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Romney: Russia Is America's 'No. 1 Foe'

By Jonathan Earle

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Barack Obama sharing a moment of candor with Dmitry Medvedev that was inadvertently caught on a "hot mic." **Pablo Martinez Monsivais**

U.S presidential hopeful Mitt Romney is taking his turn as political pot-stirrer, singling out Russia as America's main antagonist on the international stage.

On Monday, Romney told CNN's Wolf Blitzer that Russia is "without question our No. 1 geopolitical foe" because it "fights every cause for the world's worst actors."

An embarrassing hot-mic gaffe by President Barack Obama at a nuclear summit in Seoul earlier in the day served as a pretext for the remark.

Obama was overheard telling Russian counterpart Dmitry Medvedev that he would have more flexibility in arms-control negotiations after the U.S. presidential election in November.

Romney, who is locked in a marathon for the Republican nomination, used the occasion to accuse Obama of hiding future concessions and repeat charges that the Obama

administration has been too soft on the successor state to America's Cold War nemesis.

Analysts dismissed the remark as misinformed, and opposition activists, whom the Kremlin often accuses of being Western puppets, said it would have little impact on their work.

"Just because Russia doesn't always follow the United States, it doesn't make Russia a foe," said Masha Lipman, an analyst with the Carnegie Moscow Center.

Romney's comments drew ridicule from Medvedev on Tuesday.

"It smells of Hollywood. Candidates for the U.S. presidency should use reason when they make such statements," Medvedev told journalists at the conclusion of the summit, RIA-Novosti reported.

Russia and China have faced intense criticism in the West for resisting UN sanctions against the Syrian government, which the UN says has killed thousands of civilians to crush a popular uprising that began early last year.

"Russia might not be a close ally or a good partner, but it is a partner," Lipman said, pointing to Russia's decision to allow supplies to NATO troops in Afghanistan to pass through its territory.

Fyodor Lukyanov, editor of Russia in Global Affairs, said Russia's leadership should be flattered that Romney takes them so seriously.

"The United States' main foe is its failure to understand what's going on," he said. "The political and economic rise of Asia, namely China, is far more important than Russia."

Lukyanov said Romney's remark should be taken in the context of the primary campaign.

"If he wins, of course he'll carry out a different foreign policy. He'll have specialists who explain things to him,"

Officials close to the Kremlin were careful to portray the remark as a fringe position cooked up by Romney's "neoconservative advisers" during an election campaign and not official U.S. policy.

Alexei Pushkov, head of the foreign relations committee in the State Duma, told journalists it was the work of American policy makers set on establishing U.S. world hegemony.

Another Kremlin-leaning official riffed on Medvedev's analogy by comparing Romney to the cowboy mascot for Marlboro cigarettes.

"Republicans have decided to play the Marlboro man in how they position themselves on the international stage," said Alexander Sokolov, head of the Public Chamber's international affairs working group, RIA-Novosti reported.

Romney, the front-runner for the Republican nomination, has criticized the Obama administration's "reset" policy of engagement with Russia.

He says the administration gave too many concessions on the New START arms control treaty

and should not have unilaterally nixed a proposed antiballistic missile station in Poland.

But Monday's remark was his strongest yet, and perhaps the most hostile remark by a major U.S. politician since President Ronald Reagan's "evil empire" speech.

Republican Senator John McCain has come under fire for periodic tweets, including several directed at Prime Minister Vladimir Putin in which he compared the recent street protest movement to the Arab Spring revolts that swept authoritarian regimes from power beginning in early 2011.

The Kremlin and its allies presented those tweets as evidence that the resurgent opposition was part of a foreign plot.

But now, with Duma and presidential elections safely over, opposition activists said they aren't worried about Romney's words being used against them.

"Of course it helps the Kremlin, but Russians have too many problems to worry about what's happening in the United States," said veteran human rights activist Lev Ponomaryov. "Obama has firmly supported civil society and human rights, but maybe a little softer than the Republicans."

Sergei Mitrokhin, leader of the liberal Yabloko party, was less diplomatic in his characterization of Romney.

"I think the guy's an idiot. How else could I react?" Mitrokhin said. "It's dangerous, of course, if an idiot becomes president of the United States. ... Until then, it doesn't affect us at all." he said.

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