



# Snowden Case Illustrates Decline In U.S.-Russia Relations

by MICHELE KELEMEN

August 04, 2013 11:33 AM

**Listen to the Story**

**All Things Considered**

**3 min 53 sec**



*Evan Vucci/AP*

U.S.-Russia relations hit a new low this week, when Moscow ignored U.S. requests and gave temporary asylum to a man who leaked classified documents on U.S. government surveillance programs.

Many in Congress are complaining that the Edward Snowden case is just the latest example of how the Kremlin is thumbing its nose at the White House.

The Obama administration famously reset relations with Russia when Dmitry Medvedev was president. But now that Russian President

Vladimir Putin is back in the Kremlin, it seems to be having a more difficult time.

Presidents Obama and Putin had what looked to be a very awkward meeting in Northern Ireland this year. While Obama tried to lighten the mood by talking about their waning sports skills as they age, Putin coldly remarked that the U.S. president was just trying to relax him.

And the statement that came out of that meeting glossed over key differences, says David Kramer, president of the human rights watchdog Freedom House.

"Instead they were talking about mutual respect, equality and genuine respect for each other's interests," Kramer says. "It was a Soviet-like communique and frankly, I don't know what respect we should have for Putin, given the way he treats his own people ... Why the U.S. president would agree to a statement like that is baffling to me."

Kramer, a former State Department official who worked on Russia, is among those calling on Obama to cancel plans for a summit next month.

"Why Obama would want to subject himself to more of Putin and not come away with anything substantive is a mystery to me," he says.

The White House says it is reconsidering the utility of such a summit. Angela Stent, a professor at Georgetown University, says Washington should take a hint from the Snowden affair.

"Granting Snowden asylum was a clear signal from Putin that it was more important for him politically to do this than to take actions which would have enabled the president to come to have a summit with him, and in a sense validate a lot more of what Russia is doing," Stent says. "This was Putin's choice, and we should take that as a signal and step back."

Stent, the author of a forthcoming book about U.S.-Russian relations, says it was clear already in 2011 that ties were going to take a turn for the worse. Putin was facing protests over his plans to return to the Kremlin, and he pointed his finger at then-Secretary of State Hillary Clinton.

She set the tone for some of the activists in our country, gave them a signal, Putin said, adding they heard the signal and started their work with the support of the State Department.

After he resumed the presidency, tensions rose further. Russia shut down programs funded by the U.S. Agency for International Development. Congress passed a law to punish Russian human rights violators, and Moscow responded by barring American families from adopting Russian children. Stent says it's time that the Obama administration stop raising expectations that it might find a better way to deal with Russia.

"President Obama has three more years," she says. "He has a lot of other things he needs to pay attention to, so from his point and the White House's point of view, it will be a question of how much attention do you want to devote to this. And it doesn't seem to me that there's any particular opening on the Russian side for improving the relationship."

That said, Stent says the United States can't ignore Russia. She thinks the secretaries of State and Defense should go ahead with their planned talks with their Russian counterparts this month, though those talks are also under review.