



U.S. Embassy in Moscow



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On-line Interview with Russia Internet Publication "Gazeta.

Alexander Vershbow, U.S. Ambassador

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

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

First of all we recognize that Russia has experienced some terrible events in recent years and especially in the last few months with the terrorist attacks in Beslan and other places. And the American people, of course, have shown their full sympathy and solidarity with Russia, having had similar experiences ourselves. We understand that in such periods of national crisis important decisions need to be taken to better defend society against threats posed by the terrorists.

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

As to the questions about whether we are indifferent, why aren't more strongly, I think the answer is, we are expressing our concern. In the form of the comments of a friend who wants Russia to become a partner, and that means, in our view, to become a stronger democracy. We continue to support, through many concrete programs, as well as moral support, many of the activists in Russia who are seeking a stronger civil society. I think we've worked very closely with the Russian government as well in the development of judicial reform to strengthen the rule of law, which is the ultimate guarantor of a free society.

But, one of the questions posted asked why is the United States not supporting Russian democracy? The answer is only Russians can save Russian 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.ru**

I think that we find our criticisms better received by some Russian officials than by others. I think there are clearly differences of view with the Russian government, the Russian political establishment, as to what's the best path for Russia to take in the wake of the recent dramatic events in Iraq and elsewhere. Of course, this debate didn't begin with Beslan, there are clearly some contradictory tendencies going back several years to the development of democracy, freedom of the press, and other issues in the construction of civil society. We have had constructive discussions on these issues with the Russian political leadership, with officials in the Administration and in different ministries, and I think the major part of the time we take our views as those of a friend and a partner and not of a critic who wishes Russia ill. It doesn't mean they agree with our criticism, but it's a very civilized discussion.

— **Mr. Ambassador, because states that have experienced terrorism (above all the U.S. and Russia) tend to toughen their internal security laws, potentially restricting democratic and personal freedoms of citizens in order to step up the fight against terrorism, what do you think are the most acceptable and unacceptable restrictions in the United States and Russia? // Zyrab (Russia / USA)**

Well, first of all, I would say that there is frequently an exaggerated Russian debate as to what actually happened in the United States on September 11 with respect to civil liberties. We sometimes hear a caricature of what happened, for example that the establishment of the Department of Homeland Security was the equivalent of creating a new KGB. In fact, we did of course undertake some very urgent measures to strengthen the coordination of our law enforcement agencies and our intelligence services to better protect ourselves against terrorism. In the so-called Patriot Act we did give additional authority for surveillance searches, but this is under the strict regulation of the courts. I think the general principal that applies to any country is to take the necessary steps to prevent terrorist acts, but protect civil liberties because ultimate social consensus is a fundamental prerequisite to a war against terrorism.

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

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

On the first point, our experience is that a commission of this kind should have access to sensitive information, including intelligence information, to fully analyze events, but that some of that information cannot be shared openly because of the need to protect the sources. In our society there is a strong belief that the public has the right to know, and therefore all conclusions are always published and as much of the data as possible. The fact that the conclusions are credible - that they're believed by Americans - is what we hope that Russia will follow the same model and find the right balance between the public's clear right to know, as well as the strong need to protect the facts behind Beslan, while of course not giving away secrets that could be used against society the next time around.

Regarding freedom of speech in Russia, I think we have concerns. The overall picture is mixed. We've expressed many times our concerns about the decline of independent, national TV channels and the increasing dominance of presentation of events on the State channels. We can see a much greater diversity of opinion in the print media in Russia, although even there we have seen some worrisome developments in terms of pressures on editors and the tendency towards self-censorship. But here too, we think that one of the best guarantees for long-term stability in Russia and for the strength of the Russian state is to have a strong and independent press that challenges the decisions of government when that's appropriate and holds its leaders accountable for their decisions. So, we will continue to monitor the situation and give our views when we think that the trends are moving in the wrong direction. One very specific concern we have, and I think it's even more strongly felt inside Russia, is the large number of journalists who have been killed for what appear to be reasons connected with their investigations into corruption on the part of powerful business interests. It's very important that journalists' rights be protected so that they can play the essential role of monitors of the public good and expose problems when they are exposed.

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

I think the obvious reason why we want a stable and strong Russia is the biggest country geographically, it extends across the continent 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 neighboring regions. I think the more philosophical reason why we believe a strong Russia is important is because we first of all believe that strength will be best assured through democracy and that democracies deal 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 - terrorism, proliferation, infectious diseases and the like - that Russia is the strongest possible partner for the United States and other democracies.

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

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

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

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

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

I think the bigger concerns regarding Iran now center on the uranium enrichment program that Iran undertook in secret, a program which was revealed thanks to the courage of some Iranian opposition groups and the public with the covert activities of the Iranian nuclear scientists. Russia was involved in this program. The main culprit was Mr. Abdul Qader Khan from Pakistan. Nevertheless, this program does, in our view, provide convincing evidence that Iran is determined to circumvent the 1968 Non-Proliferation Treaty and develop nuclear weapons. So, it's encouraged by the United States and Russia are jointly, together with the Europeans, trying to convince Iran to abandon this course. We think, perhaps, a somewhat harder line should be taken. Taking into account the deception the Iranians practiced in the past, it is no longer possible to give them the benefit of the doubt.

— The United States gives Georgia all kinds of financial, political and military support, including training military specialists for operations against Ossetians. How do you explain this support? Is it out of sympathy for President Mikhail Saakashvili? Or, out of some other obvious, geo-politic interests? Will American military bases be established in Georgia? // Fatima Salkazanova (Paris)

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

I think that is a good way to lead into the second question. We do not see we are in any competition with Russia in Georgia. We think we have a common interest in helping Georgia strengthen its own capabilities to protect its borders, to prevent terrorists from using its territory or crossing its borders and to generally be a contributor to regional security. So the program we undertook, and that was completed this year, to train and equip the Georgian armed forces, was aimed at helping Georgia deal with common threats to security, and we think that program was the result of cooperation with Russia. We think the concrete effects of that program, which

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

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

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

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

We've watched the evolution of events in Belarus with considerable concern and the latest developments surrounding the elections and the referendum have heightened our concern about Belarus becoming the black heart of Europe. It's already very clear that the electoral process is being manipulated by the Belarussian authorities. Most serious opposition candidates have been removed from competition on the basis of various pretexts. The results of these elections and of the referendum are not likely to be seen as legitimate in the eyes of the rest of the world. This is, of course, a serious concern for the Belarussian people, who deserve a lot better than this. Ultimately it's going to be bad for neighboring states, including Poland, which will have to deal with an unstable, undemocratic, and economically weak neighbor - a country that is likely to become a source of trouble, crime, and other ills of today's world. So, Russia has more influence than the United States over Belarus, and we hope that Russia will try to steer the events there in a more positive direction and think about the long-term implications of stability in this very central location in Europe. It's hard to see how our own bilateral relationship events in Belarus will have, but it is in our common interest to try to discuss these kinds of problems in a more open way and think about how we can use our influence, and how we can use institutions like the OSCE to steer things in a more positive direction.

— **Mr. Ambassador, in your opinion, what will the U.S. Government's reaction be to further changes in the Russian political system, including the indirect cancellation of Russian Federation presidential elections and the transformation of Russia into a parliamentary republic?**

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

I think the question touches on some hypothetical scenarios, which is dangerous to speculate about in a theoretical fashion. Of course, we believe in the importance of elections, so that leaders enjoy a popular mandate for the policies that they undertake, and that at intervals they are held accountable for the decisions they've taken and 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 countries to dictate. There are obviously many different models: the strong presidential system as now exists in Russia, and that also exists in the United States; or a parliamentary system, as one sees in many western European countries, and in countries in other parts of the world. I think it's the debate over those kinds of questions, of course, that needs to be one that involves all different layers of society since it's an important issue that needs to be decided 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 the U.S. ambassador in Ukraine officially state that the U.S. will bar U.S. officials from Ukraine if Viktor Yanukovich wins the election? Are U.S. officials openly campaigning for Yushchenko, who is running through a PR agency "Aristotle, Inc." working for him? Perhaps, the U.S. is considering a Yugoslavian version of democratizing Ukraine (Moscow)

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

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

The United States doesn't have any particular plan for Ukraine. We are 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 are not relevant 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 addressed by the civilized world. Of course, the basis for that action was a series of United Nations Security Council resolutions supported by Russia. So, there is a logical connection or parallel. Ukraine is a peaceful state, a multi-ethnic state, 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. Friends of mine tell me a great deal about the long lines and humiliating procedures at the U.S. Embassy when receiving an entry visa. At the same time, U.S. citizens receive entry visas to Russia more easily and without humiliation than Russians receive visas to the U.S. Does the Ambassador believe Russia has the right to introduce similarly humiliating procedures? Doesn't the Ambassador believe the visa situation undermines mutual understanding between the peoples of the two countries? // Ilya Yevgenyevich Nikonov (Moscow)

First, I can't deny that visa issues are sometimes a source of frustration and even misunderstanding. In our visa policy we have to, of course, follow American law, which is where the criteria for approving or rejecting visas are established.

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

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

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

Another problem, which sometimes makes life difficult for non-citizens, is that many Russians try to deceive us, to commit fraud, falsified documents, forgeries of diplomas, of bank records, which makes us more vigilant in the circumstances. One of the most recent things we have tried is to bring false visas from third countries to give the appearance of being a global traveler, when in fact the person has never left Russia. Unfortunately there are a large number of private companies, travel agencies, whose only business is deceiving the American Consulate. So, the process is complicated, but our goal is to see as many Russians as possible in America.

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

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

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

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

First I would say that we are very much in favor of extending the validity period of visas for as much as possible. Indeed, in many countries we issue multiple entry visas of ten-year duration. We are also, of course, guided by the principle of reciprocity and right now Russia generally issues visas of two years or less. Sometimes it's only a year or six months, for travelers, for journalists, for businessmen, and for students.

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

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

— Mr. Ambassador. For the last five years I have been a proponent of the United States. Recently I married a Russian woman. She was interviewed that Russian citizens at the U.S. Consulate in St. Petersburg were interviewed in a humiliating fashion. Here in the States she was treated with respect. In Russia, unfortunately, this is impossible. I understand that consular officers in Russia are looking to expose potential human rights violations. This does not mean, however, that Russian citizens should be treated as second-rate human beings. America put an end to discrimination against its own country in the 1960s. Isn't it time to start respecting the rights of Russian citizens, instead of making empty statements? // Lev (Florida)

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

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

I'm not sure you can challenge the decision to deny a visa in a court. Under certain circumstances, a visa applicant can avail himself of a private lawyer to push for a review of the decision. By law, our policies, we are required to consider new information submitted by the applicant or his attorney. However, the final decision about whether to issue a visa rests solely in the hands of the consul. As the Ambassador, I have no legal authority to overrule the consul's decision. Indeed, if I tried to pressure him, I would be punished by the State Department. I can assign a member of my staff to take another look at the facts and consider the new information, but the final decision rests with the consular office. Nothing happens when we receive appeals from Congressmen on behalf of an applicant. We can review a case, but we are very clear about the fact that political interference is not going to influence the decision of our consul.

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

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

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

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

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

We continue to have no official contact with Mr. Akhmadov, and we do not recognize him as a representative of any government, nor do we recognize the Maskhadov government as having any standing. Moreover, we do not recommend that the Russian government conduct negotiations with Maskhadov or any of his representatives. But, we do believe that a political solution is needed in Chechnya, a decision which would receive the possible support from the population. However, a political process does not mean negotiating with terrorists. We completely agree that you should not negotiate with terrorists.

— **Good afternoon. Recently you said the United States does not conduct negotiations with the "president" of the Chechen Republic, Maskhadov. With whom, in the opinion of the United States, should negotiations be carried out? What do you see as a way out of the conflict in the north Caucasus? // Alu Abusultanov (Chechen Republic)**

First, when we speak about a political process or solution, this does not mean that we are talking about negotiations. There are many other ways to reach a solution. We consider the concept of political settlement the Russian government has carried out over the past one and a half years - a process of elections - is one potential path. However we believe certain opportunities were missed in following this approach, in particular, the exclusion of serious candidates in elections, both the last elections and the upcoming ones. And, certainly there are questions about how these elections were conducted. Although we have some doubts about how these principles are being applied, we still believe building Chechen government structures through a political process is one way to proceed that is an alternative to negotiations.

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

— **Mr. Ambassador, what do you think about the Khodorkovskiy case? What is the U.S. reaction to the possible sale of Yukos assets? What is their value? After all, there are some Yukos shareholders in the United States, including large foundations. Thanks! // Vasily (Krasnoyarsk)**

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

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

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

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