003, when Medvedev's succession wasn't even speculated about, the then President Vladimir Putin along with United Russia that he led managed to address successfully two

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seemingly conflicting segments of voters, namely classes longing nostalgically for the restoration of Russia's empire status and the new, liberally oriented middle class. The maintaining of balance between the groups mentioned represents presently, at least in the eyes of Kremlin elites, for Russia the guarantee of its innerpolitical stability. Therefore Obama's statements addressed to Putin didn't spark such sharp reactions in the Russian establishment which would interfere with the smooth course of his Moscow visit.

During his visit to Moscow Obama presented himself as a politician capable of thinking strategically. He didn't let himself influence by the "hawks", for instance, from the field of Heritage Foundation, but he decided to use his first visit for creating good atmosphere, which will enable him the discussion about complicated issues in the future. He appealed to Moscow to respect the sovereignty of Ukraine and Georgia, but he didn't talk of NATO enlargement problems. He defended the need of anti-missile shield construction, but not to such an extent that could endanger the key interest of the US, which is the search for new, or rather, new-old allies and partners for the war in Afghanistan, particularly in situation when the US is struck by the economic crisis and even traditional European allies don't rush into further fight against Taliban. The result was the preservation of US positions in the Central Asia as Kyrgyzstan prolonged the validity of its consent allowing the Americans to use the Manas military base in its territory, although yet at the beginning of 2009 the withdrawal of US forces had seemed a finished matter.

Nonetheless, there were regions where Obama's visit wasn't welcomed just positively. For example, in Ukraine there are fears that the coming together of the US and Russia will take its toll on it, President Viktor Youshenko said so (4). Dissatisfaction in Ukraine is stirred up by the fact that Obama hasn't met any Ukrainian representative since he took up his office and generally, Ukraine starts to play second fiddle in US policy (5). Belarus accepts Obama's policy with mixed feelings as well. On the one hand the US enfeebled sanctions on the Belorussian concern Belneftechim and after the release of US lawyer Emanuel Zeltser the International Monetary Fund passed the provision of a loan to Belarus. On the other hand Obama doesn't comment the situation in Belarus. The fact remains, however, that the US as well as the EU have said yes to the coming together with official Minsk, but Obama leaves primary initiative in terms of the dialogue with Lukashenko on the Europeans, who are welcomed more warmly in Minsk. Anyway, it is Obama's way of holding critical dialogue which is more transparent and corresponds more to the formula "something for something". The US have made concessions, but not to such an extent that they could be interpreted as

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surrender to Lukashenko since financial sanctions imposed on the current as well as former representatives of Belorussian regime suspected of human rights violation remained in force (6).

The Moscow summit avoided controversial questions. However, it doesn't mean that Obama would accept Russian "five nos", i.e. questions which Moscow rejects, on principle, like the expert of US foundation Heritage Ariel Cohen defined them. The mentioned "Russian five nos" pertain to Georgian and Ukrainian NATO accession, US anti-missile shield in the Central Europe, strong pressure on Iran due to its nuclear program, the rejection of current security architecture in Europe and the status of dollar as a reserve currency (7). Even if Obama is willing to make concession as regards some question, e.g. the anti-missile shield, he will hardly bow as for those concerning, for instance, the question of Iran, Georgian integrity or current security architecture in Europe.

The fact remains that Obama represents a challenge for Russia. In the case of Bush, Russia needn't have done literally anything for the growth of its prestige. Obama's non-confrontational policy will force Moscow to confess openly its intentions. Already now we may see, for example, that Moscow is doesn't dread NATO itself, but the loss of its influence on Ukraine and Georgia after the next enlargement. It can happen that Obama, similarly to his other democratic predecessors, won't improve relations with Russia in spite of good intentions. It is not because they have talked to it in a language of power, but because they don't give up the language of power.



Notes:

- (1) Rossijane o rukovodstve SŠA. Levada – centr, 1st November, 2008.
<http://www.levada.ru/press/2008110100.html>
- (2) Rossijane o SŠA i vizite Baraka Obamy. Levada – centr, 30th June, 2009.
<http://www.levada.ru/press/2009063000.html>
- (3) Radziwinowicz, Waclaw: Obama w Rosji przyszłości. Gazeta Wyborcza, 8th July, 2009.
- (4) Juščenko boitsia, čto Obama i Medvedev vykinut Ukrainu za bort? ForUm – For-Ua.com, 7th July, 2009.
- (5) Ekspert: Obama soveršil dve ošibki v otnošenii Ukrainy. Rosbalt.ru, 7th April, 2009.
- (6) Barack Obama extended financial sanctions on Belarusian officials. Charter97.org, 15th June, 2009.
- (7) Cohen, Ariel: The U.S. Agenda for the Obama-Medvedev Summit. Heritage Foundation, 25th June, 2009. <http://www.heritage.org/Research/RussiaandEurasia/wm2506.cfm>