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TO: NCSJ Leadership and Interested Parties

**FROM: Edward B. Robin, Chairman;
Lesley Israel, NCSJ President;
Mark B. Levin, NCSJ Executive Director**



**On behalf of NCSJ We Wish You a
Chag Kasher v'Sameach Passover!**



Advocates on behalf of Jews in Russia,
Ukraine, the Baltic States & Eurasia

NCSJ WEEKLY NEWS BRIEF
Washington, D.C. April 18, 2008

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#1

Uzbekistan: Justice Ministry Revokes Accreditation Of Chief Rabbi **RFE/RL, April 11, 2008**

The Uzbek Justice Ministry has refused an accreditation request by the country's chief rabbi, Abe Dovid Gurevich. The ministry says Gurevich failed to provide proper documentation, while others say the move represents an attack on religious freedom.

The dwindling population of Jews in Central Asia represents one of the oldest religious communities in the region -- established more than 2,000 years ago, even before the predominant Muslim faith.

Though there are only thousands of Jews left in Central Asia, they still have a chief rabbi. But as of April 10, Gurevich has no official right to serve the Jewish community.

The Justice Ministry had warned on April 5 that the accreditation for Gurevich -- who has lived in Uzbekistan since 1990 -- may not be renewed. The ministry says it has multiple complaints against Gurevich and the Chabad-Lubavitch movement of Orthodox Judaism that he heads. Among those are that the group is not submitting its financial records, making its funding impossible to trace; that the organization meets at a different address than the one given to Uzbek authorities; and that Gurevich "says the laws of the Republic of Uzbekistan are not applicable to him."

Jalol Abdusattarov, the head of the Justice Ministry's Department of Religious Affairs, said on April 10 that Gurevich's activities exceeded his authority and were not in accordance with the stated goals and duties of his organization. He gave no specific examples of such activities.

'Not A Grain Of Truth'

Prior to the announcement that he was being stripped of his accreditation, correspondent Sadridin Ashurov of RFE/RL's Uzbek Service spoke to Gurevich about the Justice Ministry's announcement. He said he had no idea why the ministry would refuse to prolong his accreditation.

Since the Justice Ministry mentioned the possible refusal of accreditation to the rabbi, the state press has published articles vaguely referring to the numerous violations of the law that Gurevich has committed and questioning whether Gurevich really has any official authority to head the Jewish community in Central Asia.

Gurevich said allegations that he violated the law are inaccurate. "None of the material written about us contains even a grain of truth," he said, "not a grain of truth."

The Jewish community in Uzbekistan has seen several setbacks in the last decade. When Uzbekistan adopted a new law on religion in 1998, it abolished the rabbinate, the Jewish community's administrative office. Subsequent attempts to reopen the rabbinate have failed, leaving the Jewish community without theological schools to train rabbis.

In February 2006, Avraam Yagudaev, a Jewish leader from Tashkent, was killed in an automobile accident that some said was suspicious. A few months later, tragedy struck again when Gurevich's secretary and her mother were found strangled to death in Tashkent.

Failed To Accompany Delegation

The news about Gurevich's accreditation problem came as more than 100 members of the World Congress of Bukharan Jews arrived in Uzbekistan, led by its president, Lev Leviev. The ancient Silk Route city of Bukhara is located in Uzbekistan, and the Bukharan Jews are perhaps the best-known Jewish group of Central Asia.

Gurevich said his current difficulties -- which the rabbi says also include visa problems -- prevented him from accompanying the delegation to the city, regarded as the Uzbek Jews' homeland. Gurevich said not even an April 4 meeting with Abdusattarov, of the Justice Ministry's Department of Religious Affairs, could clear up the accreditation problem and allow him to go to Bukhara.

State media outlets in Uzbekistan do not report on issues unless the government has a reason for the news to be made public. The campaign against Gurevich in the Uzbek press looks to be paving the way for Gurevich's eventual removal as head of the Chabad-Lubavitch movement.

As for the Bukharan Jewish community, it numbered some 40,000 when the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991. Today, it is about half that as thousands took the opportunity to move to Israel, the United States, or elsewhere.

#2a

Security will be tight on Passover, which coincides with Hitler's birthday Interfax, April 14, 2008

Moscow - The Federation of Jewish Communities of Russia (FJCR) will tighten security at synagogues and community centers at Passover (Pesach) which coincides with Hitler's birthday, April 20, this year.

"We normally tighten security on this day each year, because we receive warnings about possible provocations from law enforcement services," FJCR spokesman Boruh Gorin said in an interview with the Interfax-Religion on Monday.

All synagogues and Jewish community centers are guarded as a rule, he said.

"Security is always heightened on holidays and remains tight, as in emergency situations," Gorin said.

#2b

Moscow jewish meeting commemorates Warsaw Ghetto Uprising Interfax-Religion, April 15, 2008

A meeting that commemorated the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising, a Jewish revolt in the Warsaw Ghetto that broke out on April 19, 1943, and was crushed by Nazi Germany's SS security force, being finally stamped out on May 16 of that year, was hosted by the Moscow Choral Synagogue on Tuesday.

After a minute's silence, Chief Rabbi of the Russian Congress of Jewish Religious Organizations and Associations Adolph Shayevich, senior figures in the Russian Jewish Congress and Eurasian Jewish Congress, and former ghetto residents lit six memorial candles.

"It is very important that people who live today, especially young people, should know about this so that it never happens again," Shayevich said.

"Whole academic works" are written today in a bid to prove that the Holocaust never happened and that its death toll of 6 million is a fiction, he said.

Moscow Mayor Yury Luzhkov, in a message read out at the meeting, said the rebellion had set "an example of the power of the spirit of an unbroken people" and urged modern society "to take the tragic lessons of the past to heart."

Officials from the German and Polish embassies in Moscow spoke at the meeting, and excerpts from reminiscences by Warsaw Ghetto captives were read out.

About 13,000 Ghetto residents were murdered during the rising. Most of the remaining 50,000 were sent to concentration camps.

#2c

Holocaust confab meets in Ukraine JTA Brief, April 15, 2008

Academics, teachers and Jewish activists gathered in Ukraine for a conference on the Holocaust.

Researchers from Ukraine, Israel and other countries met in Kiev Sunday and Monday to discuss "Shoah Victims' Names." The event was organized by Tkuma, Ukraine's central Holocaust foundation, together with Yad Vashem, the Holocaust Martyrs' and Heroes' Remembrance Authority, and with support from the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee.

Jewish leaders transferred the responsibility of collecting Shoah victims' names to Boris Maftzir, head of the Holocaust Commemoration Project.

The project, run by Yad Vashem, is realized in Ukraine through the Tkuma Holocaust Research Foundation and aimed at gathering information, evidence and facts about the people who died in the Holocaust.

The conference also addressed the problem of Ukrainian-Jewish relations after World War II.

#2d

Belarusian Jews want Holocaust day JTA Brief, April 16, 2008

Belarusian Jews have been rebuffed in efforts to establish a national Holocaust day.

Jewish organizations have approached government agencies with the idea of establishing a day of memory for Belarusian Jews who perished in the Holocaust, said Leonid Levin, the head of the Union of Belarusian Jewish Public Associations and Communities.

"Officials tell us that there is no need for a national day of memory because there are several international Holocaust days," Levin said. "But we are sure that a special day in Belarus is necessary because the tragedy of the Belarusian Jews was really great."

Approximately 800,000 Jews perished in Belarus during World War II.

Levin noted that this year marks the 65th anniversary of the annihilation of the Minsk ghetto.

"The Belarusian Holocaust day could be established on Oct. 21-23, when the ghetto was annihilated," he told JTA.

Levin said a memorial day would help to provide more information about the Holocaust in Belarus.

"We need a national Holocaust day," he said, "because people in Belarus and other countries don't know much about the tragedy that happened here."

#2d

Ukraine to join WTO on May 16 RIA Novosti, April 17, 2008

KIEV - Ukraine is expected to join the World Trade Organization (WTO) on May 16, 30 days after completing all accession procedures, the country's foreign ministry announced on Thursday.

The 30-day countdown began on Wednesday, after the WTO received formal notification of Ukraine's ratification of the accession protocol.

The document was signed by President Viktor Yushchenko and WTO chief Pascal Lamy on February 5. It was ratified by the country's parliament, the Supreme Rada, on April 10, and approved by the president six days after.

Ukraine has been seeking WTO membership since 1993.

#2e

JCC opens in Ufa JTA Brief, April 16 2008

UFA, Russia - A Jewish community center opened in the capital of Russia's predominantly Muslim Bashkortostan Republic.

Ufa's Jewish community celebrated the inauguration of a new community center that brings the area's Jewish organizations under one roof.

Though the center has hosted events for the republic's 13,000 Jews since late last year, prominent figures in the Chabad-led Federation of Jewish Communities traveled to Ufa to celebrate Sunday's official opening.

The community center will host the offices of Chabad, Hillel and the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee, as well as local organizations.

Before the Jewish community center's construction, the Jewish community gathered only once a year at a historic synagogue in the city's center, which has been home to the republic's philharmonic society for decades.

The head Chabad rabbi in Ufa, Dan Krichevsky, said that the new community center would unite the community and allow the region's Jews to work together despite enmity in the past.

"Sometimes there have been arguments, but in the end we all agree," he told JTA in Moscow before the opening. "We are all one community."

The \$6 million center was built with funds from prominent supporters of the Chabad-led federation including George Rohr, Keren Keshet-The Rainbow Foundation, FJC President Lev Leviev and Eugene Shvidler.

#2f
Rabbi Aaron's grave vandalized in Ukraine
Interfax, April 17, 2008

Moscow - A hut above the grave of Rabbi Aaron, a pupil of Rabbi Baal Shem Tov - the founder of Hasidism, was set to fire in the Ukrainian city of Zhytomyr in the early hours of April 16.

They also painted swastikas and Satanist symbols on the hut walls, the Federation of Jewish Communities of Russia told the Interfax-Religion on Thursday.

In connection with this, representatives of the Zhytomyr Jewish community will meet with the regional department of the Ukrainian Security Service. There will also be a press conference for the central and local media.

The grave of the zaddik (righteous man) was vandalized in November 2007. The vandals broke the hut's door, painted swastikas on the inside and outside walls and set a fire.

#2g
Tymoshenko denies systemic ethnic, religious discrimination in Ukraine
Interfax, April 17, 2008

Strasbourg, Vienna - Individual instances of xenophobia and anti-Semitism do not mean these problems are systemic in Ukraine, Ukrainian Prime Minister Yulia Tymoshenko said at a session of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE) in Strasbourg.

"Individual cases are individual cases," she said responding to questions.

She added that no clerics of any creed expressed any complaints to the authorities at the latest session of the Council of Churches, which discussed cooperation with all religions.

Tymoshenko said that the rights of all ethnic minorities are protected in Ukraine and their discrimination is absent.

She strongly denied the accusations by head of the Russian delegation to PACE Konstantin Kosachyov that schools for minorities are being closed and media access restricted, for instance, that films without subtitles in Ukrainian are prohibited.

Asked about land seizures by Crimean Tatars she said that even though the state supports their return to their historic homeland laws are the same for everyone, including laws on land.

#2h

Belarus activists fighting anti-Semitism JTA Brief, April 18, 2008

Belarusian opposition activists have started a campaign against an anti-Semitic Russian newspaper.

The activists wrote letters to the Belarus Ministry of Information and to the state representative for religious and national issues asking them to prohibit the circulation of the newspaper *Russkii Vestnik* in the country because of its anti-Semitic content.

A recent article in the newspaper was "a direct insult of religious Jewish people," activist Maria Bagdanovich, who signed the letters, was quoted as saying by Belarusian Radio Liberty.

Bagdanovich said that with their letters to the government, the activists enclosed stories from the newspaper that insult ethnic minorities.

The activists say that if they receive no reply, they will contact the public prosecutor of Belarus.

"I've read some articles in the newspaper *Russkii Vestnik* with really frightening anti-Semitic statements," Leonid Levin, the head of the Union of Belarusian Jewish Public Associations and Communities, told JTA.

Representatives of the Jewish community have been working with the government to prohibit the circulation of books and newspapers with anti-Semitic content. The Belarusian opposition shares Western liberal values and its activists frequently support concerns of the Jewish community.

#2i

ORT college wins Russian grant JTA Brief, April 18, 2008

The Moscow ORT Technology College received a \$2.48 million grant from the Russian government.

The grant is part of the federal government's policy of supporting innovative vocational colleges.

"Most importantly, winning this grant is official recognition of the college as one of the best innovative educational establishments not only in Moscow but in the whole of Russia," said Yuri Mironenko, the college's director. "This grant also means that we can significantly upgrade our facilities and so provide students with the skills and knowledge that are in high demand among leading companies."

In 2005, Moscow's education authority combined ORT's three vocational colleges into the Technology College. It now has 2,400 students.

Robert Singer, the World ORT director, noted that last year the ORT de Gunzbourg School in St. Petersburg won the prestigious President's Prize for innovation and excellence.

#2j

Putin congratulates Russian Jews on Pesach Interfax, April 18, 2008

Moscow, April 18, Interfax - Russian President Vladimir Putin has congratulated Russian Jews on the Pesach (Passover) holy day, the Russian presidential press service reported.

"You once again turn to your history, to eternal Jewish values which have panhuman importance," Putin's congratulation letter says.

"The Russian Jewish community constantly makes a significant contribution to the strengthening of interethnic and inter-religious dialogue in the country and to the strengthening of many-century long friendship of its peoples," Putin said.

#2k

Russian watchdog seeks to abolish some 30 NGOs

Interfax, April 11, 2008

MOSCOW - The Federal Registration Service (FRS) has posted a list of non-commercial organizations against which it intends to seek a court injunction to have them abolished.

The organizations whose abolition is sought include the Muslim religious organization known as the Moscow Higher Spiritual Islamic College, the trade union of cash collectors of the Russian Federation, the Biblical college of evangelist Christians known as the Centre for Teaching the Biblical Truth and Biblical Ministry, the Modern Judaism Institute religious organization, the Alpha and Omega Biblical Missionary Academy of Full Gospel Christians religious organization, the Theological Academy of Presbyterian Christians religious organization, the Corresponding Theological Institute of Evangelical Faith Christian religious organizations, the Russian National Assembly all-Russian public organization, the Association Against Racism, Xenophobia and Anti-Semitism (a branch of the International League Against Racism and Anti-Semitism) and others.

#2l

HQ Of Human Rights Center In Moscow Raided - Lawyers

Interfax, April 11, 2008

MOSCOW - Unidentified individuals stormed on Wednesday night into the headquarters of a human rights center in Moscow and tried to seize it, the press center of the legal team for Mikhail Khodorkovsky and Platon Lebedev said on Thursday.

Helping write complaints to the European Court of Human Rights based in Strasbourg, France, is one of the areas of activity of the International Defense Assistance Center, located in the center of Moscow and set up by lawyer Karinna Moskalenko

The For Human Rights organization, headed by Lev Ponomaryov, has its headquarters in the same building and was damaged during the raid, the press center said in a report posted on its website.

"The attack began around 11 p.m. At that time there remained only one member of the Center's staff in Office No. 22, lawyer Svetlana Davydova. The raiders (Lev Ponomaryov says there were about twenty of them) burst into the office, having broken down the metal door, which had been shut. They told Svetlana Davydova to leave the (office), but the lawyer refused to satisfy that demand, fearing for the Center's archive," the report said.

"The people who had burst inside broke the stairs leading to the second floor (the Center had a separate entrance). They also boarded up the other door through which it was possible to come down to the ground floor and blocked it with sacks of cement. Two of the raiders stayed in the barricaded office. 'Svetlana Davydova was with them as a hostage, as it were,' Karinna Moskalenko says angrily," the press center said.

"According to eyewitnesses, police took about two hours to get to the site of the incident and reacted extremely half-heartedly to what was happening. The two remaining nighttime visitors left the site in a police vehicle. It was promised that a detective would come to (the office) but he never came. Karinna Moskalenko is sure that the case would fade into oblivion," the report said.

"To get rid of our complaints, the authorities will tell us this was a regular attempt at forcible seizure. But I don't believe in this theory. It was an intimidation action. Our experts on litigation in the European Court work in the

(office), and we yet to find out whether some of the documents have disappeared," the report quoted Moskalenko as saying.

#3

Thousands of Russian NGOs face closure for not meeting onerous rules

By Mike Eckel

AP, April 16, 2008

MOSCOW - Thousands of Russian nongovernmental organizations face audits, potential searches and possible closure as a deadline for meeting new stringent regulations passed, rights groups and lawyers warned Wednesday.

The Tuesday deadline, with its onerous reporting requirements, come with political pressure growing on private groups in Russia involved in everything from vote monitoring to environmental activism to helping disabled children and adults.

The requirements, now in the second year, are more significant than before, because fewer organizations have been able to keep up — and because authorities have signaled they plan to increase audits and court actions.

"It's impossible to do anything else," said Maria Kanevskaya, who runs the Human Rights Resource Center in St. Petersburg. "The only people who can run NGOs now are lawyers, legal experts who can constantly follow the changes, filing deadlines. It's horrible."

In 2006, President Vladimir Putin pushed through the law that dramatically tightened reporting requirements for NGOs, saying it would make sure they were not controlled by what he called puppeteers from abroad.

Despite his liberal public image, President-elect Dmitry Medvedev has done little to suggest things will be different under him. In a February interview, he pointedly criticized foreign-funded NGOs in particular and singled out the British Council — a cultural organization that saw several of its offices closed for what many considered political reasons.

Last week, in a speech that many activists interpreted as a harbinger, Federal Security Service chief Nikolai Patrushev accused foreign NGOs of helping terrorist groups to recruit in Russia.

The 2006 law requires organization to file highly detailed reports about activities for the previous year, such as a precise accounting of all meetings held by NGO officials.

Organizations are also required to file precise statements on how they are financed — potentially exposing them to punitive tax audits.

Pavel Chikov, with the lawyers' group Agora in the central city of Kazan, said out of an estimated 227,000 NGOs registered in Russia, 25 percent would meet this year's filing requirements. The government-run newspaper Rossiskaya Gazeta also reported that only one-quarter of all NGOs have filed properly.

In less-affluent regions outside of Moscow and St. Petersburg, even fewer groups have reported meeting the deadline.

Written questions submitted to Federal Registration Service, which regulates NGOs, on Wednesday went unanswered.

However, in an article published Tuesday under the headline "Last Warning," Rossiskaya Gazeta cited unidentified registration service officials as saying more audits and court cases against NGOs were likely.

According to the U.S.-based group Human Rights Watch, between January and April 2007 authorities issued warnings to 6,000 NGOs for various alleged violations of registration procedures, and more than 2,300 were shut down by court orders since 2006.

One cultural group was warned that it had failed to properly collect dues or hold regular meetings. Another civic organization was ordered to pay taxes on grants it received from European governments after the group acknowledged the financial help in a publication.

Officials have defended the rules as a logical effort to regulate NGOs, as in many other Western countries.

Marina Rikhanova, whose group Baikal Environmental Wave has spearheaded efforts to protect Siberia's Lake Baikal, said authorities audited her books twice last year — punishment, she alleged, for opposing the governor's plans for a uranium processing facility not far from the lake.

The registration service has oversight over 3,000 NGOs in the Baikal region and our organization gets searched twice in a year?" she told The Associated Press earlier this month.

What's most troubling, many activists said, is that the bureaucracy is targeting groups with explicitly nonpolitical missions.

Svetlana Karimov's charitable foundation "Angel" in St. Petersburg has provided assistance to severely disabled children and adults since 2003. She spent three days poring over official spreadsheets trying to account for practically everything the organization has done in the past year.

"I don't think they themselves know what they want," she said. "The right hand doesn't know what the left hand is doing."

#4

Rights Activists Concerned About Hate Crime Rise in Russia Interfax, April 15, 2008

Moscow - About 60 people have died and more than 100 have been injured this year in Russia as a result of attacks related to xenophobia and ethnic hatred, human rights activists have said.

"On the whole, during January-April 2008 at least 93 xenophobia-related attacks were registered, as a result of which 57 people died and at least 116 were injured," head of the Moscow Bureau for Human Rights Aleksandr Brod told Interfax on Tuesday [15 April], referring to results of a monitoring.

He said that during only the first two weeks of April, eight xenophobia-related attacks and clashes happened in Russia, as a result of which one person died and 33 were injured. Brod said that Moscow, St Petersburg, Tver and Sverdlovsk Regions were the worst for xenophobia this year.

"Citizens of Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Azerbaijan most often become victims of attacks," Brod said.

Brod also said that human rights activists are concerned about the authorities' willingness to understate the scale of xenophobia in Russia.

"We are concerned about statements made by a group of high-ranking officials who are trying not only to understate the scale of xenophobia-related crime, but also blame representatives of expatriate communities or human rights activists of trying to deliberately make the situation look worse than it really is," he said.

Referring to expert information, the Moscow Bureau for Human Rights said that there are up to 70,000 skinheads and dozens of radical organizations in Russia.

Human rights activists suggest speeding up the development of a concept of the national policy and accepting a concept of the state migration policy to deal with xenophobia. "It is high time we created a competent executive body which would develop and realize a state ethnic and national policy," Brod said.

Meanwhile, representatives of nationalist organizations do not share human rights activists' concerns.

"Xenophobia is a subject human rights activists can speculate on," one of the leaders of the Movement Against Illegal Immigration (DPNI), Aleksandr Belov, told Interfax earlier.

"Xenophobia is, in fact, not a specifically Russian problem. For example, in Great Britain there are ten times more xenophobia-related crimes than in Russia. What 70,000 skinheads human rights activists are talking about? It is a fabrication and misinformation. [They] are creating a threat where there is no such thing," Belov said.

At the same time he agreed that the Russian youth is becoming more radical, and gave several reasons for it.

"First of all, political freedoms for nationalist organizations are being reduced. Secondly, what can young people do? Unfortunately, the number of free sports clubs is reducing. So, will they join One Russia or Nashi [pro-Kremlin youth movement]? They won't," Belov said. [Passages omitted: Details of Belov's earlier arrest].

#5

NATO: Kyiv, Tbilisi Face More Obstacles Than Simply Russian Resistance

By Brian Whitmore

RFE/RL, April 11, 2008

Days before the NATO summit in Bucharest began, Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili rolled out a new peace initiative for breakaway Abkhazia.

Just days after the summit concluded, Ukrainian President Viktor Yushchenko announced a public-relations campaign aimed at selling a skeptical public on the benefits of joining the trans-Atlantic alliance.

These two presidential announcements represent clear attempts by Tbilisi and Kyiv to address key weak spots in their respective NATO bids.

At their summit in the Romanian capital on April 2-4, the trans-Atlantic bloc's 26 heads of state stopped short of granting Georgia and Ukraine Membership Action Plans (MAP) -- a key step before joining. They postponed that decision until at least December, when NATO foreign ministers are due to meet.

"It is a political decision of the 26 whether or not to offer a Membership Action Plan. And they will take, and they are taking account of the broadest range of practical and political considerations," NATO spokesman James Appathurai told reporters during the Bucharest summit.

Among those considerations, of course, is a reluctance on the part of some members -- most notably Germany and France -- to antagonize Russia, which staunchly opposes Georgia and Ukraine's efforts to join the Western alliance.

But analysts say it isn't just Russian opposition that is keeping the two former Soviet republics' NATO dreams on hold. Although both countries have made impressive progress on military and political reform, both also still have significant issues that need to be resolved.

Analysts say Georgia also needs to complete critical political reforms and must make progress in resolving conflicts in the separatist regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, which are strongly supported by Moscow.

For its part, Ukraine needs to overcome deep divisions in both the public and the political elite over joining NATO, and fully bring its armed forces under civilian control.

'A Political Army'

NATO officials say Ukraine has made great strides in bringing its military in line with the alliance's standards. Concerns remain, however, regarding the country's Interior Ministry troops, which are highly politicized and slow to reform.

"There is a problem with civilian control over the armed forces," says Eugeniusz Smolar of the Warsaw-based Center for International Relations explains. "In Ukraine there is a so-called Interior Army, which is unacceptable from the point of view of NATO standards. It is subjugated to the minister of the interior. This is a problem. This is a sort of political army, which we can't have. So they have a job to do."

Yushchenko has tried, thus far unsuccessfully, to reform the Interior Ministry troops. On April 8, for example, parliament rejected a bill that would have turned the Interior Ministry troops into a Ukrainian National Guard directly subordinate to the president.

The Ukrainian president is also trying to convince a skeptical public that joining NATO is a good idea. According to recent polls, just one in four Ukrainians supports joining the military alliance, and the political elite remains deeply divided as well.

Yushchenko's pro-Moscow political opponent, Viktor Yanukovich, and his Party of Regions staunchly oppose joining NATO. And even Yushchenko's Orange Revolution ally, Prime Minister Yulia Tymoshenko, while generally supportive, has been reluctant to embrace the goal as enthusiastically as the president would like.

The issue promises to be hotly contested in Ukraine's 2010 presidential election. Yanukovich is widely expected to challenge Yushchenko in that race and Tymoshenko is also believed to be considering a run.

Yushchenko this week announced that Ukraine would hold a referendum on NATO membership in two years' time.

Tbilisi's Political Challenges

Georgia also has some work to do before its bid for a MAP is considered at NATO's foreign ministers' meeting in December.

"If you look at the Riga summit declaration, the NATO countries encouraged Georgia to continue making progress on political, economic, and military reform," says Koba Liklikadze, a military affairs correspondent with RFE/RL's Georgian Service, referring to the declaration from the November 2006 summit in the Latvian capital. "This includes strengthening judicial reform and a peaceful -- and I want to underline peaceful -- resolution of outstanding conflicts on its territory."

Georgia is said to have made great progress in bringing troops into line with NATO standards (AFP) Most Western analysts say Georgia has made significant progress in bringing its military in line with NATO standards. Its forces are under civilian control and its troops are increasingly well-trained and equipped.

But Tbilisi still has some gaps to fill in its political reforms. Most notably, analysts say Georgia needs to reform its highly politicized judicial system.

Moreover, Georgia's reputation as a beacon of democratic reform in a largely authoritarian South Caucasus region suffered a severe blow in November when President Mikheil Saakashvili temporarily declared emergency rule following opposition street protests.

Georgian officials have long argued that NATO membership would help to deepen democracy and prevent backsliding on the progress made thus far. But some analysts say such a strategy -- reportedly employed by Saakashvili in Bucharest -- could prove counterproductive.

"If the quality and strength of Georgian democracy depends on NATO, that means that NATO will hesitate before it will accept you among us," Smolar says.

Saakashvili says he is aware of Western concerns about the permanence of Georgia's reforms, and that parliamentary elections scheduled for May 21 will be a critical test of his country's democratic mettle. He even proposed inserting language in the Bucharest summit's final communique to allay fears that Tbilisi is backsliding on democratic reform.

"It was our initiative to include into the communique the phrase about the necessity to conduct fair and clean elections," Saakashvili said in a recent interview with Georgia's Rustavi-2 television. "It was our proposal, which is [an effort] to show once again that Georgia has truly taken the path to democracy."

Saakashvili is also aware that he needs to show progress in resolving the so-called frozen conflicts in breakaway Abkhazia and South Ossetia. On March 28, the Georgian president unveiled a peace plan that would offer Abkhazia broad autonomy, a joint free-trade zone, and a vice president who would have veto power over decisions related to the province.

Abkhaz officials have rejected the proposal.

In a recent interview with RFE/RL, Georgian Reintegration Minister Temur Iakobashvili said Georgia's frozen conflicts will not be resolved until Russia shows a willingness to negotiate in good faith.

"The peace process has not started, because there is one country, called Russia, which does not want this process to start, and wants to continue the status quo," Iakobashvili says. "The only way to make Russia more amenable toward the peace process is for Georgia to enter NATO. This would end all talk about separatism, and since entering NATO is a process, we think that as soon as this process becomes irreversible, Russia will come to the negotiating table, so that the peace process will start and move on."

While Georgia and Ukraine are hoping they will finally get their MAPs in December, most analysts say the eight months between now and then is insufficient to satisfactorily address the issues on the table.

Smolar, for one, says the earliest realistic date will be NATO's 2009 summit in the eastern French city of Strasbourg and its German border town, Kehl.

"I expect this to happen at the 60th anniversary of NATO, if everything goes well. If Ukraine and Georgia do their homework," Smolar says.

RFE/RL's Georgian and Ukrainian services contributed to this report

#6

U.S. supports President Saakashvili's peace proposals for Abkhazia As delivered by Ambassador Julie Finley to the Permanent Council, Vienna U.S. Mission to the OSCE, April 17, 2008

Georgian President Saakashvili recently elaborated peace proposals for Abkhazia. The United States strongly supports these proposals. They are a constructive and responsible attempt to offer maximal autonomy to Abkhazia within Georgia, including linguistic and cultural autonomy, veto power over legislation dealing directly with Abkhazia, and guaranteed senior positions in the central government, including a proposed Vice Presidency.

The Saakashvili plan offers a clear path to resolving the conflict and ensuring the legitimate interests of the Abkhaz while restoring Georgia's territorial autonomy and allowing the safe and dignified return of over 200,000 Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs). It is regrettable that the Abkhaz have rejected the initiative out of hand, and refuse to negotiate with Georgia in general.

We note with concern the Russian Presidential instructions issued April 16th allowing the Russian government to create "mechanisms" to "protect" the interests of Russian citizens and other residents of Abkhazia and South Ossetia and which, to this end, envision contacts with the Abkhaz and South Ossetian separatist authorities on promotion of trade and educational and scientific exchanges. In this regard, the written document does not elaborate where such mechanisms would be located and where such services would be carried out.

While we appreciate assurances we have received from Russian government officials that there are no plans to locate these "mechanisms" in Abkhazia and South Ossetia in the immediate future, the text of the instructions leaves open this possibility. It indicates that regional affiliates of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in the Krasnodar and North Ossetian regions may provide consular services to permanent residents of Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

We are also concerned by the statement in the instructions that Russian authorities will recognize as legally valid various documents and decisions taken by the governments of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. This would have the effect of legitimating the actions and legislation of the Abkhaz and South Ossetian separatists. Georgia understandably views the instructions as a provocation and a serious challenge to its sovereignty and territorial integrity.

Mr. Chairman, this move, coupled with Russia's recent lifting of CIS sanctions that opens the possibility for military assistance to Abkhazia, has significantly increased tensions in an already volatile region. In this regard, we expect Russia to live up to its recent assurances that Russia will abide by its international commitments and responsibilities not to supply weapons to conflict zones and to maintain Russian sanctions on the transfer of military services and equipment to separatist regions. Russia is supposed to be facilitating a peace process in Georgia but is instead openly siding with the separatists, calling into question Russia's facilitator role.

We urge Russia to respect Georgia's sovereignty and territorial integrity, to repeal the April 16th instructions, to play a constructive role in accordance with its commitment to act as a facilitator to the peace process, and to work with Georgia to encourage the Abkhaz and South Ossetian leaders to engage on Georgia's new proposals for a peaceful settlement of the conflicts as a basis for finding a way forward.

#7

Medvedev Won by Curious Numbers

By Nabi Abdullaev

Moscow Times, April 14, 2008

There are numerous curiosities to be found in the official returns of the March 2 presidential election.

At a polling station in the Dagestani town of Kizilyurt, for example, more than 700 voters cast their ballots, but not a single one voted for President-elect Dmitry Medvedev, who captured more than 90 percent of the vote in the republic and more than 70 percent nationwide.

While one could imagine a neighborhood where antipathy toward Medvedev runs aberrantly deep, one blogger has crunched official election results and found strikingly anomalous voter behavior across the country.

Analyzing official returns on the Central Elections Committee web site, blogger Sergei Shpilkin has concluded that a disproportionate number of polling stations nationwide reported round numbers -- that is, numbers ending in zero and five -- both for voter turnout and for Medvedev's percentage of the vote.

The statistical anomalies offer mathematical evidence of election fraud in Medvedev's victory, math-savvy bloggers, election analysts and economists said.

"This is an unnatural distribution, and it points to blatant manipulation of numbers," said Andrei Buzin, who heads the Interregional Association of Voters and has a doctoral degree in math and physics.

In most elections, one would expect turnout and returns to follow a normal, or Gaussian, distribution -- meaning that a chart of the number of polling stations reporting a certain turnout or percentage of votes for a candidate would be shaped like a bell curve, with the top of the bell representing the average, median, and most popular value.

But according to Shpilkin's analysis, which he published on his LiveJournal blog, podmoskovnik.livejournal.com, the distribution both for turnout and Medvedev's percentage looks normal only until it hits 60 percent.

After that, it looks like sharks' teeth. The spikes on multiples of five indicate a much greater number of polling stations reporting a specific turnout than a normal distribution would predict.

A suspicious voter might say polling officials stuffed ballot boxes to achieve a nice, clean percentages like 65, 70, 75, 80 and so on.

The analysis and results mirror Shpilkin's study of the Dec. 2 State Duma elections, in which he found a similar predominance of round numbers both for voter turnout and for the percentage of the vote captured by pro-Kremlin party United Russia.

Local election officials were clearly thinking in round numbers while rigging turnout and Medvedev's percent of the vote, said economist Mikhail Delyagin, head of the Institute of Globalization Problems.

While the spikes on round numbers certainly reveal manipulations, they also demonstrate "an administrative demand" for a specific turnout to be reported to superiors, Shpilkin said in e-mailed comments.

Furthermore, according to Shpilkin's analysis, the higher the turnout, the higher Medvedev's percentage of the returns -- a correlation not seen in the returns of the other three candidates: Liberal Democratic Party leader Vladimir Zhirinovskiy; Communist Party leader Gennady Zyuganov; and Andrei Bogdanov, who heads the tiny Democratic Party of Russia.

Buzin said this correlation clearly indicated ballot stuffing on a massive scale, though Shpilkin and Delyagin said it was feasible that where turnout was higher -- whether due to voter enthusiasm, coercion or herd mentality -- voters may have been more inclined to vote for Medvedev.

A written request to the Central Elections Commission for comment on the anomalies was not answered in time for publication. In February the commission would not comment on similar anomalies in the Duma elections.

Arkady Lyubarev, a researcher with Independent Institute of Elections, said he had tried on numerous occasions to discuss statistical anomalies in election results with commission officials but was repeatedly snubbed.

"They are not mathematicians, they are legal experts," Lyubarev said. "And from a legal perspective, you cannot use these anomalies to officially challenge the results of an election."

Given the similar anomalies in both the Duma and presidential elections, officials have either not learned how to manipulate returns to make them more plausible, do not care about public opinion, or both, said Sergei Shulgin, an analyst with the Institute of Open Economics who studies elections.

"The repetition of the anomalous spikes after they were reported in the media and widely discussed in the Russian blogosphere [after the Duma elections] confirms that there is no feedback between election officials and the public," Shulgin said.

Shulgin, who has crunched numbers for national elections dating back to the mid-1990s, said statistical distribution for voter turnout in Russian elections was becoming increasingly aberrant.

With each national election, the downward slope for turnout in what should be a bell curve rises higher and higher, Shulgin said. In Medvedev's victory, it became more or less a straight line peppered with spikes on round numbers.

This trend, Shulgin said, indicates that in areas where turnout is traditionally strong -- such as rural areas and ethnic republics -- more and more voters are showing up at polling stations with each new election.

This does not necessarily indicate ballot stuffing, Shulgin said. Intense efforts by officials to lure or coerce voters to polling stations could be an important factor as well, he said.

"In this presidential election, it looks like there was an order to get every voter out, and it worked," Shulgin said.

Meanwhile, what happened at Polling Station No. 682 in the Dagestani town of Kizilyurt remains unclear.

According to the Central Elections Commission web site, of the 766 ballots cast at the polling station, not one went to Medvedev. What's more, Bogdanov received 95 percent of the votes.

The numbers stand in stark contrast to those for all of Dagestan, where Bogdanov got 0.15 percent of the vote and Medvedev 91.92 percent. Nationwide, Bogdanov received 1.3 percent compared with 70.28 percent for Medvedev.

Buzin suggested that Dagestani election officials may have accidentally swapped Medvedev's and Bogdanov's figures as they filed their reports.

A spokesman for Dagestan's elections commission was incredulous when told of the results at the Kizilyurt polling station, despite the fact they are posted on the Central Elections Commission's web site.

"It is a provocation," he said without elaborating.

#8 Russia Expands Support for Breakaway Regions in Georgia By C. J. Chivers New York Times, April 17, 2008

MOSCOW — Russia announced Wednesday that it was broadly expanding support for two separatist regions in neighboring Georgia and would establish legal connections with the regions' de facto governments.

The announcement, made by order of President Vladimir V. Putin, fell short of offering official recognition to Abkhazia and South Ossetia, the two breakaway regions, which have had self-rule and intensive Russian support since brief wars with Georgia after the dissolution of the Soviet Union.

But it signaled a comprehensive deepening of ties between the separatist enclaves and Russia, including in trade, agriculture, education, diplomacy and social support. Officials in the region said that in its long-term ambitions, Russia's enhanced engagement was modeled in part on American support for Taiwan.

The Georgian government, which has spurned the Kremlin in recent years and tightened relations with the West, reacted with alarm. It called on international support to block what David Bakradze, Georgia's foreign minister, called Russia's policy of "creeping annexation."

Mr. Bakradze said Georgia would seek a special session of the United Nations Security Council. "We will do everything we can do within diplomatic, political and legal international measures," he said by telephone, shortly after a session of Georgia's National Security Council.

The Russian decree underscored a lingering diplomatic dispute from Mr. Putin's eight years in office and suggested that the Kremlin was seeking to assert itself more fully against Georgia in the weeks before Mr. Putin stepped down. He is scheduled to turn over the presidency next month to a protégé, Dmitri A. Medvedev, who has limited foreign policy experience and, to date, a less confrontational style.

Russia has supported both enclaves since wars in the 1990s ended in stalemates that created them. Russia's anger at Georgia intensified in 2003 after Georgia's so-called Rose Revolution, when protests against a rigged election toppled the government and set the current Georgian government on a westward course.

No nation recognizes Abkhazia or South Ossetia, which have endured only with Russia's assistance, and Russia has often tread lightly, offering support while officially staking a position of neutrality. But Russia had threatened to formalize its connections after Kosovo, in defiance of Russia's opinion and with support from the West, declared its independence from Serbia in February. Russia has also said it will increase its presence in response to Georgia's efforts to join NATO.

Wednesday's decree said that Russian ministries would establish direct relations with their counterparts in the breakaway regions. Mr. Putin also ordered that consular services for residents of the regions be offered from an office just over the border inside Russia; most adults in the enclaves have Russian citizenship, part of the Kremlin's policy of offering passports to them.

The announcement came as Abkhazia and South Ossetia, emboldened by Kosovo's declaration, have sought more foreign support. The de facto Abkhaz government has been repairing its long-idled civilian airport and hopes to establish direct air service to Russia and perhaps Turkey, where much of the Abkhaz diaspora lives.

Maksim K. Gvindzhiya, Abkhazia's deputy foreign minister, said by telephone that he did not expect Russia to recognize the regions formally because it would bring a diplomatic burden on the Kremlin. But he welcomed the growing ties and said he was not concerned about foreign reaction. "The political attitude is less important to us than the practical and economic," he said.

#9

New Armenian genocide museum

By Marilyn Henry

Jerusalem Post, April 12, 2008

Several blocks from the White House, Armenian-Americans are building a genocide museum. Like the US Holocaust Memorial Museum down the street, its location will make it impossible to ignore.

Genocide is a word that the White House avoids each April 24, when the Armenians commemorate the horrific event, which traditionally is dated from 1915. The US government acknowledges the atrocity without naming it, so as not to offend Turkey, which vehemently denies there was a genocide.

"Each year on this day, we pause to remember the victims of one of the greatest tragedies of the 20th century, when as many as 1.5 million Armenians lost their lives in the final years of the Ottoman Empire, many of them victims of mass killings and forced exile," President George W. Bush said in a statement last April 24. "I join my fellow Americans and Armenian people around the world in commemorating this tragedy and honoring the memory of the innocent lives that were taken. The world must never forget this painful chapter of its history."

Memory is part of the mission of the Armenian Genocide Museum of America. The museum, to be constructed in the landmark building that was once the National Bank of Washington, is intended to commemorate the victims and educate the public about the Armenian genocide and subsequent crimes against humanity.

Many Armenians see the rescue of the survivors largely as an American endeavor, and as an American story. "This is the story of what Americans did for another people - saving them from starvation, bringing them back to life, creating the foundation for a community that wants to thank the United States for bringing it here, giving

it its liberty and the security that allows for this expression in the museum," said Dr. Rouben Adalian, a historian and the museum's project coordinator.

And much of it has a strong Jewish component. Museum exhibits are likely to feature three figures: Henry Morgenthau, Franz Werfel and Raphael Lemkin, each of whom reflected on the genocide within his own field - diplomacy, literature and law.

IT WAS Henry Morgenthau, the American ambassador to the Ottoman Empire, who first raised the alarm. "Deportation of and excesses against peaceful Armenians is increasing and from harrowing reports of eyewitnesses it appears that a campaign of race extermination is in progress under a pretext of reprisal against rebellion," Morgenthau wrote in a 1915 cable to the State Department.

Last month, the Armenian Genocide Museum passed a critical test when the District of Columbia's Historic Preservation Review Board approved a proposal for the museum to restore and use the former bank, which is listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

The site is about a 20-minute stroll along 14th Street from the US Holocaust Memorial Museum. The Armenians learned much and lost much from the American museum, which held its dedication ceremonies 15 years ago, on April 22, 1993.

"The construction of Holocaust museums - especially the US Holocaust Memorial Museum - was illuminating in the sense that a story that is so stark and horrifying could be conceived and reconstructed in a manner that could be made comprehensible to general audiences and be respectful of the subject and the victims," said Adalian.

But the Washington museum, funded by tax dollars and private donations, gave short shrift to events before the Nazi rise to power. It uses a famous quote of Hitler's, made shortly before the invasion of Poland: "Who, after all, speaks today of the annihilation of the Armenians?" The museum could say: "Not us."

"The US Holocaust Memorial Museum essentially committed itself to telling the Jewish story," said Michael Berenbaum, who was the project director for the Washington museum's permanent exhibition. "It made a couple of references to the Armenian story, but it did not fulfill the Armenians' fondest hopes, maybe even unrealistic hopes, to create an Armenian wing or maybe an Armenian memorial."

The Armenian museum, which is privately financed, is scheduled to open in two years.

"Jews should have a couple of eerie feelings as they enter an Armenian museum," said Berenbaum, now the director of the Sigi Ziering Center for the Study of the Holocaust and Ethics at the American Jewish University in Los Angeles. "The first is: What would have happened to the remembrance of the Holocaust if Germany had denied the crime?"

#10

Moldovan president, Transnistrian leader meet in Bender Moldpres, April 11, 2008

President Vladimir Voronin and Transnistrian leader Igor Smirnov met in Bender today. Vladimir Voronin and Igor Smirnov considered new possibilities of developing the dialogue between Chisinau and Tiraspol, and set a series of concrete steps meant to develop the negotiating process, according to the presidential press service.

Voronin and Smirnov agreed on a coordinated position to urgently convene joint task forces to consolidate measures of trust between Chisinau and Tiraspol. These task forces should put forward a wide spectrum of concrete projects in infrastructure development, road construction, security and disarmament, social, cultural and humanitarian sectors.

Vladimir Voronin said that the constructive atmosphere in the Transnistrian settlement allows Moldova to ask the European Union and the USA to cancel the visa restrictions imposed on Transnistrian leaders.

For his part, Igor Smirnov said that Transnistria's leadership lifts travel restrictions against all representatives of Moldova's leadership.

President Vladimir Voronin and Transnistrian leader Igor Smirnov agreed on continuing such meetings, so as to gradually settle all the problems which have been accumulated between Chisinau and Tiraspol.

The 11 April meeting between Voronin and Smirnov is the first in the last seven years. The two leaders agreed on it on 7 April 2008. The Transnistrian settlement negotiations were suspended in 2006.

#11 EU Makes Human Rights Priority With Central Asia Associated Press, April 14, 2008

Human rights will be a priority in the European Union's relations with Central Asia, a senior EU envoy said Thursday.

The announcement came on the heels of an Amnesty International appeal for the EU to insist on the human rights provisions in its Central Asia strategy adopted last year.

"We have agreed that an essential part of the strategy we have developed together is a structured dialogue on human rights," Slovenian Foreign Minister Dimitrij Rupel said at a news conference in the Turkmen capital, Ashgabat. Slovenia currently holds the EU's rotating presidency.

The remarks were made after a rare meeting in Ashgabat between EU officials and the foreign ministers of the five former Soviet Central Asian states -- Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan.

Amnesty International welcomed the announcement, but noted it had come a long time after the EU's adoption last year of a five-year Central Asia strategy.

"We are pleased the EU are now saying human rights are at the heart of the relationship, but that should have been the case for the last 10 months as well," said David Nichols, executive officer for foreign policy at Amnesty International's EU office in Brussels.

Rupel also met separately with Turkmen President Gurbanguly Berdymukhammedov and discussed prospects for the EU investment in the Turkmen energy sector.

Berdymukhammedov expressed interest in diversifying routes for the export of Turkmenistan's abundant energy resources to the world market.

All Central Asian natural gas exports currently flow through Russia, which has sought to cement its grip on energy supplies to Europe.

#12 Kyrgyzstan: Opposition Calls For Dismissal Of Parliament, New Constitution By Tynchtykbek Tchoroev and Bubukan Dosalieva RFE/RL, April 12, 2008

Some 2,000 representatives and supporters of Kyrgyzstan's main opposition parties, meeting in the capital, Bishkek, have adopted a resolution calling for the dismissal of parliament and the invalidation of the current constitution.

The meeting, called a "kurultai," was also attended by members of leading nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), intellectuals, and ordinary voters. It was called by the Public Parliament, an umbrella bloc of several opposition parties and NGOs.

The parties who organized the kurultai feel the promises of the March 2005 Tulip Revolution in Kyrgyzstan have gone unfulfilled and that they have been marginalized by the government that emerged after those events.

More photographs from the opposition meeting can be found on the website of RFE/RL's Kyrgyz Service.

According to Azimbek Beknazarov, leader of the opposition Asaba (Flag) party, the resolution adopted on April 12 states that Kyrgyzstan is "in a grave political, social, and economic situation because of the establishment of an unfair, inhumane, and irresponsible power system in the country." The resolution urges President Kurmanbek Bakiev to "carry out urgent measures in order to improve the lives of ordinary people, to stop the rise in prices, and ensure economic growth."

The Kyrgyz authorities rejected the demands, saying the current constitution was adopted with the support of almost 80 percent of Kyrgyz voters and that only another referendum can change or amend it.

'Just Criticism'

The head of the presidential press service, Dosaly Esenaliev, defended the government's performance and criticized the opposition congress.

"If there had been reasoned, constructive proposals, it would have been OK," Esenaliev told RFE/RL's correspondent in Bishkek. "But there was just criticism, of course. It is a phenomenon in democratic societies. However, today's efforts by the government are working in the direction of lessening the negative impact of the ongoing economic crisis in the world on Kyrgyzstan."

Temir Sariev, a former lawmaker and now co-chairman of the For Justice movement, told RFE/RL ahead of the meeting that there are three "big headaches" in which the opposition is critical of the government's performance so far. "They are like a three-headed dragon," he said. "First, corruption; second, poverty; third, unemployment. We will discuss ways of resolving these three ills."

The kurultai in Bishkek (RFE/RL)

Excluded From Power

Kyrgyz Justice Minister Marat Kaiypov said on April 12 that the kurultai has no legal authority.

"Our constitution allows [citizens] to convene a kurultai," Kaiypov said. "However, when the kurultai is to be convened [there are questions that need to be answered] -- what issues will be discussed, where it will be held, who will convene it, and what power do their decisions have? Such questions have to be defined by the law. Unfortunately, there is no law about the regulations of convening the kurultai. They have not yet been adopted."

None of the opposition parties that organized the kurultai won seats in the last parliamentary elections -- and for the Ata-Meken (Fatherland) Socialist Party that fact is particularly painful. Ata-Meken won enough of the popular vote to claim eight seats but, due to a new regulation adopted just before the December poll, the party had to win half of 1 percent of the vote in every voting district in the country and failed to do so.

#13

Jewish program helps Georgia's refugees

By Matt Siegel

JTA, April 15, 2008

Nino Dvali projects optimism and confidence, and her almond eyes sparkle when she talks about her lifelong dream: owning her own clothing boutique.

When the 24-year-old Georgia native proudly unfolds the elegant, handmade black dress she designed, which looks like something Audrey Hepburn would be proud to wear, it serves as a potent reminder of how far a little help can go in Tbilisi.

Dvali is a graduate of the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee's vocational training program in Tbilisi, an eight-month pilot program in dressmaking and design for low-income Georgians and the capital's sizable population of internally displaced refugees from the country's war-torn separatist regions.

Funded under the auspices of the JDC's nonsectarian International Development Program, the vocational program has proven tremendously successful. So far it has a 100 percent job placement success rate, with graduates going on to work at a local trade union.

Originally designed to help low-income Georgians living in Tbilisi, the vocational program is being expanded to include Jews.

Jews are not usually included in the International Development Program, but in the reconfigured vocational program they will fill half the slots.

Erica Lessem, the JDC's Jewish Service Corps volunteer in Tbilisi, says she hopes the expansion will help improve relations between Georgia's Jews and non-Jews while achieving the development program's main goal of tikkun olam, repairing the world.

"Seeing them with their finished products and seeing their pride is what made me realize that it's so much more than a means to an end for them," Lessem said. "We're giving them an outlet for their creative talent, not just a 9-to-5 job."

Many of Georgia's internally displaced refugees have been living for nearly two decades in squalid collective housing with the hope of returning to their homelands.

Georgia's Ministry of Refugees provides the JDC with names from a waiting list of those in dire conditions seeking employment opportunities, Lessem said, and Jews are recruited to the program by JDC community workers.

The graduates receive an average monthly salary of \$280 from their factory jobs -- slightly less than the average monthly salary in this former Soviet republic -- but they can make considerably more with overtime.

Many of the participants share their incomes with their families, significantly boosting the quality of life in a country with high unemployment and where many elderly eke by on pensions of less than \$100 per month.

After independence in 1991, Georgia, a tiny country nestled between the Caucasus Mountains and the Black Sea, underwent the kind of economic challenges typical to many former Soviet republics. Plagued by corruption, with little precious natural resources and struggling with two breakaway republics, most of Georgia remains mired in post-Soviet decay.

Much of the Georgian population is euphemistically characterized as "underemployed." They either live on subsistence farming or do odd jobs to make ends meet. Many young people cannot afford to attend college and live with their parents because they cannot afford to live alone.

In the capital of Tbilisi, however, a surprising economic recovery is taking place, spurred by the Western-friendly government of President Mikheil Saakashvili and foreign investors' interest in getting in on one of the region's only liberal and relatively unexploited markets.

But Saakashvili's plan to transform Georgia into a technology- and tourism-based economy, following the model of other successful post-Soviet states like Estonia and Latvia, requires a trained work-force -- something Georgia desperately lacks.

Enter the JDC's vocational training program, founded in 2006 by Alexis Frankel, the organization's 2006-07 Ralph I. Goldman Fellow in International Jewish Communal Service.

In the clothing design program, experts put the students through rigorous hands-on training with modern industrial sewing equipment and design theory. Such education is a luxury few in Tbilisi enjoy.

The JDC's new expanded program will focus not only on dressmaking but on marketing as well, in partnership with a local advertising firm. The JDC is also building partnerships with local businesses to find jobs for graduates.

Madonna Gulordava, 22, a graduate of the JDC program who did not attend college and who lives with her grandmother, two sisters and her father, talked about how much her income has helped her struggling family.

"The only person who works in my family is my father," she said at first, then corrected herself and smiled. "Now I've started working and supporting the family."

#14

Putin to Take Helm of Party After Leaving the Presidency

By Sophia Kishkovsky

New York Times, April 16, 2008

Surprising no one, President Vladimir V. Putin accepted an offer Tuesday to lead the dominant political party in Russia once he leaves office next month and takes the post of prime minister, potentially setting the stage for years of power-sharing with the president-elect, Dmitri Medvedev, his hand-picked successor.

At a party congress that mixed elements of an American political convention, a Soviet-era Communist Party Congress and a corporate pep rally, Mr. Putin agreed to become the chairman of United Russia, a party that has been regarded as an arm of the Kremlin since it was created in 2001.

But he would not accept the post immediately, saying it would be inappropriate for him to be officially affiliated with a political party until after Mr. Medvedev assumes office on May 7. He said that would not be a problem once he is prime minister, calling a dual party and government role "a perfectly civilized, natural and traditional practice for democratic states."

Mr. Putin twice addressed a crowd of hundreds of delegates and guests who filled Gostiny Dvor, a convention complex just steps from Red Square and the Kremlin. He was greeted with multiple standing ovations, and a unanimous vote to make him party leader.

Yet the scene bore significantly less of the Soviet stamp than did the previous party congress, held in October, when a textile worker and a paralympic athlete appeared on stage and appealed to Mr. Putin to stay on as Russia's leader.

Also distinctly un-Soviet was the length of this gathering, which convened for only about two hours over the past two days.

At the October congress, Mr. Putin said he would consider becoming prime minister if the country elected a president he could work with. On Tuesday, he said everything had gone according to plan.

Mr. Putin was barred constitutionally from running for a third term as president. But analysts have speculated that he and Mr. Medvedev could alternate the posts of president and prime minister without ever formally defying the law.

Mr. Medvedev also addressed the congress, but to a much more muted response. He said that just as Mr. Putin did not join United Russia as president, he, too, should remain above the party fray for now.

Alexander Rahr, program director for Russia and Eurasia at the German Council on Foreign Relations, said Mr. Medvedev's decision might signal an effort to put some distance between himself and Mr. Putin.

"If he had joined the party, he would have received a new boss," Mr. Rahr said. "That means the head of the party: Putin."

#15

Limmud FSU comes into its own

By Grant Slater

JTA, April 15, 2008

The night bus to Limmud Moscow navigates the Friday-night gridlock of Mercedes' and Range Rovers on Rublovskeye highway, the main thoroughfare to the chateaus of Russia's oligarchs.

Huddled in the back of the bus, a group of newly minted Limmudniks, as organizers call them, pass the time playing cards and trading the Hebrew phrases they picked up from Birthright Israel trips and Hillel retreats.

It is precisely at the intersection of the young professionals on the back of the bus and the oligarchs on the highway that organizers hope to establish a solid foundation for Limmud in the former Soviet Union.

After three conferences here in two years Limmud -- the grassroots, volunteer-driven Jewish learning extravaganza that started in Britain and has spread to Jewish communities around the globe -- seems to be catching on in a country where the Jewish community is more accustomed to outside support than homegrown volunteerism and self-sustainability.

"This was completely foreign to them at first," said Alexander Pyatigorsky, a Limmud council member who recently started his own company in Moscow.

Most Jewish programs in Russia, he said, are "pushed from the top down. Limmud is the opposite; it's from the ground up."

Pyatigorsky said the attitude toward volunteerism already has started to shift. Whereas at first Limmud presenters wanted pay, now academics and experts in Jewish life show up at Limmud conferences here without expecting compensation.

Organizers proudly billed last weekend's conference as the first Limmud event conceived, organized and funded in large part on Russian soil.

Some 230 participants from Moscow paid more than \$100 -- a significant increase over past Limmuds -- to attend the conference at a verdant resort an hour outside the city.

International contributions and low admission fees helped support the two Limmud conferences here last year. But this year the scales are starting to tilt, with only 40 percent of funds coming from overseas, according to Moti Talias, an Israeli consultant brought in by Limmud FSU's founders to assess progress and provide guidance.

As wealthy Russian Jews see and experience Limmud, Talias says he expects local support to grow.

Limmud "is not something that you sell to someone," he said. "It's something that you make yourself and take part in."

Founded 27 years ago in Britain, local Limmuds rely on volunteers for everything from organization to presentation in putting together gatherings that celebrate Jewish study, fellowship, culture and pluralism.

A sprawling Limmud retreat with more than 700 attendees last October in a Moscow suburb drew dignitaries from every corner of the Russian Jewish community. In a rare show of unity, Rabbi Berel Lazar of the Chabad-led Federation of Jewish Communities and Rabbi Adolf Shayevich of the Congress of Jewish Religious Communities and Organizations of Russia both attended.

Attendees at last weekend's retreat -- one of a series of smaller conferences planned to supplement the bigger annual Limmud event -- drew many first-timers, according to conversations with dozens of participants.

Pavel Merchov, 20, a student at Moscow's Higher School of Economics, had never attended a Limmud event or observed any of the Jewish holidays. That changed this winter.

At his girlfriend's urging, Merchov traveled to Israel with Birthright Israel, which offers 18- to 26-year-old Diaspora Jews free trips to the Jewish state to boost their connections to Israel and bolster their Jewish identity.

"It's a small part of the community, and I know a lot of people here," Merchov said at Limmud. "Now I've met a lot more."

With the relatively small crowd, many attendees ran into people they knew from in between Limmud seminars on everything from Jewish fashion to the army and civil society in Israel. The young crowd mingled well into the wee hours each night over bottles of wine or role-playing games in the hotel's basement. Saturday night featured a jazz concert.

When planning for the Russian version of Limmud began several years ago, philanthropist Sandra Cahn of New York and Chaim Chesler, an emissary to the region from the Jewish Agency for Israel, relied heavily on \$1.2 million in start-up capital and organizational support from outside the former Soviet Union.

"At the beginning we were like blind kittens," said Anna Smulyanskaya, a member of the conference board. "But now the preparation has been more professional. We know the mistakes that we made."

Successful in the Moscow area, Limmud now is spreading to elsewhere in the former Soviet Union.

While Limmudniks juggled seminars and flirted across dinner tables, Chesler held late-night meetings with representatives from the World Jewish Congress and the World Congress of Russian-Speaking Jews to discuss future Limmuds.

In October, a Limmud retreat will be held in the city of Yalta on Ukraine's Crimean Peninsula. The Yalta Limmud will rely in part on the largesse of Vadim Rabinovich, a media mogul and outspoken figure in the Ukrainian Jewish community.

Chesler said he also expects the support of Moshe Kantor, the president of the Russian and European Jewish congresses, who may also give a presentation on his burgeoning collection of Russian art.

The Ukraine Limmud will be followed by a conference in Belarus dedicated entirely to Jewish art and cultural issues. Plans to hold a conference for Russian-speaking Jews in Israel are also taking shape, Chesler said.

Noting that participants in last weekend's retreat paid their own way, Chesler said he has every intention of fashioning Limmud FSU into an indigenous organization. While Russian donors at first expected some amount of control or recognition for their contributions to the project, that has changed.

"Now," Chesler said, "they give you a credit line and you go out and do it."

#16

Palestinian leader Abbas arrives in Russia for talks

Agence France-Presse, April 16, 2008

MOSCOW - Palestinian president Mahmud Abbas arrived in Moscow on Wednesday for talks with Russia's leaders, as the country makes plans to host a Middle East peace conference.

Abbas arrived at an airport near Moscow and was to hold a series of meetings, culminating in talks Friday with President Vladimir Putin.

Before leaving for Moscow, Abbas told journalists he and Putin would discuss "the international peace conference planned in Russia and its agenda."

Upon arrival, he said he was hopeful about ongoing peace negotiations with Israel.

"Serious negotiations are ongoing and all the parties are showing a will to reach an agreement before the end of 2008," Abbas told AFP.

But Abbas also strongly condemned Israel's military operations in the Gaza Strip that left 17 Palestinians and three Israeli soldiers dead on Wednesday, calling via his spokesman for an immediate halt to Israeli "aggression."

"President Abbas strongly condemned Israel's escalation of violence in the Gaza Strip," said Abbas' spokesman, Nabil Abu Rudeina.

Abbas "called on the Israeli government to immediately stop Israeli aggression and urged all parties to cooperate with efforts to reach a truce and prevent our people from any more suffering if this violence continues."

Russia is a member of the diplomatic Quartet for Middle East peace, which also comprises the European Union, the United Nations and the United States.

Last week Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov said the proposed conference would be a useful follow-up to the US-hosted one last November in Annapolis, Maryland.

Although a date for the conference has yet to be set, Abbas said June was being talked about as a possible time period.

Last month Lavrov visited the Palestinian territories and criticised Israeli settlement activity in the West Bank, calling also for an end to the Jewish state's "unacceptable" blockade of the Gaza Strip.

Kicking off his visit on Wednesday, Abbas was to dine with former prime minister Yevgeny Primakov, a noted Middle East expert.

Abbas was to receive an honorary doctorate while addressing students in Moscow on Thursday, ahead of Friday's talks with the outgoing Russian president, who hands over to president-elect Dmitry Medvedev on May 7.

The Palestinian leader was to hold talks in Washington next week with President George W. Bush.

#17

Ukraine draws increasing Israeli business interest

by Nazar Kudrevsky

Kyiv Post, April 17, 2008

Israeli entrepreneurs are planning to invest billions of dollars in Ukraine during the next several years, representing some of the nation's largest foreign investment.

Global finance, infrastructure and real estate developer Arison Group, led by Israel's wealthiest citizen Shari Arison, visited Kyiv in early April to explore investment opportunities, particularly those related to the EURO 2012 football championship.

Arison met with President Viktor Yushchenko at the Secretariat on April 2, after he visited Israel in November and invited a delegation of top Israeli entrepreneurs to visit Kyiv and consider investing in Ukraine.

"Generally, through its subsidiaries, the company will consider becoming involved in projects of the \$100 million to \$500 million scale," Arison Group said in a press release.

The firm is interested in projects related to the EURO 2012 football championship, "particularly the building and restructuring of stadiums, road construction, airports and hotels," the press release said.

However, the company said it would not limit itself to EURO 2012 projects and will consider a wide range of investment opportunities.

Arison Group is already active in Ukraine after subsidiary Bank Hapoalim, Israel's largest bank owned by Arison, purchased a 76 percent stake in the Ukrainian Innovation Bank (Ukrinbank) for \$136 million in December.

Meanwhile, Seven Hills LLC, a Ukrainian-registered developer that serves as the Ukrainian arm of Israel's Scorpio Real Estate, is working on "four major projects in progress with an estimated value well in excess of \$1 billion," said chief executive officer Arie Schwartz.

Scorpio Real Estate is owned by Israeli billionaire businessman Benny Steinmetz.

Seven Hills will complete the first of four buildings, containing 380 apartments, in the Park Avenue residential development in the Holosiyivskiy district in Kyiv by the end of 2008.

The Israeli developer will begin construction on a residential complex in the Pechersk District at an undisclosed time, recruiting renowned New York architect Costas Kondylis to design what will be "the tallest residential complex in the city," Schwartz said.

The Kondylis architectural firm has designed many notable real estate projects in New York, including the Trump World Tower, the Plaza Hotel & Residencies, and the Atelier.

The Pechersk project has the regulatory go-ahead and when completed, will offer 150,000 square meters of apartment space and "a spectacular penthouse that will be the envy of the city," Schwartz confirmed.

Another project, Airport City, will consist of office units linked to warehousing and distribution facilities with shopping outlets, a hotel and restaurants.

It will be located on a 50-hectare plot next to Kyiv-Boryspil highway.

The company will start work on the project in 2009, and its offices will provide work space for more than 5,000 people.

Airport City was included in the general plan for EURO 2012 preparations as a priority project, Schwartz said.

Another project being designed by Kondylis, Podil Center, will be a 30,000-square meter complex combining Class A office and shopping space across from the National University of Kyiv Mohyla Academy.

The current projects are the start of Seven Hills' national and regional investment program called "Project 150," which envisions property developments in all Ukrainian cities with a population of 150,000 or more people, Schwartz said.