

The Other Russia response to the July 28, 2009, Hearing of the House Committee on Foreign Affairs, Subcommittee on Europe

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On July 28, the US House of Representatives House Committee on Foreign Affairs, Subcommittee on Europe held a hearing with the title, “The Reset Button Has Been Pushed: Kicking Off a New Era in U.S.-Russian Relations.” The witnesses before the committee were Philip H. Gordon, of the State Department and Celeste A. Wallander of the Defense Department

The hearing contained several items of interest for the members of our pro-democracy coalition in Russia, several members of which met with US President Obama during his visit to Moscow in early July. Mr. Gordon’s positions were generally robust and we laud his unequivocal support for human rights and free media in Russia as well as the territorial integrity of Russia’s neighbors.

THE MYSTERIOUS \$29 MILLION

There was also one item in Mr. Gordon’s submitted testimony that received tremendous attention and publicity from the Kremlin-controlled media in Russia. This was Mr. Gordon’s statement that, quoting his submitted testimony, “... the U.S. Government is providing over \$29 million in assistance to advance democracy and human rights in Russia, most of which is targeted to strengthen civil society, independent media and the rule of law.” Every state-controlled media source, which is to say every major media outlet in Russia, gave this number as the only piece of information from the hearing. The obvious implication in these stories was that the US was fomenting trouble in Russia, if not outright treason and revolution.

Mr. Gordon cannot be blamed for the Kremlin’s propaganda. But since it is the members of our coalition who bear the impact of the Medvedev/Putin regime’s persecution, we must highlight that we are unaware of any significant pro-democracy projects funded by the monies Mr. Gordon mentioned. We have thousands of members and allies in groups all across Russia and nowhere have we seen or heard of independent media receiving such funding. In fact, it is a generally understood here that a great deal of USAID funding in Russia – substantially more than \$29 million by their own numbers – ends up in the hands of authoritarian government officials and various middlemen.

Mr. Gordon's "\$29 million" statement was not made during the hearing itself, which is unfortunate because we imagine several House members would have been interested to hear exactly how this money is being spent, if indeed Mr. Gordon has such information. In fact, Congressman Inglis (R-SC), to his credit, asked Mr. Gordon if there was anything that could be done to aid the people of Russia who want to see an end to the murders and kidnappings of those who oppose or investigate the Kremlin regime. Mr. Gordon gave a vague response and declined to mention the \$29 million in US aid outlined in his submitted testimony.

WHERE IS THE MONEY?

This is directly related to another aspect that was ignored during the subcommittee hearing, that of the Kremlin's virulent internal anti-American propaganda campaign. In his opening remarks, Congressman Delahunt (D-MA) expressed frustration that two-thirds of Russians polled have a negative view of the United States. Mr. Gordon declined to explain that the Kremlin-controlled media, from which 80% of Russians get their news, has for many years constantly portrayed the US as an enemy intent on weakening and controlling Russia.

If the US government is going to make claims about aiding pro-democracy causes in Russia, claims that lead to crackdowns against our members here, we must demand there be some accounting as to how and where that money is being spent. There are many worthy and beleaguered organizations in Russia dedicated to returning our country to the rule of law and to the international stage as an independent and equal partner to the West with free markets and a free media. If it is confirmed that US taxpayer money is instead going to support the oppressive Medvedev/Putin regime, this must cease.

THE KREMLIN'S MAN IN WASHINGTON

During the hearing Congressman Rohrabacher (R-CA) vociferously promoted the Kremlin party line as well as any paid Putin spokesman. He criticized the US and NATO for extending protection to the Baltic states and criticized the fact that such protection had made the Baltic states less vulnerable to "compromise" with Russia; he worried that sanctions against Iran might damage Russian interests; he endorsed Russia's practice of turning off gas supplies to Ukraine and Europe; and most shockingly, Mr. Rohrabacher stated that the US should partner with "a

- USAID partners with the Russian Central Bank and the Russian Foreign Ministry.
- The Senate Foreign Operations Committee recommended a \$20 million increase over the \$47 million aid request for Russia.
- In one appropriation footnote the Committee recommends \$500,000 to support the work of the US Forest Service in the Russian Far East.
- Sources: <http://bit.ly/nb6Ch> ; <http://bit.ly/BIJOQ>

giant” (Russia) instead of being concerned with an “alliance with Lilliputians” (the Baltic states) and that the US couldn’t depend on its European friends. That he further invoked President Ronald Reagan to defend this attitude of allying with the strong at the expense of the weak was even more startling.

Congressman Rohrabacher also stated there are “opposition parties and opposition newspapers” in Russia, which revealed him to be ignorant of the reality of the Putin regime, where only token symbols of opposition are allowed. Finally, Mr. Rohrabacher referred to the recent kidnapping and murder of rights activist and investigator Natalia Estemirova as “just one journalist” whose brutal killing did not merit the attention it received relative to the Chinese suppression of the Uighers. (Our appreciation to Mr. Gordon for bluntly rejecting this cynical line of reasoning.) Many colleagues, many dozens of Russian activists and journalists – all in some way involved in activities unpopular with the government – have been killed during the Putin regime without a conviction to show. If Mr. Rohrabacher desires more information he can consult the partial list of the names of political prisoners and victims that opposition leader Garry Kasparov presented to President Obama in July. We fear that no number of such murders would be enough for Mr. Rohrabacher to realize that the police state Mr. Putin has created is not deserving of his passionate endorsement.