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## Russian Ombudsman Asks Boating Tragedy's Child Survivors: 'So How Was The Swim?'

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By Anna Shamanska

Political tradition and human instinct virtually necessitate that political figures reach out to console victims of high-profile tragedies.

It is a frequent feature of national healing all around the world, whether after mass shootings in the United States, deadly terror attacks in Paris, or killer wildfires in Russia.

But Russia's combative children's rights commissioner, Pavel Astakhov, turned the convention on its head in a bizarre exchange at a June 23 meeting with young survivors of a deadly boating tragedy at a summer camp in Karelia, near Finland.

Astakhov was on a visit to the Moscow hospital treating some of the children who managed to swim and scramble to safety after a storm overturned two canoes in a remote icy lake, leaving 13 campers and a young instructor dead from drowning or hypothermia.

A [clip aired by Russia's RenTV channel](#) shows Astakhov entering a room with two female survivors of the disaster on Lake Syamozero, asking with a smile: "So how was the swim?"

"Thank God they are alive," responds the quaking voice of a woman, presumably a relative of one of the girls, from behind the camera.

Astakhov goes on to ask the girls about their flight back to Moscow and their previous stays at the Park Hotel Syamozero camp, which was operating despite a [long list of complaints](#) from parents alleging abuse and dangerous practices.

The ombudsman later tried to explain himself with a [post on Instagram](#). He blamed media for editing out important parts of the lengthy and "psychologically challenging conversation" and releasing a "sensationalist report." He claimed to have tried to speak to the girls "in their language."

"There are psychological tricks that help to open up a scared child and let them talk, share emotions, which is very important for these kids," Astakhov wrote. "Professional psychologists recommend speaking with maximum positivity."

Astakhov then appeared to throw politically charged verbal darts.

He called it a shame that investigators hadn't yet spoken to the children, but said the girls were able to say a lot that "will be used in the investigation."

Vladimir Markin, a spokesman for the Russian Investigative Committee who previously said there had been efforts to close the camp, responded by criticizing Astakhov's comments as misguided.

"We have already asked those who sent and accompanied the children on this deadly sail, 'How was the swim?' Markin said. "Investigators, unlike the ombudsman, use psychological tricks on children only in the presence of qualified psychologists."

Markin said the Investigative Committee had already discovered the circumstances and causes of the crime "in compliance with both the law and the norms of morality and ethics."

An **online petition** that emerged to remove Astakhov after his swim comments has attracted around 5,000 signatories.

Many people on social media expressed outrage with Astakhov. One user created a looped video of the ombudsman's visit and Russian President Vladimir Putin speaking to CNN about the Kursk submarine disaster of 2000, in which 118 people died.

"So how was the swim?" Astakhov asks.

"She drowned," Putin answers.

Russian businessman German Sterligov tweeted the video, saying, "This is Russia's history of mercy, compassion and philanthropy."

The Kremlin has ordered the Investigative Committee to "find those guilty" and Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev accused camp organizers of "criminal and absolutely flagrant negligence."