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U.S. Embassy in Moscow

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On-line Interview with Russia Internet Publication "Gazeta.

Alexander Vershbow, U.S. Ambassador

***Gazeta.ru*, October 13, 2004**

— What is the reaction of George Bush's administration to abolition of direct election of governors in Russia, which is as being a key measure in the fight against international ter Andrey Vasilyev (Kazan)

— Why has there been no reaction by U.S. authorities to th offensive against democratic freedom in Russia? To the liqu independent media, the decimation of the opposition in elec manipulation, the establishment of control over the human movement, and canceling of elections. Don't you - don't Am where this leads? // Yelena (Moscow)

First of all we recognize that Russia has experienced some terri recent years and especially in the last few months with the terrc Beslan and other places. And the American people, of course, h their full sympathy and solidarity with Russia, having had simi experiences ourselves. We understand that in such periods of n important decisions need to be taken to better defend society ag posed by the terrorists.

Of course we will be watching with interest to see what steps a reform and strengthen the special services, to deal with the corr President Putin has identified as one of the root causes of the re by the terrorists (in the recent events). The political changes tha proposed by President Putin have raised some questions in the American government and many people who follow developm very closely. While each of these steps may have its own logic of strengthening the Russian state, we worry that the overall im up reducing the essential checks and balances needed for any st democracy. President Bush himself put it quite directly when h democracies have a balance of power between central governm government and a balance of power within central governments different branches. It remains our hope that in carrying out poli one does not end up weakening those very institutions of demo terrorists themselves would like to destroy.

As to the questions about whether we are indifferent, why aren' more strongly, I think the answer is, we are expressing our con form of the comments of a friend who wants Russia to become partner, and that means, in our view, to become a stronger dem continue to support, through many concrete programs, as well a moral support, many of the activists in Russia who are seeking stronger civil society. I think we've worked very closely with m Russian government as well in the development of judicial refo strengthen the rule of law, which is the ultimate guarantor of ar society.

But, one of the questions posted asked why is the United States Russian democracy? The answer is only Russians can save Rus democracy. We can certainly share our expertise and offer our constructive criticism when we think that's necessary.

— Do the Russian authorities listen to criticism? // Gazeta.r
I think that we find our criticisms better received by some Russ than by others. I think there are clearly differences of view with government, the Russian political establishment, as to what's th for Russia to take in the wake of the recent dramatic events in I elsewhere. Of course, this debate didn't begin with Beslan, ther clearly some contradictory tendencies going back several years the development of democracy, freedom of the press, and other construction of civil society. We have had constructive discussi issues with the Russian political leadership, with officials in the Administration and in different ministries, and I think the majo take our views as those of a friend and a partner and not of a co wishes Russia ill. It doesn't mean they agree with our criticism, very civilized discussion.

— Mr. Ambassador, because states that have experienced t (above all the U.S. and Russia) tend to toughen their intern potentially restricting democratic and personal freedoms of in order to step up the fight against terrorism, what do you acceptable and unacceptable restrictions in the United Stat and Russia? // Zyrab (Russia / USA)

Well, first of all, I would say that there is frequently an exagge Russian debate as to what actually happened in the United Stat September 11 with respect to civil liberties. We sometimes hea caricature of what happened, for example that the establishmen Department of Homeland Security was the equivalent of creati KGB. In fact, we did of course undertake some very urgent me strengthen the coordination of our law enforcement agencies ar intelligence services to better protect ourselves against terrorist the so-called Patriot Act we did give additional authority for su searches, but this is under the strict regulation of the courts. I th the general principal that applies to any country is to take the n to prevent terrorist acts, but protect civil liberties because ultim social consensus is a fundamental prerequisite to a war against

I would also add that full transparency and full accountability o institutions of the State is another essential prerequisite to main confidence of the public, which is also needed to fight terror ef people are to be confident that the State is doing everything nec need to know what was the reason when a failure took place, as 9/11, as was the case in Beslan. Therefore I think it is a very po development here that a commission was established under the of the Council of the Federation to examine what happened in I offered to share some of the experience from our September 11 that the Russian people can get the same full analysis of what v that the mistakes can be prevented in the future.

— Many of the resources of the commission to investigate tl tragedy will be classified. What do you think of this, and ho the degree of freedom of speech in Russia? // Gazeta.ru

On the first point, our experience is that a commission of this k have access to sensitive information, including intelligence inf fully analyze events, but that some of that information cannot b openly because of the need to protect the sources. In our societ strong belief that the public has the right to know, and therefor conclusions are always published and as much of the data as pc the conclusions are credible - that they're believed by Americar we hope that Russia will follow the same model and find the ri between the public's clear right to know, as well as the strong d the facts behind Beslan, while of course not giving away secret used against society the next time around.

Regarding freedom of speech in Russia, I think we have concer overall picture is mixed. We've expressed many times our conc decline of independent, national TV channels and the increasin presentation of events on the State channels. We can see a muc diversity of opinion in the print media in Russia, although even seen some worrisome developments in terms of pressures on ce and the tendency towards self-censorship. But here too, we thir the best guarantees for long-term stability in Russia and for the strength of the Russian state is to have a strong and independen challenges the decisions of government when that's appropriate leaders accountable for their decisions. So, we will continue to situation and give our views when we think that the trends are t the wrong direction. One very specific concern we have, and I t even more strongly inside Russia, is the large number of journa been killed for what appear to be reasons connected with their i into corruption on the part of powerful business interests. It's v that journalists' rights be protected so that they can play the ess monitors of the public good and expose problems when they ne exposed.

— Mr. Ambassador, you have explained why a free press is a strong Russia, but why is a strong Russia necessary for th States? // Gazeta.ru

I think the obvious reason why we want a stabile and strong Ru
Russia is the biggest country geographically, it extends across t
and stability in Russia can promote stability in the surrounding
Europe and Asia. Russia also has enormous economic resource
advantages that can become an engine for development in neigl
I think the more philosophical reason why we believe a strong a
Russia is important is because we first of all believe that streng
will be best assured through democracy and that democracies d
with each other. So, I think that it is in our mutual interest that
ending any remaining chance of conflict between our countries
can unite our efforts to fight the real threats of this century - thr
terrorism, proliferation, infectious diseases and the like - that R
strongest possible partner for the United States and other demo

I think that there is sometimes a misconception in this country,
present in the recent debate, that the United States wants a weal
we somehow are trying to take advantage of the difficulties of l
transition that's been going on for the past decade and a half. I t
that if Russia were not able to deal with its internal problems ar
become a source of instability, it would only damage the intere
on Russia's periphery. It would be much more of a threat to stal
Europe and in East Asia, and it would be, in short, absolutely fo
United States to seek such an unfortunate course of developmer
So, of course we sometimes have differences on how to deal w
international problems, we have differences on how best to dev
institutions, whether it be in Russia or in other former Commur
but I think our differences are largely ones of tactics and our in
goals increasingly coincide, and that's sometimes forgotten in tl

To be honest, what's encouraging about the evolution of our rel
last few years is that our approaches to the majority of internati
increasingly do coincide. Of course we had a serious difference
to deal with Saddam Hussein, but now our basic approaches to
and to the stabilization of that country in its transition back to f
are very similar. We perhaps have differences regarding tactics
with Iran. I think Russia puts strongest emphasis on dialogue ar
we believe there needs to be a clear threat of sanctions in order
Iran to abandon its nuclear ambitions.

I think the area where our goals are similar but our differences
be more serious relates to some of the problems in the former S
think that preserving the status quo in places like South Ossetia
Transnistria, Georgia, and Moldova is not a sustainable, not a v
action. We think much more active efforts are needed to push th
in particular, the separatist regimes to accept political solutions
reintegration within some kind of federal state. We worry that a
cautious approach could lead to increased tensions rather than t
solutions. Even on these kinds of issues we are able to talk very
one another, to lay out our different points of view, and step-by
tactical approaches closer together, even if we aren't always wo
same basis.

— Mr. Ambassador, what is the position of the U.S. admini concerning Russia's construction of the atomic power statio Iran? Does your government consider this nuclear plant a r facility? // Aleksandr (Russia)

We don't consider Bushere a military installation, but we do co doubts about the wisdom of supporting the construction of that station. I think that our opinion has been understood, but the pr to completion, and now we are focusing on ensuring that Russi demand that all spent nuclear fuel from that reactor be returned that it doesn't become available for potential weapons program

I think the bigger concerns regarding Iran now center on the ur enrichment program that Iran undertook in secret, a program w revealed thanks to the courage of some Iranian opposition grou public with the covert activities of the Iranian nuclear scientists Russia was involved in this program. The main culprit was Mr. from Pakistan. Nevertheless, this program does, in our view, pr convincing evidence that Iran is determined to circumvent the N Proliferation Treaty and develop nuclear weapons. So, it's enco and Russia are jointly, together with the Europeans, trying to c abandon this course. We think, perhaps, a somewhat harder lin Taking into account the deception the Iranians practiced in the longer can give them the benefit of the doubt.

— The United States gives Georgia all kinds of financial, po military support, including training military specialists for operations against Ossetians. How do you explain this supp because of the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan oil pipeline? Is it out of sympathy for President Mikhail Saakashvili? Or, out of son obvious, geo-politic interests? Will American military bases in Georgia? // Fatima Salkazanova (Paris)

The United States has no plans and no intention of building any in Georgia. This was stated quite clearly by Secretary of State I was in Moscow at the end of January. Our position has not cha believe that the Russian bases that continue to operate in Georg withdrawn in accordance with Russia's own political commitm Istanbul summit of the OSCE in 1999. And we believe that this new opportunities for military cooperation between Russia and would be in everybody's interest, including the United States' in particular, military action directed against terrorist threats.

I think that is a good way to lead into the second question. We we are in any competition with Russia in Georgia. We think we interest in helping Georgia strengthen its own capabilities to pr borders, to prevent terrorists from using its territory or crossing and to generally be a contributor to regional security. So the pr undertook, and that was completed this year, to train and equip of the Georgian armed forces, was aimed at helping Georgia de common threats to security, and we think that program was the to Russia. We think the concrete effects of that program, which

started under President Shevardnadze, have been seen in the m
efforts by Georgia to keep Chechen terrorists out of the Pankisi
also support President Sakaashvili's efforts to deal with Georgi
economic problems and to create a more stabile and prosperous
because that too we think would be good for the Georgian peop
had a rough life since independence, and because that would al
general stability in the wider region.

With regard to problems like South Ossetia, or Abkhazia, we a
very frank with President Sakaashvili that we only support poli
and we oppose military solutions. When tensions escalated in A
there were even unfortunate incidents such as the shooting on t
member of the Duma Andrey Kokoshin, we were very firm wit
they had to deescalate and focus only on political solutions. As
response to another question, Russia has to do its part with the
Tskhinvali and Sukhumi, who may believe that they can count
their unrecognized separatist entities indefinitely.

Finally, we genuinely believe that full normalization and streng
Russia-Georgia bilateral relations would be a major factor for s
economic progress in the region. We discourage any efforts to
triangular relationship in which one tries to play off the other, a
focus on the shared interests of Georgia, Russia, and other inte
including the United States.

— What is your opinion about the situation in Belarus? // H

We've watched the evolution of events in Belarus with conside
and the latest developments surrounding the elections and the r
have heightened our concern about Belarus becoming the black
Europe. It's already very clear that the electoral process is being
manipulated by the Belarussian authorities. Most serious oppos
have been removed from competition on the basis of various pr
results of these elections and of the referendum are not likely to
legitimacy in the eyes of the rest of the world. This is, of cours
affairs for the Belarussian people, who deserve a lot better than
Ultimately it's going to be bad for neighboring states, including
will have to deal with an unstable, undemocratic, and economic
neighbor - a country that is likely to become a source of trouble
crime, and other ills of today's world. So, Russia has more influ
United States over Belarus, and we hope that Russia will try to
events there in a more positive direction and think about the lo
of stability in this very central location in Europe. It's hard to s
on our own bilateral relationship events in Belarus will have, b
our common interest to try to discuss these kinds of problems i
way and think about how we can use our influence, and how w
institutions like the OSCE to steer things in a more positive dir

**— Mr. Ambassador, in your opinion, what will the U.S. Go
reaction be to further changes in the Russian political syste
indirect cancellation of Russian Federation presidential ele
or transformation of Russia into a parliamentary republic**

incumbent president taking the post of prime minister? Son close to the Kremlin consider this almost inevitable. // Dmit

I think the question touches on some hypothetical scenarios, wl dangerous to speculate about in a theoretical fashion. Of course believers in the importance of elections, so that leaders enjoy a popular mandate for the policies that they undertake, and that a intervals are held accountable for the decisions they've taken ar that they've achieved.

Of course, the constitutional framework for Russia or any other decision that the Russian people need to take. It is not for other dictate. There are obviously many different models: the strong system as now exists in Russia, and that also exists in the Unite France; or a parliamentary system, as one sees in many west Eu countries, and in countries in other parts of the world. I think it' the debate over those kinds of questions, of course, be one that different layers of society since it's an important issue that need on the basis of broad social consensus.

— Mr. Ambassador, please explain the shocking show "The Democratization of Ukraine" staged by the U.S. Why did th ambassador in Ukraine officially state that the U.S. will bar U.S. by Ukrainian officials if Viktor Yanukovich wins the el are U.S. officials openly campaigning for Yushchenko, who PR agency "Aristotle, Inc." working for him? Perhaps, the considering a Yugoslavian version of democratizing Ukrain (Moscow)

The question you're asking me to answer contains all kinds of h outright falsehoods as its basic premises. We are strongly in fav fair electoral process in Ukraine, but we do not support any can current presidential elections. We are not backing Mr. Yushche not backing Mr. Yanukovich, or any of the other candidates. W Ukrainian people to have a genuinely free choice among the dif candidates. Only through honest and fair elections can Ukraine essential foundations of democracy that it needs to achieve long prosperity and stability.

There may be some American private consultants that are helpi Ukraine. I don't know about that. There's no activity by the U.S on behalf of any of the election campaigns. It's, of course, very that many famous Russian political consultants are very activel support of the candidacy of Mr. Yanukovich. There's nothing w although it's important that such activities be transparent.

The United States doesn't have any particular plan for Ukraine. interested in Ukraine becoming a strong, European democracy that contributes to the wider prosperity of the region.

References by the questioner to the so-called Yugoslav option r in this context. The crisis in the former Yugoslavia in the 1990s

of policies of ethnic cleansing and even genocide by one group which created a threat to international security that had to be ad civilized world. Of course, the basis for that action was a series Nations Security Council resolutions supported by Russia. So, logical connection or parallel. Ukraine is a peaceful state, a mu and we hope it becomes a strong, democratic state.

I respect the freedom of people to ask absurd questions.

— I've never been in the U.S., although I can afford it. Frie me a great deal about the long lines and humiliating proced U.S. Embassy when receiving an entry visa. At the same tin U.S. citizens receive entry visas to Russia more easily and w humiliation than Russians receive visas to the U.S. Does the believe Russia has the right to introduce similarly humiliati procedures? Doesn't the Ambassador believe the visa situat undermines mutual understanding between the peoples of t countries? // Ilya Yevgenyevich Nikonov (Moscow)

First, I can't deny that visa issues are sometimes a source of fru even misunderstanding. In our visa policy we have to, of cours American law, which is where the criteria for approving or reje established.

We have tried to do as much as we can to make the procedures and receiving a visa as simple as possible. You no longer enco crowds or long lines at our consulate in Moscow, or at our thre Saint Petersburg, Yekaterinburg, and Vladivostok. We've estab network of partners all around Russia who take care of the subi documents, the collection of the fees, so that people don't have from their hometown or their home region in order to submit th for a visa. We've tried to reduce the waiting period between the the application and the scheduling of an interview to a matter o maybe even less if there's an urgent need to travel.

Unfortunately we do now have to have a personal interview, at of the State Department, and this is something that all of our en every country of the world must now do. We regret that given I geographic expanse, this is not always easy for people and can expensive journey - but we have not found any way around this

The criteria by which we decide on visas have remained the sa haven't changed since September 11 and the rate of approval of remained about the same since September 11. The main provisi which sometimes leads to refusals, relates primarily to the fund question, will the traveler return to Russia, or will that traveler illegal worker or an illegal immigrant? The law specifically say person applying for the visa has to convince the consul that he So, sometimes the information presented or the very words of t create doubts in the minds of our consul, and that's why someti refused despite having relatives that they want to visit, or close they want to visit in the States, and we are sad about that kind

Another problem, which sometimes makes life difficult for hon citizens, is that many Russians try to deceive us, to commit frau falsified documents, forgeries of diplomas, of bank records, wh us more vigilant in the circumstances. One of the most recent tı have tried is to bring false visas from third countries to give the being a global traveler, when in fact the person has never left R unfortunately there are a large number of private companies, tra whose only business is deceiving the American Consulate. So, complicated, but our goal is to see as many Russians as possibl America.

I don't think the process is any easier for American citizens see the Russian consulates in the United States, but we do try to wc Russian partners to simplify procedures as much as possible. In were able to lower the fees on a reciprocal basis for student visa never be able to satisfy all of the Russian people all of the time our best to make the process as painless as possible and to prov information so that legitimate travelers get their visa applicatio The aim is that all legitimate travelers should get their visas. Or is to stay away from those travel agencies I mentioned that are

— Mr. Ambassador, are there plans to open a U.S. consulat Novosibirsk? Lack of a consulate here further complicates t difficult procedure for obtaining a visa to the U.S. // Mikhai

I wish I could give a positive answer because I believe it would for us, but especially for Russian travelers, for us to have a con in Novosibirsk. You may recall that back in the early 1990s we decide where we would place our third consulate. Initially we v Novosibirsk, but President Yeltsin convinced former Secretary that Yekaterinburg would be the best choice. It was obviously h He had a strong opinion. At the present time we don't have the resources in our State Department budget to consider opening a consulate, but I continue to keep that subject on the table in my with Washington. I would simply say, we never say never.

— Are there talks underway regarding extending the validi student visas? Or, is the U.S. following the principle of recip waiting for Russia to change the term of validity of visas it i citizens? // Daniel (Minneapolis, Minnesota)

First I would say that we are very much in favor of extending th period of visas for as much as possible. Indeed, in many countr we issue multiple entry visas of ten-year duration. We are also, guided by the principal of reciprocity and right now Russia gen duration of visas to two years or less. Sometimes it's only a yea months, for travelers, for journalists, for businessmen, and for s

As I mentioned, we've lowered the cost of student visas, and we suggestions for extending the validity on a reciprocal basis. Wh certain limitations on the fees that we charge, we are always pr entertain reciprocal reduction in other categories too. When I sp

limitations, I mean the fact that the State Department requires t some of our consular operations be financed by the fees.

— Mr. Ambassador. For the last five years I have been a pr the United States. Recently I married a Russian woman. Sh that Russian citizens at the U.S. Consulate in St. Petersburg interviewed in a humiliating fashion. Here in the States she them. In Russia, unfortunately, this is impossible. I underst consular officers in Russia are looking to expose potential i This does not mean, however, that Russian citizens should l second-rate human beings. America put an end to discrimi own country in the 1960s. Isn't it time to start respecting th Russia, instead of making empty statements? // Lev (Florid

Well, I'm sad to hear that people were not treated with full resp courtesy, and I'll talk with our Consulate in St. Petersburg abou course, the consular staff is often under a lot of pressure. They very hard and conduct a lot of interviews, but that is not an exc behavior. Perhaps part of the problem was related to the fact th employees may not speak correct Russian. Of course, I will do make sure these complaints are passed in full to our staff in St. will make sure that other members of our staff at our Consulate about it. We would like Russians to be treated with the same re Americans.

— This question should perhaps be directed to the consul, b you can answer it. Can I challenge a visa refusal in court? I Russian court, or an American court? Should the challenge to the Embassy, as the government body, or to the consul w refusal? Thank you in advance. // Mikhail (Moscow)

I'm not sure you can challenge the decision to deny a visa in a c Under certain circumstances, a visa applicant can avail himself of a private lawyer to push for a review of the decision. By law policies, we are required to consider new information submitte applicant or his attorney. However, the final decision about wh issue a visa rests solely in the hands of the consul. As the Amb no legal authority to overrule the consul's decision. Indeed, if I pressure him, I would be punished by the State Department. I c member of my staff to take another look at the facts and consid information, but the final decision rests with the consular office thing happens when we receive appeals from Congressmen on applicant. We can review a case, but we are very clear about th political interference is not going to influence the decision of o

— If I believe the current policy infringes upon my rights a can I apply for refugee status in the U.S.? // Ilya (Moscow)

The short answer to this question is probably negative. Althoug concerned about some developments here, we do not consider I totalitarian state in the way the Soviet Union was, and so we dc political asylum to people wishing to leave Russia. There are o

specific legislative regulations regarding the granting of politic refugee status. I am not familiar with the details of these laws, l based on a legitimate fear of persecution on political, religious, grounds. There are a small number of ethnic groups and nation the victims of persecution, and they are entitled to refugee statu States. In other words, the questioner should look into immigra United States through traditional channels.

— Dear Mr. Ambassador, could you please comment on the Ilyas Akhmed in the United States, and explain why the Un gave him protection? // Russian Diplomat (Abroad)

I think you are referring to Ilyas Akhmadov. He was granted pc by an independent court in Boston. This was not a decision by t Government and it does not reflect U.S. policy. Our courts are independent. We may disagree with a person's political views, l courts that make the decision, not the Federal Government. In t asylum case, it is the prerogative of the other government to pr information that could clarify the question of that individual's p terrorist activities in that country. In the case of Akhmadov, it i to provide proof of his links to terrorism, with that information by the court and compared with other information before a deci rendered.

We continue to have no official contact with Mr. Akhmadov, w recognize him as a representative of any government, nor do w Maskhadov government as having any standing. Moreover, we recommend that the Russian government conduct negotiations Maskhadov or any of his representatives. But, we do believe th solution is needed in Chechnya, a decision which would receiv possible support from the population. However, a political proc mean negotiating with terrorists. We completely agree that you negotiate with terrorists.

— Good afternoon. Recently you said the United States doe negotiations with the "president" of the Chechen Republic, Maskhadov. With whom, in the opinion of the United State negotiations be carried out? What do you see as a way out c in the north Caucasus? // Alu Abusultanov (Chechen Repul

First, when we speak about a political process or solution, this that we are talking about negotiations. There are many other w solution. We consider the concept of political settlement the Ru government has carried out over the past one and a half year - a elections - is one potential path. However we believe certain op were missed in following this approach, in particular, the exclu serious candidates in elections, both the last elections and the A And, certainly there are questions about how these elections we Although we have some doubts about how these principles are we still believe building Chechen government structures throug one way to proceed that is an alternative to negotiations.

The key point I just stressed is the building of the broadest pos citizen support and the isolation of terrorists, pushing them asic margins. Together with this political process must come econo reconstruction and job creation, so as to give people hope for th deprive terrorists of the appeal that brings people to their side. I we hope that Dmitriy Kozak and his new commission will succ efforts have foundered. If there are ways the United States can very interested in doing so.

— Mr. Ambassador, what do you think about the Khodork What is the U.S. reaction to the possible sale of Yukos asset their value? After all, there are some Yukos shareholders ir including large foundations. Thanks! // Vasily (Krasnoyarsl

The Khodorkovskiy case and Yukos case, of course, have raise the United States about the rule of law in Russia and property l Indeed, there are many minor shareholders in the United States could be affected by the final resolution of this affair. It is hard the situation since each day brings new developments or new ir previous events. It is hard to know what the situation is from or next. We hope the situation will be resolved in a way that is fai shareholders, including minority shareholders who may be in th hope criminal proceedings will be transparent and in strict acco and we hope Russia will keep in mind the potential consequenc attractiveness as a place for foreign investment.

— What can you say about results of the U.S. investigation of U.S. citizens during the Nord Ost incident? Has the true deaths been established? (The official version in Russia is st used had nothing to do with the deaths of the hostages.) // P (victim) (Moscow)

My answer is simple. I am not aware of any final conclusions v the fate of American hostages at Nord Ost. However one aspec investigation is that we are trying to take this tragedy into acco developing our own techniques to combat terrorism at home. A use of the gas, we share the opinion of Russian experts that the not die from the effects of the gas, but rather because there was medical assistance provided to deal with the consequences of th