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Clarification: How the Russian Media Distorted Comments by an Alaska State Official

By The Moscow Times

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Alaska gubernatorial candidate Bill Walker, left, talks with his former running mate, Craig Fleener, before a news conference, Sept. 2, 2014, in Anchorage, Alaska. **AP Photo / Mark Thiessen**

On Thursday, we published an article titled "Russian Media Distorts Comments by Alaska State Official," describing a report by the news agency RIA Novosti about comments Craig Fleener, Alaska's senior advisor for Arctic policy, made in Arkhangelsk this week.

We at The Moscow Times understand that there may have been some confusion about Mr. Fleener's remarks, which RIA Novosti summarized in the following way: "Alaska might be better developed today, if it were under Russian control."

It would have been an extraordinary claim by a U.S. official, which is why we reached out directly to Mr. Fleener for clarification. This is the response he sent us:

Thank you for the opportunity to correct the message.

The question posed to me was '"Do you think Alaska would be more or less developed if it remained a Russian territory?"

My response was that Alaska is a very long distance from the developed part of Russia and therefore would not have likely been more developed. Developing very remote regions is very expensive, especially in the far north. Compare Alaska to Chukotka where there is limited development. However, I added that it likely would have been developed as a point of national defense because of its proximity to Canada and the U.S., and there are a lot of oil, gas and minerals that would have been developed, as well.

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There was also this exchange on Twitter:

Embed:

> @Alexey___Kovalev - no. I said Alaska is proud of our RU heritage and connections and that we want to continue to build strong partnerships.
>
> — Craig L Fleener (@AlaskasArctic) March 30, 2017

As we explained in our report on Thursday, Fleener said he believes Russia wouldn't have abandoned the region entirely, in light of its natural resources and importance to national defense, but he does not think "Alaska might be better developed today, if it were under Russian control."

RIA Novosti and the other news outlets that recycled its original report misrepresented Fleener's comments. Then RIA Novosti changed the headline of its story, which was initially "In Alaska, Announcement That the State Would Be More Developed Under Moscow's Control." The same article is now titled, "Advisor to the Alaska Government: We Value Our Ties to Russia."

In an audio tape published by RIA Novosti, moreover, Fleener only said Russia would have developed Alaska for "national defense" and "strategic position" reasons, without ever stating that Russian control would have been better for the territory, which is how dozens of other Russian news outlets then presented the story without nuance.

His comments in the recording are imprecise and contradictory, but RIA Novosti buried this ambiguity in its report and misrepresented what was actually said.

We are happy to have given Mr. Fleener the opportunity to correct his message, and apologize if this attention has inconvenienced him in any way.

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