

Whereas, she has selflessly served the needs of her community and encourages those around her to do the same: Now, therefore, be it

Resolved, That along with her friends, family, and the residents of the 18th Congressional District, I commend and thank Alexis Roll for her service to Zanesville and the State of Ohio. Congratulations to Alexis Roll on her selection as one of the top two youth volunteers in Ohio for 2008.

LEV PONOMAREV AND THE
FUTURE OF FREEDOM IN RUSSIA

HON. ALCEE L. HASTINGS

OF FLORIDA

IN THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

Wednesday, March 5, 2008

Mr. HASTINGS of Florida. Madam Speaker, as President Vladimir Putin ends his presidency of the Russian Federation and his anointed successor, Dmitry Medvedev, prepares to take over, I would call the attention of my colleagues to what I consider an alarming backward step recently taken by the Kremlin in the area of civil liberties and freedom of speech.

Last week, we learned that criminal charges have been filed against human rights activist Lev Ponomarev for allegedly slandering the head of the Russian prison system, General Yuri Kalinin.

Mr. Ponomarev had charged publicly that so-called "torture camps" have been established in certain penal colonies under General Kalinin's jurisdiction. If taken to court and convicted, Mr. Ponomarev could be fined, or even imprisoned for as much as 3 years.

Mr. Ponomarev, the leader of the Moscow-based organization "For Human Rights," is a veteran human rights campaigner, going back to the Soviet era. He recently met with the staff of the Helsinki Commission, of which I am honored to serve as chairman, to share his concerns about what he feels is a pattern of systematic abuse and violence in Russia's penal system. The slander charges were filed when he returned to Moscow.

Madam Speaker, I make no judgment about the substance of Mr. Ponomarev's contentions. Nevertheless, I would point out that much of what he stated has already been publicized in the Russian media and by the office of the Russian State Duma's human rights ombudsman. It would appear that Mr. Ponomarev is being prosecuted not for any genuine crimes he may have committed, but for his prominent and long-time human rights activity. If this is indeed the case, he joins a growing number of Russian citizens who have been subjected to questionable legal procedures by authorities as a result of their political activities.

Unfortunately, this situation is symbolic of larger problems in Russia that are recounted very well in a February 25th editorial by Washington Post columnist Jackson Diehl entitled, "Holding Medvedev to His Words."

I would like to submit this article for the RECORD and I urge my colleagues to read it to better understand the challenges faced by Russian citizens who work for human rights and civil society in today's Russia.

[From the Washington Post, Feb. 25, 2008]

HOLDING MEDVEDEV TO HIS WORDS

(By Jackson Diehl)

Dmitry Medvedev, the man Vladimir Putin has appointed to be elected as Russia's president next Sunday, is so slavishly devoted to his patron that he has begun imitating his physical quirks. That includes "how he lays his hands on the table or how he stresses key words in speeches," not to mention walking with "fast and abrupt steps," according to the Reuters journalist Oleg Shchedrov.

Medvedev presumably won't be exercising his power as president to dismiss the prime minister—the position Putin is about to assume—anytime soon. Yet the diminutive 42-year-old former law professor has been making some interesting statements the past couple of weeks. For example: "Russia is a country of legal nihilism. No European country can boast such a universal disregard for the rule of law."

Or: "Freedom is inseparable from the actual recognition by the people of the power of law. The supremacy of the law should become one of our basic values." Or: "One of the key elements of our work in the next four years will be ensuring the independence of our legal system from the executive and legislative branches of power."

It's hard to believe that Medvedev could mean this. After all, the man he is to succeed has, according to estimates by Russian and Western analysts, accumulated a \$40 billion fortune while in office, ranging from shares in Russian energy companies to an apartment in Paris. On his watch, 14 journalists—almost all of them Kremlin critics—have been murdered, but none of the killers has been brought to justice. Relations with Britain are icy, thanks to Putin's refusal to act on Scotland Yard's case against the former KGB agent it says poisoned a Putin critic in London.

But criminality isn't limited to the Kremlin; it may be Russia's single greatest problem. Average citizens are frustrated by everything from the bribes necessary to obtain simple services to the extortion practiced by police and the susceptibility of judges to payoffs, as well as political orders. Promising the rule of law—even if he doesn't apply it to Putin and his circle—may be the juiciest pre-election promise Medvedev can make.

In any case, his pledge was seized upon by Lev Ponomarev, the courageous and pragmatic leader of the Russian movement For Human Rights, which is fighting an uphill battle to retard the country's return to Soviet-style lawlessness. Ponomarev was in Washington this month to lobby the Bush administration and the presidential campaigns; as he explained it, Russia's presidential transition offers a rare opportunity for outsiders to press Moscow to adhere to basic international standards.

"I don't have any big illusions," Ponomarev told me. "I think Mr. Medvedev is just another face of Mr. Putin. On the other hand it provides an opportunity to follow up on the rhetoric about the rule of law. If Mr. Medvedev says A, maybe it is possible to pressure him to say B. What can B be? It can be specific steps for restoring and enforcing legal norms."

Ponomarev said that President Bush and his successor can start by pushing Medvedev to stop using the law as an instrument of political repression. That would mean ending such practices as the prosecution of liberal academics on bogus espionage charges; the involuntary commitment of opposition activists to psychiatric wards, or their draft into the military; and the campaigns against human rights and other civil society groups based on supposed tax violations or breaches of local ordinances.

Next comes what Ponomarev called "the torture camps": a re-emerging gulag of some 50 prison colonies, closed to the outside world, where prisoners are subjected to systematic violence and abuse. Ponomarev's group has documented these practices in photographs and videos smuggled out of the camps, many of which are controlled by the same officials or clans that managed them in the Soviet era.

Finally, there is the legal persecution of those who report such truths. On Friday, state prosecutors brought criminal charges against Ponomarev himself, claiming that he had slandered Gen. Yuri Kalinin, the head of the prison camp system. Ponomarev's travel documents were also revoked; his lawyers believe he is being punished for speaking out in the United States.

"It seems to me that a country that is a member of the G-8," the group of rich democracies that Russia was allowed into a decade ago, "cannot afford to have political prisoners and to have torture in its prison camps," Ponomarev said to me. It also shouldn't be allowed to prosecute human rights activists who try to promote the rule of law. Medvedev ought to be asked by President Bush and other Western leaders to explain how his talk of ending "legal nihilism" squares with the charges against Ponomarev—before the new president gets his first invitation to a G-8 summit.

A TRIBUTE TO PASTOR EMERITUS
A.D. THOMAS

HON. ADAM B. SCHIFF

OF CALIFORNIA

IN THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

Wednesday, March 5, 2008

Mr. SCHIFF. Madam Speaker, I rise today to recognize Pastor Emeritus A.D. Thomas, who is celebrating more than 50 years in the ministry.

Pastor Thomas began serving in the ministry in the late 1950s at Saint Matthew Baptist Church in Merced, California. In 1966, he was called to be pastor of Lincoln Avenue Baptist Church in Pasadena, where he ministered for 28 years, until his retirement in 1994.

Under Pastor Thomas' leadership at Lincoln Avenue Baptist Church, many milestones were achieved. A few of the landmark achievements include the purchase of the church's surrounding property, construction of a new sanctuary and the A.D. Thomas Educational Center and the incorporation of Lincoln Avenue Baptist Church.

Many youth-oriented programs were created under Pastor Thomas' guidance, including a scholarship ministry, BEST after-school program, children's church, vacation bible school, youth choir, and Baptist Youth Fellowship. Other programs created during his tenure were the Nurses Guild, food outreach—clothing ministry, the Board of Christian Education, the transportation department, and new membership ministry. Pastor Thomas has also given generously of his time and experience to many community and church-affiliated organizations, such as the Interdenominational Ministerial Alliance.

Pastor Thomas and his wife, Dr. Sandra Thomas, long-time Altadena residents, have three children, Michael, Vincent, and Rosalyn, and six grandchildren.

I ask all Members of Congress to join me in congratulating Pastor Emeritus A.D. Thomas for his lifetime commitment to religious services and the betterment of the community.