



Interview With Yevgeniy Gryunberg, anchor for "Sostoyaniye KZ" on Channel 31

Richard A. Boucher, Assistant Secretary for South and Central Asian Affairs

Almaty, Kazakhstan
April 8, 2006

GRYUNBERG: In February 2006, the Department of State established a new bureau of South and Central Asian affairs, and Richard Boucher was appointed to head it. Today Assistant Secretary of State Richard Boucher decided to personally acquaint us with his new position, since he turned up in our country.

Hello Mr. Boucher. Tell us please, the establishment of such a bureau - does that mean the U.S. recognized our countries as separate, self-sufficient political players, or is the new bureau some kind of separate headache for the U.S.?

ASSISTANT SECRETARY BOUCHER: First of all, thanks for having me today. It's not a headache. Our goal is to make sure these countries get the opportunities and the attention they deserve from the United States. One of our goals is to make sure we don't lose all the connections between Central Asia and Europe - connections between the Council of Europe, the OSCE, the European Bank, NATO, the European Union. But we'll see what we can do to promote the other connections to the south.

The historic change in the region is that Afghanistan is no longer the obstacle. It can be a place where goods, energy, communications, important ideas flow back and forth. And if we can set up these connections, it means the countries of Central Asia, including Kazakhstan, have more options. We want these to be independent, prosperous, and democratic countries. We don't want them to depend only on Russia or depend only on China, or depend only on India, or depend only on us. They deserve all these options. And the people of the region deserve all the options as well.

GRYUNBERG: Mr. Boucher, on taking your position, you said that the countries of South and Central Asia have a decisive role, and significance for the United States of America. What is that significance all about?

ASSISTANT SECRETARY BOUCHER: I think the significance is the moment, it's the geographic position, it's the great potential of these countries. Nowhere is that clearer than in Kazakhstan, which has great potential in energy, great potential in agriculture, great potential as a stabilizer in this region and a great potential to support and expand its role. So our goal is to figure out how to help Kazakhstan realize that. Some of it's economic, some of it's security, some of it's by helping Kazakhstan achieve democracy. All those things go together, and they all support each other.

GRYUNBERG: What is this so-called transformational diplomacy of Condoleezza Rice and which you've also referred to?

ASSISTANT SECRETARY BOUCHER: A lot of that is about us, American diplomats. She's trying to describe for Americans what our diplomats do. A long, long time ago, when I joined the Foreign Service, the main job was just reporting on what was going on, maintaining relationships. She wants us to be out working with people, helping people, starting programs, trying to support change. Find the people in society who are looking for something new and different and looking for opportunities, and helping them get it. So it's about a much more active diplomacy on the ground. And I think our diplomats here are doing that.

GRYUNBERG: Another quote from your "inauguration speech," if I may call it that. You made reference to President Bush, in saying that U.S. policy is to promote democratic growth in each country, with the final objective of ending tyranny in the world. What countries in Central Asia, from the U.S. perspective, are tyrannical regimes?

ASSISTANT SECRETARY BOUCHER: Well, I think in all the countries of this region there's pressure for change. Some are farther along and some are very far back. Unfortunately, for example, in Uzbekistan, we've seen the situation move backwards. What President Bush said, is that a world without democracy is not a stable world. We tried for a long time in Latin America, and especially in the Middle East, to support governments, thinking they could maintain stability. But we didn't get stability. Eventually we got attacks against America. So President Bush has said we have to find and support the people who want to modernize their society, the people who want to advance into the modern world, people who want to build democratic stability, and work with them.

We're not here to overthrow governments. We're not here to disrupt governments. We're here to help people achieve what they want.

GRYUNBERG: Let's move on to the example of Kyrgyzstan to figure out what appears to be a contradiction in terms of reaction by the government of Kyrgyzstan to events, or contradictions in terms of the assistance provided by the U.S. to this country. You probably remember, there was a time when Kyrgyzstan for the United States of America was some sort of exemplary model island of democracy. And then suddenly a revolution came about a year ago, the anti-people regime of Askar Akayev was overthrown, and George Bush welcomed that revolution, calling it the first breath of freedom in Central Asia. Don't you think that that is a sort of contradictory approach towards relationships, from the U.S. standpoint?

ASSISTANT SECRETARY BOUCHER: I suppose so, but where there's change, we need to recognize it, and we need to work with it. If the people of that country want to move in the right direction, if the people in that country want to expand their democracy, we should see what we could do. I'll be going there after Astana, and I'll look and talk to them, and say, "Where are you headed? What do you want to do? What do you need from us to continue the progress toward democracy?" In some places it's training, in some places it's working with journalists, in some places it's doctors and lawyers and judges, helping people write laws that are in new areas. But in the end, it's based on that question - what do you want to do, where do you want to go, and how can we help.

GRYUNBERG: If you don't mind, let's get into more detail on this. As we all know, the United States allocates funding to support democracy in countries in Central Asia. How is that funding spent in our countries?

ASSISTANT SECRETARY BOUCHER: I think the first thing to remember is, we allocate a lot of money to economic development, education, economic reform, healthcare, making borders safe, helping government perform its functions better. Democracy money - all that supports the institutions of government and supports the building of democracy. More directly, democracy funding might train journalists, it might help people who are forming civil organizations to move people overseas who are doing similar things. It might provide completely open training for political parties.

So we don't try to pick which political parties should win. We try to let each one - all of them - learn how to organize, how to keep their party lists, how to train their people who might be going to elections to watch the polls. We work a lot with election commissions. There's any number of things we might do. It goes back to the question, what do you want to do, and how can we help.

GRYUNBERG: One more quote of yours. "Some leaders, including those in Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, reacted negatively to the challenges of fighting terror and meeting the demands of their people for economic and political opportunity, and we will have to manage our relations accordingly." What kind of changes are you talking about? What kind of new relationships?

ASSISTANT SECRETARY BOUCHER: Well, I think frankly, Uzbekistan's been moving backwards, and not just with regard to us and people who are trying to do work and help the people of Uzbekistan. But they've been very harsh on their own people. We saw the horrible shootings in Andijan. We've seen something like 2,000 Uzbek organizations closed down. We've seen people put in jail. So, it's very hard for us to do anything positive for the Uzbek people when the government is such a problem. Nonetheless, we're trying to help them with education, we're trying to help them with security. We're trying to help them meet with people outside Uzbekistan. And the same applies to Turkmenistan. If the government doesn't like us meeting with people, we still look for how we can help the people of that country. And it's not always easy.

GRYUNBERG: And in these two countries U.S. relations is used as an example to show that the United States has a set of double standards that it uses in its relations with other countries. So as long as Uzbekistan was part of the anti-terrorism effort, and while it was providing its airport and was actively involved, relations were not so harsh. This can be said about Turkmenistan, too. The United States seems to be reproaching the authorities, saying that there is not enough democratic reform, while at the same time referring to this country as the leader in terms of energy security in U.S.-Central Asian relations.

ASSISTANT SECRETARY BOUCHER: I don't know that we've said that about Turkmenistan. We'd be more inclined to say that about Kazakhstan, actually. But in any case, yeah, Turkmenistan has energy. I think you're sort of touching on a key question. Should we walk away from a country and the people of a country until they have a good democracy? Or should we look for places where we can work on a variety of things and where we can try to keep things moving? Sometimes, many times, economic reform leads to political reform. So, if we can help someone with economic reform, perhaps that will make a more open society, increase the rule of law, decrease corruption and provide opportunities. So, that's our attitude.

Uzbekistan is another case. I can frankly - the story that you told is a little backwards. Our relations with Uzbekistan went downhill over a long period of time. I visited there with Secretary Powell several times. We're always trying to find positive areas where we can work together. But they kept closing down, and closing down, and closing down. They kept alienating people in their own society, and finally they shot many of their citizens. We reacted strongly. Over the years, actually, we would withhold money from Uzbekistan. After the shootings in Andijan we spoke out, the government didn't like it, and it was neither possible for us or for them to continue to cooperate.

GRYUNBERG: They say here that the only Americans who are really happy with the Central Asian affairs are the Colorado beetles. What is the attitude toward Kazakhstan right now? Is there positive progress, at least in this country?

ASSISTANT SECRETARY BOUCHER: I think there's a perception in the United States that Kazakhstan is a first of all a big country, an important country in a key location. It's going to play an important role in world energy supplies. It's carried out a number of economic reforms, so that opens the possibility for expansion of the economy in other areas. Kazakhstan can and will benefit from regional ties. Kazakhstan will benefit from having more options, a variety of ways to sell oil and gas, electricity. We've seen some movement in Kazakhstan. We're also looking for movement towards rule of law, fighting corruption, building democratic institutions, so that this kind of change can go into the future. I think the simple answer is the phrase I used, democratic stability.

We're very concerned when we see the murders of opposition politicians. We want to make sure that those are investigated completely. We also look at things that are happening, like the Democracy Commission, with an open mind, to say, this sounds like something that could move the society forward, if it's done openly and with the participation of all segments of society.

But I think that we look at Kazakhstan as a place that's moving forward in many ways. And in order to be a strong power in the long term, it needs to move forward in all these ways.

GRYUNBERG: You've touched on a theme that's very important in our country. Let's move on. Concerning the murder of the opposition politician Sarsenbayev, in Kazakhstani society right now, there's too little information, there's a lack of confidence in the authorities. We know the FBI participated in the investigation of this case, but unfortunately, we're not getting any details, any news, any new facts. The opposition press even says the FBI hasn't helped at all in the investigation. Maybe you have some important details regarding the investigation of this case.

ASSISTANT SECRETARY BOUCHER: I think one of the things, at least in our law, is that, as investigations are underway, it's not good for investigators to talk about what they're finding out and what they think might have happened. They have to follow the facts all the way to the end and make their conclusions based on hard evidence. That process is underway. Our FBI is indeed helping the Kazakh investigators. And eventually, all this information will have to be presented in court. And I'm sure that we will present whatever information we've learned. So I do think that this needs to be followed seriously all the way to the end. And if there's a fair and complete investigation, we'll all be able to learn what happened. It's a very sad and tragic event, and we do need to get to the end of it.

GRYUNBERG: Today, when the investigation is still underway, can you say that it's being conducted properly, the way you would do it in the United States, very thoroughly, without any political pressure?

ASSISTANT SECRETARY BOUCHER: You know, I've got to stand back from the investigation and let those people do their work. I can tell you it should be conducted properly, without political pressure, but I don't think I can make a judgment until the case is over.

GRYUNBERG: OK. You're going to Astana next, you'll probably visit Kazakhstani authorities and the opposition. Let's start with the authorities. What is your view of the Kazakhstani authorities' striving for democratic reform? What is your view of President Nazarbayev's new initiative to set up this democracy commission?

ASSISTANT SECRETARY BOUCHER: Well, I think first of all, I'll be doing a great deal of work with the Kazakhstani authorities. We'll talk about regional economic integration, we'll talk about Kazakhstan's integration with the international economic community, we'll talk about some political issues, diplomatic issues, and we'll certainly talk about the democracy commission. I want to hear from them, what kind of results they're expecting, how they will involve people from all sectors of society, including the opposition, and how they expect to make this work, to create long term institutions for society. We'll also talk about what we and others might do to help.

GRYUNBERG: Now, about the opposition. There's a well known slogan, that a country is as democratic as the strength of its opposition. So, how do you assess the capabilities of the opposition in Kazakhstan today?

ASSISTANT SECRETARY BOUCHER: You know, I don't think I should judge, that's for the Kazakh people to judge. I think a nation is as democratic as the voice of its people is heard and is reflected in the kind of government they have. So, I can't say who should be in government, except I can say, the people in government need to be chosen by the people.

GRYUNBERG: But the voice of the Kazakhstani people was heard recently, 93% voted for the incumbent president Nazarbayev. Getting back to this phrase, that a country is as democratic as its opposition, I would say that we have 7% democracy, or there is something wrong with the opposition. What I'm getting at, do you have any recommendations for the opposition? Ambassador Ordway encouraged the opposition to engage in a dialogue with the government, but the opposition never followed his advice.

ASSISTANT SECRETARY BOUCHER: Well, I think it's important for the government and the opposition to talk to each other. Their voice needs to be heard, in the commission and decisions about the future of the country will be run. As you know, we thought the elections had some severe flaws. Many others did as well. That is not to say that President Nazarbayev might not have won, if it was a completely open and fair election. But we'll never really know because of the problems. Just the same, we'll never really know how much support the opposition had, until elections are fair and free. So really, having a fair election helps the government and the opposition establish themselves as a political force in the longer term.

GRYUNBERG: I understand that you're a diplomat, but let me try to get back to the previous topic, the political murder. The opposition press makes some references to

the FBI, and there is an opinion that the death of Zamanbek Nurkadilov, another member of the opposition, may not be a suicide, that it could also be called a politically motivated murder. Can you either support or deny that?

ASSISTANT SECRETARY BOUCHER: I have not heard the FBI say anything about whether that might be murder or suicide. I don't think we know.

GRYUNBERG: One more question, maybe this will work out for me. Tell me please, in general, these two very serious political events, emergencies for our country, are still very unclear. The most important thing is to figure out whether this is some sort of struggle without any rules, or maybe external interference. I think the Department of State must have analyzed the situation. Both of those versions would mean a totally different attitude toward our country.

ASSISTANT SECRETARY BOUCHER: Well, I guess we try to deal with what we have, and we try to make it better. I've been meeting this afternoon with some political scientists and some opposition politicians, and they were trying to help me understand what's going on in Kazakhstan, and how these various factors exist. I don't think my judgment from 12,000 miles is as valid as the judgment of people inside the country. And I think we really have to look for a way to base ourselves on reality here, and what people want, and try to move it forward.

GRYUNBERG: So you don't think that this was some sort of a strike against the authorities, this is not viewed as some sort of serious event that casts a shadow on all the political personages, that's what in fact we're always being threatened with.

ASSISTANT SECRETARY BOUCHER: Well, I think a murder of a prominent political figure, particularly if we've seen a number of murders of people involved in politics or journalism, that's certainly a matter of concern. But until I have the facts, until the investigation is finished, it's hard to say exactly why it happened.

GRYUNBERG: One more quote from you, you mentioned that in our region there is a new generation of young people with a lot of potential, who, if given a chance, will be able to reap great benefits for themselves and for the world. Nevertheless, judging by statistical trends among the younger generation, we see the rise of anti-Americanism. How does America intend to address this?

ASSISTANT SECRETARY BOUCHER: That's an interesting problem. I've tried in my previous job as spokesman to figure this out and to do something about it. Frankly, it's hard. You can't just talk to people and expect them to change their minds, particularly if they're not ready to listen to you openly. So, I think there's a couple things we have to do and we are doing. One is to try to connect with people on an individual basis. What the young people want, and what their parents want, is education, technology, opportunity, a chance to travel, a chance to work in a place where they can get ahead by their own effort, a chance to decide their future, personally, and in their nation. I want to make sure the United States is helping them get all those things. Because I really think we can help them acquire economic opportunity, technology, information, a chance to decide. Over time, perhaps that will change their attitude.

The second thing is, we're trying to get as many people as possible to visit the United States, whether on their own, or through scholarships and travel programs. It doesn't mean that everyone who goes to America agrees with us. But we can have a different and more rational discussion with people who have a better understanding of who we are and what we want. Many things are said about Americans, many of these things are untrue. So, we think that if people can understand a little more about the United States, we can have a better discussion of policy. People who think we're right, can tell us we're right, people who think we're wrong can tell us we're wrong.

GRYUNBERG: In trying to understand us better, Condoleezza Rice advised George Bush to read "Crime and Punishment" by Fyodor Dostoyevsky. Do you know if he has read it?

ASSISTANT SECRETARY BOUCHER: I don't actually.

GRYUNBERG: Was that some sort of mandatory reading for Department of State staff? Did you read it?

ASSISTANT SECRETARY BOUCHER: No, I read it many, many years ago, 30 years ago. I probably don't remember it as well as I should. It's a fantastic book, it's very complicated, it's very profound. But I think I'd have to think some more to find out how it applies to my present work. Maybe I'll take the advice and re-read it myself.

GRYUNBERG: Thank you. Tell me, are there any other authors or philosophers from Central Asia or South Asia you plan to read to enhance your understanding of our area?

ASSISTANT SECRETARY BOUCHER: You know, I try to keep reading as much as I can. And in this new job I go on the airplane a long, long time to get somewhere. So, I've been picking up books about India, about Pakistan, about the history of this region, Central Asia. But I haven't found many good books yet on the present Central Asia. So I'll keep looking.

GRYUNBERG: So, everything is about the past, the wisdom of our people lies in the past. What is your vision of our future?

ASSISTANT SECRETARY BOUCHER: I think first my vision is to support your vision. I think people here are no different than anywhere else. They want a chance to develop themselves, educate their children, decide their own affairs, including their government, opportunity to travel. So, in some ways, my vision is just that Kazakhstan should be a normal country, trade and travel and education, with the rest of the world. But I think if Kazakhstan keeps moving forward, it can be more than that. It can be an important player in this region, an important source of energy for Europe, and for Pakistan and India. An example, perhaps, to other states, about how reform and democracy could work in a Muslim society, in a mixed society. So, I guess the question is, how far can Kazakhstan go? I don't know yet, but we'll try to help.

GRYUNBERG: Thank you very much for finding time for us. Thank you for your answers. Come and see us more frequently, Mr. Boucher.

ASSISTANT SECRETARY BOUCHER: Thank you very much, it's a great pleasure to be with you.

Released on April 10, 2006



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