

NCSJ Weekly News Update

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NEWS.....



WASHINGTON, D.C. June 13, 2008

TO: NCSJ Leadership and Interested Parties

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

In Brief: Fond farewells and new beginnings

Dear Friend,

This week, we report that two friends of NCSJ are leaving their current diplomatic positions for new assignments in their home countries. Russian Ambassador to the United States Yuri Ushakov is returning to Moscow to become Prime Minister Vladimir Putin's deputy chief of staff in charge of foreign policy and economic affairs. Ambassador Ushakov spent over nine years in Washington serving with great distinction and dignity. I always appreciated the Ambassador's willingness and availability to discuss NCSJ's agenda. Ambassador Ushakov and his staff went the extra mile to address our concerns and needs. From our first meeting upon his arrival in 1999 to our last conversation at the annual Russian National Day Celebration earlier this week, Ambassador Ushakov was open and forthright. On behalf of the entire NCSJ leadership, I want to wish him the best of luck as he assumes his new position; we look forward to seeing him in Moscow.

Lasha Zhvania, Georgia's current Ambassador to Israel, was elected to the Georgian Parliament last month. Ambassador Zhvania will wrap up his diplomatic responsibilities in Israel and then return to Georgia, where he will serve as chairman of the Parliament's Foreign Affairs Committee. As an ambassador and a former deputy foreign minister, Lasha has a long record of supporting a strong relationship with the United States as well as the American Jewish community. Anyone who has ever had the pleasure of working with Lasha appreciates his unlimited energy, good humor and sense of commitment. I know that these traits will serve him well in the Parliament.

The departure of two such distinguished diplomats with whom NCSJ has worked closely is one more example of the importance of our successful ongoing outreach efforts to the governments of the former Soviet Union. NCSJ provides information, analysis and guidance to the FSU embassies and consulates in Washington and New York as well as to officials in the various capitals. These relationships have enabled NCSJ to address the needs and concerns of our member agencies, federations, supporters and most importantly, the Jewish communities of the former Soviet Union. In the past year, NCSJ has worked with our Embassy colleagues on issues ranging from anti-Semitism to communal property restitution.

One last reminder about NCSJ's Board of Governors meeting next week. U.S. Under Secretary for Political Affairs William J. Burns will be the keynote speaker on Tuesday, June 17. The meeting is scheduled from 10:00 a.m. to 1:00 p.m., in our offices. For complete details, please see www.ncsj.org/Board.html.

Sincerely,

Mark B. Levin
Executive Director



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

NCSJ WEEKLY NEWS BRIEF
Washington, D.C. June 13, 2008

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#1

Promise to boost Israeli investments in Georgia helps secure seat in parliament for ambassador
By Greer Fay Cashman
THE JERUSALEM POST, June 10, 2008

The promise to bring more Israeli investors to Georgia in general and to Tbilisi in particular has helped to transform Lasha Zhvania, Georgia's Ambassador to Israel from a diplomat to a member of Parliament.

Zhvania, 34, who presented his credentials both in Israel and Cyprus three years ago, took vacation time to return to Georgia to campaign for a seat in his country's 150 member parliament, and was elected on May 21.

He returned to Israel briefly to take care of some unfinished business then returned to Georgia, and will be back in Israel after the new parliament convenes for its first session on June 10 to wind up his affairs, to bid farewell to President Shimon Peres and to invite him to pay an official visit to Georgia.

A graduate in International Humanitarian and Refugee Law, Zhvania never practiced, but went immediately into his country's Foreign Ministry.

In 1998 he came to Israel as first secretary in his country's embassy, and from 2001-2002 served as Georgian Consul. He returned to Georgia to serve as deputy minister of finance from 2002 to 2003, and the following year served as deputy minister of foreign affairs.

In 2005 he returned to Israel as ambassador, and has only just managed to complete three years of what is supposed to be a four-year term.

Had he failed in his campaign for parliament, he would have probably returned to his ambassadorial post, allowed due to a loophole in Georgian law.

Whereas any public figure running for parliament has to resign his post, diplomats serving abroad are not required to do so.

When interviewed in Jerusalem this week, Zhvania surmised that whoever drafted the law never imagined that an ambassador who was enjoying himself abroad would ever want to come back to the grind of parliament.

So he took a vacation, knowing that if he failed to be elected, there was still a job waiting for him in Tel Aviv.

Many heads of foreign missions develop a deep affection for Israel during their tours of duty, but most have no prior experience of Israel and no emotional ties. Zhvania is an exception. His mother is Jewish, and in 1988, she brought him to Israel to meet his grandfather, aunts, and other relatives. After that, he returned to Israel every year to get together with relatives dispersed in Kiryat Bialik, Haifa, Nahariya and Netanya.

During his periods of diplomatic service in Israel he made many friends. In addition to his native tongue, he speaks fluent Hebrew, Russian, Greek and English and regrets that he never got around to learning Arabic.

When he became ambassador, Zhvania set himself a number of goals: To make people more aware of Georgia; to change Georgia's image in Israel: to boost trade relations; to increase tourism; to enhance relations with the Jewish world and to save Georgia's cultural heritage in Jerusalem - namely the Monastery of the Holy Cross - and other properties.

Israelis used to think of Georgia as a surrogate of Russia, and referred to Georgians as "Gruzinim," which is the Russian terminology. Thanks to Zhvania's efforts, Georgians are now referred to in Hebrew as "Giorgim."

There was always talk about the friendly relations between Israel and Georgia, said Zhvania, but "There was nothing you could attach to such statements. In 2002 there was only one Georgian pilgrim to Israel. In 2005 there was only one flight a week from Georgia to Israel, and it was more than half empty." There are now four flights a week, and they're usually full, and people are put on a waiting list, he noted with satisfaction. Hundreds of Georgian tourists are visiting Israel, many of them pilgrims, but also a significant number of businesspeople. Meanwhile, Israeli tourism to Georgia has grown by 400 percent since 2005, he said, "and in Tbilisi you can hear Hebrew in the streets and in all the hotels." While there has been a substantial increase in bona fide tourism from Israel to Georgia, the majority of visitors from Israel are businesspeople.

"Over the past two years, Georgia has become an important destination for Israeli investment, especially in construction, infrastructure and high-tech." There's still a huge potential in agriculture, he said.

Israeli investment in Georgia so far, he added, amounts to more than \$1.5 billion.

Not all of it comes directly from Israel. Several Israelis who have business interests in other countries have invested in Georgia through their foreign-based concerns rather than directly from Israel, but there are many Israelis who are ready to invest from here, according to Zhvania, who intends to return to Israel frequently to escort investor delegations to Georgia. Israelis who already have business ties with Georgia, said Zhvania, include the Ofer family and Nochi Dankner.

During his election campaign, Zhvania established a foundation that will act as a liaison between Georgia and Israel, especially when it comes to cutting bureaucratic red tape and speeding up project implementation. The foundation will also create an employee database that will give Israeli investors instant access to the human resources they need for their investment projects.

This, too, contributed to Zhvania's success at the polls, promising that many more jobs would become available as increasing numbers of Israelis invest in Georgia.

Georgia's already good relationship with B'nai B'rith International has been solidified recently through visits to Georgia by BBI's top leadership, which is leading to much closer cooperation.

But Zhvania is particularly proud of taking the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations to Georgia and familiarizing them with the Georgian Jewish community - which numbers 8,000 - out of the country's population of 5 million. Two Jews hold ministerial positions in Georgia's government.

Zhvania says that Jews have generally fared well in Georgia, because "Israel and the Jews are an example for Georgians." He cited commonalities between the two societies like preservation of identity and historic memory, strong ties to the homeland and an orientation towards future continuity.

Although the corruption that existed in Georgia under Communist rule and in the immediate aftermath of the fall of the Iron Curtain has been largely eradicated, Georgia still faces both internal and external threats, said Zhvania, which was why he decided to throw his lot in with President Mikhail Saakashvili - in whom he believes implicitly - and whose vision he shares. Yet for all that, part of his soul remains in Israel.

"I'm leaving my post as ambassador, but I'm not leaving Israel. I became engaged with Israel 20 years ago and can never be disengaged. When I see Tbilisi Airport or when I see Ben-Gurion Airport, I always have the same feeling. I cannot explain what it is, but I do not have that feeling flying to any other country. All I know is that the heart always beats faster."

#2

Medvedev's Window of Opportunity

By Roland Nash

The Moscow Times, June 7, 2008

For the market, the postelection period began when Vladimir Putin used his first speech as prime minister to announce his plans to lower taxation for the oil sector. This was a powerful statement to the international investor community that a new page had been turned in the country's desire to attract investment. The 17 percent gain in the value of hydrocarbon companies in the following two weeks -- some \$105 billion of value -- can be largely attributed to Putin's statement.

The changes affecting oil taxes were the most eye-catching of recent initiatives, but not the most important. President Dmitry Medvedev's first concrete steps toward backing his rhetoric on the rule of law are potentially groundbreaking. In the private sector too, there seems to be a new flurry of activity. The metals magnates are hammering out a deal on Norilsk, LUKoil has unveiled new reserves and Unified Energy System is finally breaking apart.

It is as if Medvedev's inauguration opened up new possibilities to resolve the difficult, unresolved issues that had been building for much of the last two years. The early years of Putin's first term were also the most energetic period of coherent policy implementation in the country's post-Soviet history, and it could be the same for Medvedev's presidency.

Which brings us neatly around to TNK-BP. Here is a simmering issue that has come very much to a boil since March. It is high-profile enough to become for Medvedev what the Boris Berezovsky and Vladimir Gusinsky conflicts were for Putin. The problem for Medvedev is that, unlike Putin's conflicts with the Yeltsin-era oligarchs, the conflict over TNK-BP is not a straightforward tussle for power. It cuts across at least three major tenets of the political and economic system that have emerged in Russia since 2000.

First, private sector oligarchs are being accused of using the media and the legal system to influence the outcome of a dispute over the control and ownership of strategic assets. This smacks more of the anarchic wars of the oligarchs in the '90s than the controlled environment of Putin's presidency. Medvedev has yet to earn his spurs against the oligarchs. Just as the first years of the new regime are an opportunity for the Kremlin to define strategy, so they are also an opportunity for other power groups to assert influence. With Putin's support behind him, Medvedev will want to make very sure that the state remains the ultimate arbiter in conflict resolution.

Second, a foreign company is attempting to defend itself within the ownership structure of Russian hydrocarbon assets. One unwritten rule that emerged under Putin was that the country's natural resources benefit Russia above everything and everyone else. Foreign participation was welcome, but only under the supervision of the state. The one seeming exception was BP, whose joint venture was supported openly by Putin and Tony Blair, then-prime minister of Britain. Blair was the first Western leader to publicly welcome Putin in early 2000.

Since those heady days of cooperation, however, Britain has been knocked down in the rankings of Russia's favored trade partners. British Prime Minister Gordon Brown looks unlikely to strike up a cordial relationship with any political leader, let alone Medvedev. When Putin was president, he made clear that the foreign partners were welcome in developing hydrocarbons but that they had to look to the state first for guidance.

Third, the drive for investment is being challenged. It has become mantra that the continued re-emergence of Russia as a great power requires economic growth and that growth depends on the investment needed to improve productivity before inflation erodes competitiveness. The escalating feud between BP and their Russian partners is an embarrassing reminder of the unique challenges facing firms doing business in the country. If the globally intrepid BP is unable even to get their employees work permits, then less experienced organizations will question their ability to cope.

The conflict therefore involves something of a dilemma. If the interests of the three oligarchs who control half of TNK-BP -- Mikhail Fridman, Len Blavatnik and Viktor Vekselberg -- win out, then it seems to suggest that the strong-armed tactics being employed against BP have at least the tacit support of the state. If the interests of BP win out, then it could be spun as foreign oil companies determining the strategic direction of part of Russia's hydrocarbon wealth. The dilemma may explain why the state has so far been studiously silent.

It analyzing this conflict, it is useful to consider the underlying economics. The clear advantages to the Russian partners in TNK-BP are to sit in the driving seat during any sale of assets. But they are dwarfed by the potential economic benefits of some kind of strategic partnership between BP and one of the state hydrocarbon companies -- particularly Gazprom. The gains that can accrue from two of the world's top 10 biggest companies cooperating over hydrocarbon production are of a scale that can change the global energy landscape. At the risk of oversimplifying the issue, Gazprom has the reserves but not the international presence, while BP has a global franchise but not the reserves. Putting the two together creates a hydrocarbon giant that immediately attains the Russian goal of building international champions.

The Medvedev presidency has begun quite brilliantly. Tough actions have signaled that there is more to the president's commitment to the rule of law than just rhetoric. And we are witnessing a business-like efficiency in the White House never seen before. Thus, the increasingly ugly faceoff between the partners in TNK-BP stands out so awkwardly. It seems unlikely, against the backdrop of all the other initiatives, that Medvedev will want this conflict to stain the otherwise positive start to his presidency.

All the major players are together in St. Petersburg this weekend for the International Economic Forum. Perhaps this is the opportunity to define some new rules of the game.

#3

Airbrushed by the Kremlin, Again

Editorial

The New York Times, June 9, 2008

Years ago, Soviet news agencies grew to be experts in removing unwanted comrades from official photographs. People disappeared in the developing rooms just as they disappeared in real life, and early group photos with Stalin often contracted into a picture of the Soviet dictator standing alone. That grim history makes what's happening today on Russia's national television networks all the more chilling.

As Clifford Levy wrote in The Times last week, Russia's national networks, the most powerful media in the country, are routinely deleting news or opinions critical of the Kremlin. In one notable case, Mikhail Delyagin, a well-known political analyst, criticized Vladimir Putin during the taping of a talk show. When the program aired, Mr. Delyagin was missing. Or, most of him was missing. His disembodied legs remained in the picture.

While the print media and Internet news are subject to far less censorship than television, Mr. Putin and his recent successor, President Dmitri Medvedev, have made it clear that free speech is not one of their priorities. Since 2000, when Mr. Putin was first elected president, about 14 independent journalists have been killed after doing the kinds of investigative work that any thriving nation desperately needs. Authorities often target less

than obedient news outlets like the three independent newspapers that were shut down recently for allegedly using counterfeit software. The boisterous debate on the Internet continues, but the Kremlin announced recently that it will now monitor online content.

Equally insidious as government censorship is the growing self-censorship among Russian journalists. The fear, mostly of losing their jobs, is especially true at national television networks, where most Russians get their information. News about Chechnya or Georgia or Iran now follows the government line. Mr. Putin's opponents or Mr. Medvedev's critics are viewed as un-newsworthy, and public affairs shows on Russian television are growing more like those in the Soviet days when "news" meant reading a handout from the Kremlin.

A troubling aspect of this slide toward those dark old days is that many Russians insist they are fine with government-controlled TV. In the Web commentary after Mr. Levy's article appeared online, quite a few Russians said a free press is unnecessary. One called the idea "American propaganda." The American media have their flaws, but at least if you don't like one particular television channel, the zapper offers a different view. For Russians, there is no such relief.

#4

Russian police arrest teen cemetery vandal JTA Brief, June 12, 2008

Police arrested an 18-year-old suspected of vandalizing a Jewish cemetery in Russia's fourth-largest city.

Thirteen gravestones were knocked over or split in two sometime before May 28 when the damage was found, according to the local State Department for Internal Affairs.

The Krasnaya Etna cemetery in Nizhny Novgorod was attacked several more times, as recently as June 8, Regnum news agency reported.

Police are investigating four suspects between the ages of 14 and 18. The arrested 18-year-old confessed to damaging the cemetery.

The youth said he was not motivated by "hatred toward non-Slavic people," Regnum reported, though he was unable to explain his motivations for damaging the cemetery.

The other youths said they stood by as the arrested suspect vandalized the cemetery and said nothing to stop him, Regnum reported.

In a departure from other similar cases, the youth was not charged with vandalism but with "desecration of the bodies of the deceased and their burial places," for which he could face five years in jail.

#5

Video Draws Attention to Growing Violence Against Minorities in Russia By MICHAEL SCHWIRTZ The New York Times, June 12, 2008

Shamil U. Odamanov used to call his parents almost daily from Moscow, where he worked as a laborer after moving from his village in Russia's North Caucasus region in search of a better job. Then, just over a year ago, the phone calls stopped.

Now, to the family's horror, they think they know why. They have identified Mr. Odamanov, 24, as the man beheaded in a video of a double killing apparently carried out by members of a Russian neo-Nazi group last year.

"It's not only that he's similar, it is him, period," Umakhan Odamanov, Mr. Odamanov's father, said by telephone from his home in Dagestan, a Russian republic in the North Caucasus. The Odamanovs, who have lived in Dagestan for generations, are Kumyks, a tiny ethnic group native to the region. Investigators have said

that Shamil Odamanov is probably one of the two victims in the video, dark-skinned men who appear kneeling below a Nazi flag before they are killed.

Though initially considered a fake, the video, which originally appeared on Russian ultra-nationalist Web sites in August, spread quickly across the Internet and was shown in edited versions on national television. It shoved the problem of violence against ethnic minorities into the foreground of national discourse, if only for a short time.

The police are investigating several individuals, some from nationalist groups, in connection with the killings, but no suspects have officially been identified, Vladimir I. Markin, the spokesman for the Investigative Committee of the Prosecutor General's Office, said in an interview.

In February, a court found Viktor Milkov, a student from Adygei, in southern Russia, guilty of helping to circulate the video and sentenced him to a year in prison. He claims an unknown person e-mailed the video to him.

The police have not yet found the victims' bodies, Mr. Markin said, nor have they identified where the murders took place.

Attacks against ethnic minorities in Russia have steadily increased over the last several years, as more and more immigrants from abroad or from Russia's poorer ethnic enclaves have moved into large urban centers in search of work.

Mr. Odamanov was among them. He left his home village of Sultanyangiyurt in Dagestan about two years ago and moved to Moscow to look for a job "and possibly a bride," his father said.

In his regular calls home, he frequently complained about run-ins with skinheads, who sometimes stalk the low-income residential areas around Moscow, harassing dark-skinned people.

In late March 2007 Mr. Odamanov called "to wish me a happy birthday," his father said. "That was the last time I heard from him."

The next time he saw his son was in the video. He was tied, kneeling next to another man and wearing the black Adidas jacket and shirt given to him by his brother, Artur, Mr. Odamanov said.

Set against a soundtrack of heavy metal music, the video opens with the title "Operation of the National-Socialist Party of Russia to Arrest and Execute Two Colonists From Dagestan and Tajikistan." There are initially shots of the countryside that investigators now believe is somewhere in the Kaluzhkaya region, about 120 miles southwest of Moscow.

"We were arrested by National-Socialists," the two bound men mumble through their gags.

In the next scene, one of the captors, in camouflage and wearing heavy black gloves, yells, "Glory to Russia!" then plunges what looks like a large knife into the neck of the man thought to be Mr. Odamanov. He is decapitated in seconds.

Then the second man, whom the police have not identified, is shot in the head and crumples face first into a shallow grave. In the final scene, two men in camouflage, wearing black masks, give Nazi salutes.

There were about 600 violent racist attacks, including 80 murders, reported in Russia in 2007, according to the Sova center, an organization that monitors hate crimes in Russia. The number of attacks this year reached 232 as of June 1, 57 of which were murders.

Human rights groups have often accused officials of ignoring the problem of racist violence in Russia, though, in Moscow at least, a recent spike in murders of dark-skinned people has prompted a noticeable response among law enforcement agencies.

“Moscow prosecutors have definitely started to more actively engage this problem, beginning from last year,” said Aleksandr Verkhovsky, the director of the Sova center.

The Interior Ministry announced last week that the police had arrested more than 50 people this year who were thought to be involved in xenophobic attacks in Moscow and St. Petersburg, the cities with the highest levels of racist violence.

Still, the number of attacks nationwide continues to grow steadily by about 15 to 20 percent each year, as it has for about the last five years, Mr. Verkhovsky said. Moreover, he said, the percentage of murders is growing as teenagers involved in violent nationalist groups grow into adults.

“They simply take their affairs more seriously,” he said.

#6

State renews efforts to bring disputed Jewish manuscript collection from Russia

By Anshel Pfeffer

Ha'aretz, June 12, 2008

The State of Israel plans to renew its efforts to retrieve the world's second-largest collection of ancient Jewish manuscripts from Russia.

Various parties have been trying to bring the impressive Ginzburg collection to Israel for years. Now, they are hoping that renewed Russian-Israeli cooperation, primarily Israel's expected transfer of the Sergei building in Jerusalem to Russia, will enable the collection to be brought to Israel.

The noble Russian-Jewish Ginzburg family acquired its collection over three generations, beginning in the 1840s. The collection includes 14,000 books, 45 incunabula (books published in the 14th century at the start of the printing era), more than 2,000 Hebrew manuscripts and 1,000 Arabic manuscripts. It is considered the second largest collection of antique Jewish literature in the world, after the Bodleian Library in Oxford.

Baron David Ginzburg, the last of the collectors, died in 1910. After his death, Zionist activists, including Eliezer Ben Yehuda, began trying to bring the collection to the land of Israel. In May 1917, the National Library in Jerusalem signed a contract with parties in Russia to buy the collection for half a million rubles. The acquisition was funded by donations from Russian Zionists, and when the money was delivered, the books and manuscripts were packed into crates to be delivered. But the shipment was delayed by World War I, and when the Bolshevik Revolution broke out, the Soviet authorities seized the books and sent them to the Lenin Library in Moscow.

Over the years, prominent Jews, including Albert Einstein, Israel's first president, Chaim Weizmann, and Foreign Ministry officials, tried to bring the Ginzburg collection to Israel, but their efforts were rejected. Now the heads of the Jewish National and University Library (Israel's official national library, which is located in Jerusalem), including director general Shmuel Har Noy and board chairman David Blumberg, are trying to put the matter on the public agenda.

The issue is being revisited mainly because of the advanced talks on the Sergei building, which was built circa 1890 adjacent to the Russian Compound. It was named for Prince Sergei, heir to Czar Nicholas II, who was executed by the Bolshevik revolutionaries. The building served as a hostel for Russian pilgrims to the holy land, and currently houses the offices of the Society for the Protection of Nature in Israel and the Agriculture Ministry.

The Russian government is demanding ownership of the building, and the negotiations are nearing completion, to the Russians' satisfaction. Meanwhile, Har Noy and Blumberg have demanded of Foreign Ministry Director General Aaron Abramovich that the same principle apply to the Ginzburg collection - that the ministry demand the Ginzburg collection in exchange for the Sergei building. The ministry does not believe Russia will accede to this demand, but intends to try to retrieve the collection in any case.

In the 1990s, the Russians photographed a large part of the manuscripts and books in the collection and allowed scholars to study them, apparently in order to quiet the issue. The Lenin Library even built a splendid building in Moscow to preserve the collection.

"If the state is returning property to the Russian government, there is no reason that something we have proof that Russian Zionists purchased should not be returned to the state," said Har Noy.

The Foreign Ministry responded, "The ministry received the request concerning Baron Ginzburg's book collection, and the issue is under examination. In the coming days, Foreign Ministry officials will be meeting with representatives of the National Library in order to receive the data and documents on the matter."

The Ginzburg collection includes a translation of Dionysius Cato's "Moral Distichs," Yehuda ben Moshe Albotini's 1519 commentary on the Rambam's Mishneh Torah, a 1671 essay written by well-known kabbalist Shmuel ben Hiam Vital in Damascus, and one of the first six books printed in Hebrew, "Answers to Questions" by the Rashba, which was printed in Rome.

The National Library heads wish to make the collection a major exhibition at the new National Library building slated for construction in Jerusalem.

#7
"Neo-Eurasianism," the Issue of Russian Fascism, and Post-Soviet Political Discourse
By Dr. Andreas Umland
The Global Politician, June 7, 2008

The past couple of years witnessed a welcome sensitization of the Russian public towards skinhead attacks and ultra-nationalist propaganda. Nevertheless, Putin's administration and the Kremlin-controlled mass media maintained an ambiguous stance regarding xenophobic tendencies in politics and public discourse. While primitive hatred of foreigners and ethnic violence are officially stigmatized, the dissemination of national stereotypes and anti-Americanism, in particular, by government-directed information channels and political pundits continues unabated. For example, the notorious publicist Alexander Dugin, who openly propagated fascism in the 1990s, has become an important player in shaping the discourse of Russian political and intellectual elites today. It remains to be seen how the Russian leadership will handle the challenges resulting from such a contradictory approach to its domestic and foreign policies in the coming years.

A New Sensitization Towards Right-Wing Extremism?

In view of escalating violent attacks and other actions against foreigners, the debate on Russian fascism is currently experiencing a new high in the Russian media. There was a similar debate in the mid-1990s, when the confrontation between President Boris Yeltsin and the "intransigent opposition," a state of near-civil war in Moscow, the ascent of Vladimir Zhirinovskiy, the appearance of neo-Nazi parties, and the first Chechen war, gave rise to the notion of a "Weimar Russia." Even though this construct has made only rare appearances in commentaries in recent years, the current media debate is also marked by increasing alarmism.

It is to be welcomed that the increasing right-wing extremist tendencies within the party landscape and youth culture, which had been largely ignored for many years, are now at least partially acknowledged by the Russian public, and countermeasures are being debated. Even the Russian judiciary which has been known for its pro-nationalist bias is beginning to submit to the pressure of public opinion (or the presidential administration), and now applies the Russian penal code's section on xenophobic crimes more frequently than was the case during the 1990s. Other promising developments include the sharp reactions of state officials to a xenophobic campaign advertisement aired by the "Rodina" alliance ahead of elections for the Moscow municipal parliament in 2005, and recent measures against the often deadly skinhead attacks on immigrants and visiting students. Official statements on such issues occasionally refer to the "anti-fascist" heritage of the Soviet Union and to the Russian people's alleged special deep-rooted aversion against fascism.

Ambiguous Reactions

Despite such encouraging signs, the Kremlin-controlled mass media have an altogether ambivalent stance toward right-wing extremist tendencies. Although manifest anti-Semitism and violent racism are now heavily criticized and visibly stigmatized, other xenophobic patterns remain present in reporting on foreign news and political commentaries. In addition to the traditional anti-Western, anti-Baltic, anti-Gypsy and anti-Polish reflexes, this is increasingly true for prejudices against Ukrainians and Caucasians, recently, especially, against Georgians. Unquestionably, though, it is the US that holds first place among the “enemies of Russia,” as projected by Russian state-controlled mass media. The primitive and profound anti-Americanism seen, for example, in prime time political television shows like *Odnako* (“However”, hosted by Mikhail Leontiev), *Realnaia politika* (“Real Politics”, hosted by Gleb Pavlovsky), or *Post scriptum* (hosted by Alexei Pushkov) is raised to the level of a Manichean world-view, where the US is made responsible for the majority of mishaps and failures in recent Russian, and, indeed, global history. In these accounts, US society mutates into the negative Other of Russian civilization.

Curiously, Germany – the country that has caused Russia the most harm in recent history – is often excepted from this paranoid perception of the external world and stylized as a collective friend of Russia, probably not least because of Putin’s personal preferences (a distorted view that has, however, been stoked by the unorthodox approach to Russia of former German chancellor Gerhard Schröder).

It is also important to note that, despite the increasing censure of certain right-wing extremist tendencies, the representatives of ultra-nationalist political groups regarded as close to President Putin have been excepted from the Kremlin’s campaigns against the radically nationalist camp. This is true in particular for Zhirinovskiy’s so-called Liberal Democratic Party, although many statements made by Zhirinovskiy and his entourage equally stir xenophobic hatred among the population. For example, in his notorious 1993 pamphlet *The Last Leap toward the South*, Zhirinovskiy, a Turkologist by training, blames the peoples of “the South” (i.e. Muslim Asia) as being responsible for most of Russia’s past and current problems, and explicitly proposes to make Turkey, Iran and Afghanistan part of the Russian empire. Nevertheless, Putin, in 2006, personally awarded the “Order of Merit for the Fatherland” (fourth degree) to Zhirinovskiy – a man who in September 1995 had physically attacked a female MP, Yevgenia Tishkovskaya, in the State Duma in front of TV cameras.

Aberrations of the Intelligentsia

Besides such tendencies in the broader public, there are similarly contradictory developments in the discourse of the elites and political pundits. On the one hand, the political leadership is promoting integration of Russia into Western organizations such as the G8 and the World Trade Organization. On the other hand, the discourse among political experts, as well as intellectual life in general, are characterized by the spread of an anti-Western consensus often described as “Eurasian,” the essence of which is the assertion that Russia is “different” from, or indeed, by its nature, the opposite of the US. The Russian book market is experiencing a glut of vituperative political lampoons whose main features include pathological anti-Americanism, absurd conspiracy theories, apocalyptic visions of the future, and bizarre fantasies of national rebirth. Among the more or less widely read authors of such concoctions are Sergei Kurginyan, Igor Shafarevich, Oleg Platonov, Maxim Kalashnikov (a.k.a. Vladimir Kucherenko), and Sergei Kara-Murza.

Probably the best-known writer and commentator of this kind is Aleksandr Dugin (b. 1962), who holds a doctorate in political science from an obscure Russian provincial institute, and is the founder, chief ideologue, and chairman of the so-called International “Eurasian Movement,” whose Supreme Council boasts among its members former Russian Federation’s Culture Minister Aleksandr Sokolov, the Vice Speaker of the Federation Council, Aleksandr Torshin, several diplomats, and similarly illustrious personages, including some marginal Western intellectuals and CIS politicians. Dugin’s increasing celebrity is remarkable considering that the chief “Neo-Eurasian” is not only among the most influential, but also one of the most brazen of the ultra-nationalist publicists. While authors such as Kurginyan or Kara-Murza are satisfied to promote a renaissance of classical Russian anti-Western sentiments in their pamphlets, and only subtly draw on Western sources, Dugin admits openly that his main ideas are based on non-Russian anti-democratic concepts such as European integral Traditionalism (René Guénon, Julius Evola, Claudio Mutti, etc.), Western geopolitics (Alfred Mahan, Halford Mackinder, Karl Haushofer, and others), the German “conservative revolution” (Carl Schmitt, Ernst Jünger,

Arthur Moeller van den Bruck, etc.), and the francophone New Right (Alain de Benoist, Robert Steuckers, Jean Thiriart).

Furthermore, during the 1990s, Dugin repeatedly hinted at his sympathy for selected aspects of Italian Fascism and National Socialism, such as the SS and its Ahnenerbe (“Ancestral Heritage”) Institute, and has described the Third Reich as the most consistent incarnation of the “Third Way” that he advocates. In the chapter “Fascism – Boundless and Red” of the online version of his 1997 book *Tampliery Proletariata* (The Templar Knights of the Proletariat), he expressed the hope that the inconsistent application of originally correct ideas by Hitler, Mussolini, etc. would, eventually, be followed in post-Soviet Russia by the emergence of a “fascist fascism.” In Dugin’s apocalyptic worldview, global history consists of a centuries-old confrontation between hierarchically organized “Eurasian” continental powers and liberal “Atlantic” naval powers. Today, this confrontation is carried out between Russia and the US as the main representatives of the two antagonistic types of civilization, and its “final battle” is approaching (notably, Dugin uses the German word *Endkampf*, which has fascist connotations, without a Russian translation).

One might expect Dugin, and other extremely right-wing pundits offering similar pro-fascist statements, to be subjected to the same public stigmatization that neo-Nazi parties and skinhead groups are currently experiencing. However, this has not been the case, so far. On the contrary, Dugin and others of his ilk, such as the well-known editor-in-chief of Russia’s leading ultranationalist weekly *Zavtra* (“Tomorrow”), Aleksandr Prochanov, are popular guests in prime-time political television shows such as *Vremena* (“Times”, hosted by Vladimir Pozner), *Tem vremenem* (“In the Meantime”, hosted by Aleksandr Archangelsky), *Voskresni vecher’* (“Sunday Evening”), or *K Baryeru* (“To the Barricade”, hosted by Vladimir Solovyov), and are even invited to popular talk shows like *Pust govoryat* (“Let Them Speak”, hosted by Andrei Malakhov).

The Post-Soviet Conception of Fascism

The fact that Dugin has so far been “spared” by the Kremlin-controlled media and his political opponents is not only due to his recent celebrity as a “radical centrist” and fanatical supporter of Putin as well as his ability to win the sympathies of prominent members of the Russian legislative and executive branches. He has also managed to avoid the charge of promoting fascism by adapting his writings and public image to the distorted conception of fascism inherited from Soviet propaganda. In the post-Soviet discourse, the term “fascism” is equated with German National Socialism and its external trappings, such as the swastika or Roman salute. Occasionally, the propagandistic usage of the term “fascism” goes so far as to include all ideas regarded as “anti-Russian.” It then, paradoxically, becomes a rhetorical instrument in xenophobic agitation campaigns of Russian ultra-nationalists.

The example of Dugin illustrates that, as a result of the idiosyncratic conception of generic fascism in post-Soviet Russia, it is sufficient to rhetorically dissociate oneself from the worst crimes of Nazi Germany and to refrain from blatantly copying Nazi symbols in order to avoid public stigmatization as a “fascist”. This approach would, at least, explain why, on the one hand, obviously neo-Nazi groups such as the Russian National Unity of Aleksandr Barkashov or skinhead gangs are being vocally suppressed by the executive and judiciary, while on the other hand ultra-nationalist writers who, in terms of their rhetoric, are no less radical are not only tolerated, but have unhindered access to public platforms and state-controlled media, and are, sometimes, allocated an active role in PR projects of the Kremlin’s political technologists.

1984 – Déjà vu

Another factor in favor of Dugin and similar publicists is the return of the Russian leadership to quasi-Orwellian forms of organizing public discourse. Government-controlled political reporting in the mass media has become a succession of national-patriotic happenings in which international developments of any kind – whether a Russia-China summit or Russian athletes’ performance at the Olympics, the “Orange Revolution” or foreign success of a Russian fantasy movie – are exaggerated into either collective triumphs or shared humiliations of the Russian nation under its faithful leadership. The attendant superficiality and emotionality of public debates, which occasionally degenerate into bizarre shouting matches between participants of political television shows, replace serious analysis. Political commentaries are fixated on the “here and now” which, in the case of Dugin, may have contributed to that his well-known neo-fascist stance during the 1990s has been “forgotten.” The

mantra-like disparagement of the West that accompanies the agitational realignment of foreign news reporting increases the playing field for the propagation of anti-Western slogans which also furthers the spread of extremist ideas proposed by Dugin and theorists with similar leanings.

Outlook

Will the newfound sensitivity towards nationalist tendencies lead to a sustained return to tolerant and liberal aspects of Russia's political tradition? Or is this new tendency no more than the latest episode in Moscow's fluctuating media campaigns?

One can identify two contrary trends – one ideological, the other pragmatic – whose collision has restored a certain measure of controversy to the generally dull public discourse in Russia. On the one hand, the dualist worldview introduced by Putin's entourage in the past few years – the simple, but honest Russians struggling for independence against a devious, soulless, imperialist West – fulfils an important role in legitimating the "tough" course of the resurging Russia. However, the officially approved paranoia also opens the floodgates for radical conclusions. Since the US model of society is presented as the antithesis of Russian civilization, one should not be surprised when youth gangs of violent thugs try to prevent an "Americanization" of Russian society, in their way. The damage caused by such reactions to the international image of Russia is, in turn, incompatible with the equally strong tendency towards establishing the country as a respected partner of the Western countries and as becoming a part of the "civilized world" (the preferred Russian term for the economically advanced democratic states). Besides, the leadership of the Kremlin appears to be considering large-scale immigration as a way of replenishing the rapidly dwindling population of the Russian Federation, which would create new, potentially explosive, tensions. Finally, the fanatical anti-Americanism and pro-Iranian positions of Dugin as well as others are in contradiction to a number of security policy preferences of the Kremlin and its efforts to join the international coalition against terrorism as a full member. Due to these and other challenges in the coming years, the – at least partial – handover of power last month gains some importance. It will be interesting to see which of the two contradictory tendencies currently present in Russia – the nationalist anti-Western one, or the urge to become integrated into international formal and informal networks – will gain the upper hand.

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#8

Parsing the Schumer Plan

By Richard Lourie

The Moscow Times, June 9, 2008

It's not only supply and demand that drives markets, it's fear itself. After the Israeli transportation minister threatened last week to attack Iran's nuclear facilities if Tehran continues with its program for developing nuclear weapons, the price of oil jumped more than \$10 a barrel, sending the U.S. stock market down by 400 points.

In a recent Wall Street Journal commentary, U.S. Senator Charles Schumer proposed pressuring Iran to the bargaining table by imposing severe economic sanctions that could even "topple the theocracy." Germany and France are now ready to join with the United States and Britain in imposing sanctions -- though they will not be effective without Russia. China, the last key player, "may go along if everyone else will." This is the weakest link in his argument, which Schumer passes over with no further comment.

The country that matters most is Russia, because of its influence with Iran and because it has blocked sanctions in the past. The trick to getting the country involved, says the New York senator, is making Moscow "an offer it can't refuse."

That offer has three parts. The first is to "treat Russia as an equal partner when it comes to policy in the Caspian Sea region, recognizing Russia's traditional role in the region." The Russian response to this could

well be: "Thanks, guys. And if we ever have any similar dealings with Canada, we'll be glad to treat the United States as an equal partner in the Great Lakes region." As one of the five countries that border the Caspian Sea, Russia has had diplomatic relations with Iran since the late 16th century.

The second part of the offer is to compensate for the \$2 billion to \$3 billion that Russia earns annually from its trade with Iran. The Russians, who have the world's third-largest currency reserves, might think: "What's the difference? Either way we end up with the same amount of money in our pocket, but if we go for the U.S. offer, we will alienate our good customer Iran, and that could cost us later. Besides, as we just saw, every time there are international jitters about Iran or the Straits of Hormuz, the price of oil jumps. If we're exporting 10 million barrels a day, a \$10 jump brings another quick \$100 million.

"In other words," the Kremlin concludes, "the Americans are offering to acknowledge us for something we already are and pay us money that we're already making -- part three better be good."

It is. Not all of U.S. President George W. Bush's idiocies had negative consequences. The ill-conceived plan to place a missile-defense system in Poland to counter Iran's threat at least provides a bargaining chip with the Kremlin. After being promised that NATO would not move "one inch" eastward after the collapse of the Soviet Union, Moscow now finds itself cordoned off from the Baltic to the Black Seas by NATO countries. Treated by Washington as the loser in the Cold War, Russia bristles at any reminders of the humiliation of the '90s. And so the U.S. missiles are more a matter of insult than injury. Withdrawing the proposed missile-defense system would be a recognition of Russia's return to great, if not superpower, status and a precondition for any further serious changes in the U.S.-Russia relationship.

The rub is that Russia might prefer to wait on that if it means damaging its long-term relationship with Iran. For some reason, the prospect of a nuclear Iran doesn't seem to worry Russia much at all. And if worse comes to worst, the U.S. missiles can always shoot the Iranian missiles down, can't they?

No, Schumer's is an offer the Kremlin can refuse and probably will. It will hold out for something it wants even more -- Ukraine kept out of NATO.

**#9
Leader of the Congress of Russia's Jewish Religious Communities believes that authors of the
Forbidden Art exhibition are provocateurs
Inter-Fax Religion, June 9, 2008**

The Congress of Jewish Religious organizations and associations of Russia is concerned with growing anti-Semitic feelings caused by the Forbidden Art 2006 exhibition.

"Russian Jews often have to pay for acts of "artistic self-expression" and "ideological protests" of small provocative groups," Chairman of the Congress of Russia's Jewish Religious Communities Rabbi Zinovy Kogan says in his statement conveyed to Interfax-Religion.

According to the rabbi, this exhibition was "mocking at Orthodox symbols, icon, ideals" and provokes its visitors to aggression towards the Orthodox Church and to anti-Semitic demonstrations.

Jews have "to listen to accusations of Russian citizens in crimes they neither committed nor provoked and to be subjected to physical attacks of skinheads who seek ideological justification of their activities and derive their anti-Semitic inspiration in such kind of anti-Christian and anti-Russian "performances" and exhibitions."

"Why all of us have to suffer for idiocies of the high-handed!" the rabbi exclaims.

According to him, the Forbidden Art 2006 had nothing to do "with art and human right protection," but was "only a provocation," "modern incitement of enmity initiated by new herostratoses."

"This exhibition shouldn't be considered as an act of blasphemy against God in Christian or Muslim understanding; it is rather an act of willful and targeted humiliation of human dignity of Christian and Islam believers," the rabbi said.

He urged all Christians and Muslims "not to shift responsibility for provocations initiated by Yury Samodurov and his few associates to Russian Jews as it would be wrong and unjust."

#10

Russia outlines solution to Georgia tensions

CNN, June 6, 2008

International powers should stay out of the conflict between Georgia and its two breakaway regions, the Russian foreign minister said Friday.

Sergei Lavrov, speaking just after the Russian and Georgian presidents held their first face-to-face meeting, said: "The key to solutions is the direct negotiation of the parties."

Currently Georgian troops line the Kodori Gorge, a mountainous region separating the de-facto republic of Abkhazia and Georgia-governed territory.

Abkhazia views the military presence as a sign of aggression and levels of Russian peacekeepers in the disputed area have increased in recent months.

Lavrov puts those numbers at about 2,500, which he says are in accordance with a 1994 Russia-Georgia agreement allowing up to 3,000.

In regard to the recent deployment of Russian railway troops sent to fix a broken Abkhaz railroad in the disputed area, Lavrov said the exercise was a step toward economic rehabilitation of the area.

The assurance comes amid Georgian worries that Moscow is unfairly intruding into the conflict resolution.

Russia sees Georgia -- a former Soviet republic as inside its sphere of influence -- but Georgia now has a pro-West government and is angry at Moscow's support for Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

NATO has criticized Russian activities in the breakaway republics, and the European Union's foreign policy chief has been in Georgia this week.

Lavrov said Georgia and Abkhazia should sign an agreement disallowing the use of force in the area.

He described Friday's meeting between Russian President Dmitry Medvedev and Georgia's Mikheil Saakashvili as very calm and quiet, not confrontational at all.

The two did not discuss the controversial incident of May 20 when a Georgian unmanned reconnaissance aircraft was shot down over the Abkhaz region, he said. Georgia accuses Russia of involvement and Russia denies it.

The Medvedev-Saakashvili meeting came on the sidelines of a two day summit of the Commonwealth of Independent States composed of Russia and the former Soviet Republics.

#11

BEYOND GEORGIA: RUSSIA'S STRATEGIC INTERESTS IN EURASIA

By Mamuka Tsereteli

CACI Analyst, June 11, 2008

With its continued policy of intimidation and military provocation toward Georgia, Moscow is seeking to prevent Georgia's integration into transatlantic security structures. Russia also wants to achieve a much greater

geostrategic objective: to close the strategic access route to the heartland of the Eurasian continent for Western interests. The ports and railroad systems of the South Caucasus, as well as an air corridor through the region, provide a vital supply link for NATO and allied forces in Central Eurasia, including in Afghanistan. The destabilization of Georgia would impact the functioning of this vital system, as well as the functioning of the oil and natural gas transportation system that connects the Caspian Sea resources to world markets.

BACKGROUND: Georgia, together with Ukraine, is an aspirant country for NATO membership and was very close to receiving a Membership Action Plan during the recent NATO summit in Bucharest. But certain European countries, led by Germany, resisted this initiative, mostly under pressure from Russia, although the summit expressed its ultimate commitment for Georgian and Ukrainian membership, and decided to return to discussing the issue at the December 2008 NATO ministerial summit in Brussels.

The Russian political leadership apparently feels that it has a window of opportunity to destabilize Georgia, and if possible Ukraine as well. Since Russia's efforts to pressure Georgia through various economic sanctions in recent years produced no results, provoking military confrontation in the breakaway region of Abkhazia seems to be the only way Russia sees perceived that it has a possibility to close Georgia's door to NATO membership.

Georgia went through the turmoil of civil conflicts and ethnic tensions in the early 1990s, with the heavy involvement of forces in Russia that were displeased with Georgia's strong drive towards independence and its Western orientation. The ensuing conflict in Abkhazia produced almost three hundred thousand predominantly ethnic Georgian displaced persons. The conflict left Abkhazia with a population of 150,000, with a devastated economy and Russian "peacekeepers" to maintain the status quo in the region. Despite erstwhile political statements on the part of the Russian Government recognizing the territorial integrity of the Georgian state, the fact is that Russian peacekeepers are supporting and implementing a policy of de facto annexation to Russia of this part of Georgia. Following decisions in April to solidify its relations with the Abkhazian and South Ossetian breakaway regions, Russia recently moved paratroopers and engineering forces into Abkhazia, steps perceived by Georgia as military provocations.

IMPLICATIONS: Russia is already pressuring Central Asian governments and their transportation companies to divert their cargos towards Russian transportation options. The Russian leadership is apparently hoping that should it manage to provoke a military confrontation in the South Caucasus and thereby destabilize Georgia, the strategic transit function of the South Caucasus region would be weakened, and the West would be forced to seek better terms to deal with Russia in order to secure alternative supply routes to Central Asia. If the Georgian link is weakened, Moscow's next target would in all likelihood be Azerbaijan. With its strategic energy reserves, and its position as the only country bordering both Iran and Russia, Azerbaijan constitutes the prize in the region. Should it be rendered ineffective as a conduit for East-West trade, ultimately the South Caucasus would become dysfunctional for both military and economic access to Central Asia.

With the relative calm in Pakistan's tribal areas and the pressure on Taliban being somewhat relieved following the coming to power of democratically elected forces in Pakistan, militants are strengthening their positions in Afghanistan. Russia, in this context, is trying to seek the role of an indispensable actor for Western military and security operations in Afghanistan in the hope of securing much greater say in the geography and design of the operations. Russia also hopes that the next U.S. administration will be forced to have a much more pro-active diplomatic policy vis-à-vis Iran and will need Russian support at the UN Security Council.

In addition, Russia is hoping that European, and in particular German, dependence on Russian energy will continue to stimulate passive policies vis-à-vis Ukraine, Georgia, Moldova, Azerbaijan and other states of the former Soviet Union. The vertically integrated European energy companies, closely affiliated with their national governments, have special relationships with the Russian state-controlled monopoly, Gazprom. This, in turn, affects the decision-making process in those countries. Russia still considers its neighboring states as its own exclusive domain, and large European powers such as Germany, France, and Italy seem to be comfortable with this attitude. However it is clear that there is mistrust in Russia towards Europe as well.

Neither are Russia's recent moves limited to Georgia. In a set of developments corresponding to Moscow's habitual policies of sending test balloons of incipient policies, Moscow's mayor Yurii Luzhkov appeared in the

Ukrainian province of the Crimea last month. There, he strongly stressed Russia's right to the Sevastopol navy base in particular and the Crimea in general, openly flaunting Russia's customary lip service to Ukraine's territorial integrity. Far from condemning his actions, the Russian parliament and Foreign Ministry endorsed his views, lambasting Ukraine for its decision to declare Luzhkov an undesired person in the country. These events show that Moscow may be moving toward a more general policy of challenging the post-Soviet border delimitation of 1991, and that Georgia is merely the first instance where this policy is being tested.

CONCLUSIONS: The recent acceleration in Russian policy towards Georgia and Ukraine clearly needs to be considered in the context of attempt by Russia to revitalize both military-political and economic dominance over Central Eurasia. In absence of developed transportation links from Central Asia to the South or to the East, the Western direction through the South Caucasus is the only alternative to a Russian-dominated transportation system for the region. For the West, the South Caucasus transportation corridor is a vital access link to Central Asia and the Northern frontiers of the Middle East. That is why stability in the South Caucasus in general, and in Georgia in particular, cannot only be a concern for Georgians. Georgia has become the testing ground for the West's commitment to its own security interests, as well as to the values of democracy and free market economy in this strategically important area of the world. Success in Georgia sets the precedent for success on the Southern flank of the former Soviet Union, similarly to how the success of the Baltic States represents a precedent to follow for Georgia. Failure to uphold these principles, however, would resonate strongly in Central Asia and beyond.

Unfortunately, not everyone in the U.S. or Europe realizes the strategic importance of Georgia for long-term Western security interests. Except several congressional non-binding resolutions and European parliamentary statements, a forceful and unified Western response to recent Russian policies is yet to be seen. A NATO Membership Action Plan for Georgia and Ukraine is the best way to ensure stability in those countries, and thus keep alternative access routes to Eurasia alive. But more urgent steps are needed before December to secure western interests in this region.

AUTHOR'S BIO: Mamuka Tsereteli is the President of Georgian Association in United States and a Professor at the School of International Service at American University in Washington D.C.

#12

Georgia Is Warned by Russia Against Plans to Join NATO

By SOPHIA KISHKOVSKY

The New York Times, June 7, 2008

President Dmitri A. Medvedev of Russia warned the Georgian president, Mikheil Saakashvili, on Friday that Georgia's joining NATO would deepen the conflict between the former Soviet states.

After the two leaders met behind closed doors at a palace outside St. Petersburg, Russia's foreign minister, Sergey V. Lavrov, said that Mr. Medvedev told Mr. Saakashvili that his quest for NATO membership would not help resolve the simmering tensions in the separatist Georgian regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

"We have stressed again that Georgia would not be able to achieve this by artificially pulling itself into NATO because this would lead to another stage of confrontation," Mr. Lavrov said.

The conflict in Abkhazia has increased friction between the nations in recent months.

In April, a Russian fighter jet shot down a Georgian reconnaissance drone over Abkhazia, according to a United Nations investigation. And last month, Russia sent paratroopers and artillery across the border to reinforce its peacekeeping force there.

On Monday, Georgian officials demanded that Russia withdraw the additional troops, as well as a Russian Army unit that Russia said was sent to repair infrastructure in the region.

The European Union's external relations commissioner, Benita Ferrero-Waldner, warned this week that the Russian troop buildup in Abkhazia could destabilize the region, which had a civil war in the 1990s. And Mr.

Medvedev said Friday that German leaders had expressed their concern to him about relations between Russia and Georgia on Thursday during his first visit to Europe as president.

Mr. Lavrov said Friday that Russia wanted to resolve the conflicts, but not with outside help, a position both leaders appeared to endorse during a photo opportunity at the Konstantinovsky Palace.

"I think that we're capable of solving all the problems ourselves, overcoming the difficulties that exist and building long-term relations," said Mr. Medvedev, who was inaugurated as Vladimir V. Putin's successor last month.

Then Mr. Medvedev turned to Mr. Saakashvili and asked, "What do you think?"

Mr. Saakashvili said that he agreed and that many of the problems between the countries were "artificially created."

"Russia and Georgia are countries that are very close to each other on historical, cultural and human levels," he said.

Mr. Saakashvili, however, did not back away from his long-term goal of joining NATO. Georgia has applied for membership, and NATO has promised that it will eventually be accepted.

Mr. Medvedev has argued that NATO membership for Georgia or Ukraine, which has also sought membership, would threaten Russian security.

Mr. Lavrov said that the meeting between them at an informal gathering of leaders of the Commonwealth of Independent States, a group made up of most of the former Soviet republics, was "very calm, very quiet, no confrontation at all."

He also said that the deployment of 300 Russian troops to make repairs in Abkhazia last weekend was meant to pre-empt the use of force rather than prepare for Russian intervention.

Abkhazia borders the Krasnodar region of Russia, which includes Sochi, the site of the 2014 Winter Olympics. The Games are being promoted by the Kremlin as a symbol of Russia's revival after years of post-Soviet turmoil.

Mr. Medvedev also met on Friday with President Viktor A. Yushchenko of Ukraine. Mr. Lavrov said the leaders had discussed several points of contention: the Russian Black Sea Fleet, which is based in Ukraine's Crimean peninsula; gas prices; and Mr. Yushchenko's efforts to unify the Ukrainian Orthodox Church.

Gazprom, the Russian state-controlled natural gas monopoly, has halted supplies to Ukraine in the past and has threatened to do so again, demanding that the government in Kiev pay market prices. The dispute has been of grave concern to Europe because 80 percent of Gazprom's supplies to Europe run through Ukrainian territory.

#13

Uzbekistan: Longest-Held Political Prisoner Free After Two Decades In Jail

By Gulnoza Saidazimova

RFE/RL, June 6, 2008

One of the most controversial figures in recent Uzbek history and the oldest political prisoner in the country, Ahmadjon Odilov, has been released from jail on the heels of a visit by a senior U.S. official.

Odilov, now 83, was once regarded as a potential rival to President Islam Karimov with considerable influence within the opposition.

Odilov's freedom was granted two days after Mutabar Tojiboeva, a human rights defender and government critic, was released on parole on June 2 after serving nearly half of an eight-year prison term.

Both were mentioned in a recent letter by the Miami-based International Society for Human Rights appealing for a release of political prisoners.

The son of prominent rights activist Ahmadjon Madumarov was also released this week, but his family said he had served his full seven-year jail term.

Victim Or 'Butcher'?

Odilov was released on June 4 and reunited with his family near the eastern Uzbek city of Namangan. His younger brother, Mominjon Odilov, confirmed the news to RFE/RL's Uzbek Service.

"We are very happy. We are at Ahmadjon's house now," Mominjon Odilov told RFE/RL's Uzbek Service shortly after their reunion. "He is in good shape and healthy, thank God. We are happy. He is praying now. He is well."

Odilov spent more than 20 years in prison -- first in Moscow, then in Uzbekistan -- after being detained in 1984 after Soviet officials investigated corruption charges in the Uzbek cotton industry. Some call him the "Butcher from Pap" -- where he lived -- while others say he is a "victim of the Karimov government."

The criminal case against him -- dubbed the "Cotton Case" -- was one of the biggest of its time. In the 1970s, Odilov set up an agro-industrial complex that included several collective farms and employed some 40,000 people. It became one of the most successful entities in the former Soviet Union, and brought Odilov the respect of the Communist Party bosses as well as many medals, orders, and titles, including the highest Soviet prize, the "Hero of Socialist Work."

His industrial complex in Pap, near Namangan, became a showcase of a successful socialist economy that was shown to almost every visiting foreign delegation. The venture translated into considerable influence and wealth.

Influential Figure

Some said Odilov was one of the key figures in the political decision-making of the then-Uzbek Soviet Socialist Republic (UzSSR). He was believed to have had great influence in appointing political figures in the UzSSR as well as distributing economic and financial wealth.

In 1983, Moscow officials launched a series of investigations against alleged corruption in the Uzbek cotton industry.

Television and newspaper reports pictured Odilov as a cruel man who ran his entity as a medieval king, showing no mercy toward his foes. Reports said he had private prisons to keep people who refused to follow his orders. Rumors spread in the Soviet Union that Odilov had made millions of rubles and kept them in gold bars buried under his tomato bushes. More than 1,000 people, including many of Odilov's family members, were detained.

The "Cotton Case" was seen as an attempt by the new Soviet government under Yury Andropov to redistribute wealth that the cotton industry was bringing to Soviet coffers -- as well as the pockets of the communist nomenklatura.

The case brought notoriety to two investigators, Telman Gdlyan and Nikolai Ivanov, who were dispatched to Uzbekistan by Moscow officials. Both Gdlyan and Ivanov were later sacked from their positions in the Soviet prosecutor's office amid the change in Soviet leaders in the mid-1980s.

With the "Cotton Case" still open, Odilov remained in a Moscow prison for eight years without being charged.

Odilov was briefly set free after the 1991 collapse of the Soviet Union. He reportedly set up an independent political party, Temur's Justice Party. But he was imprisoned again in 1993.

Some say Uzbek President Karimov saw Odilov as a rival and felt threatened by his influence and the respect that Odilov garnered from the opposition.

Odilov's prison term was prolonged several times as the Uzbek prison administration accused him of keeping drugs in his cell and violating prison rules.

Rights Questions

Many human rights organizations urged Uzbek authorities to free Odilov, who is said to be nearly blind and suffering from other health problems.

Odilov's release comes along with that of Hamidullo Madumarov, the son of prominent rights activist Ahmadjon Madumarov.

Hamidullo Madumarov was imprisoned on charges of anticonstitutional activity, an article in the Uzbek Criminal Code frequently used against members of unregistered religious organizations.

Speaking to RFE/RL on June 5, however, Ahmadjon Madumarov said his son was released only after serving his full term. "He was given a seven-year prison term and he did spend seven years in jail," Madumarov said. "I met him and now we are on our way to [our native city of] Margilan."

Madumarov said his other son -- imprisoned on similar charges -- remained in jail despite the fact that his prison term ended last month.

The release of both Odilov and Madumarov comes after a visit to Tashkent by U.S. Assistant Secretary of State Richard Boucher.

Boucher said on June 2 after meeting with President Karimov that talks focused on improving human rights and that some progress had been made.

On June 2, human rights defender and government critic Tojiboeva was released on parole after serving nearly half of her eight-year prison term.

In April, the International Society for Human Rights, wrote a letter to Karimov urging him to release political prisoners, including Odilov and Tojiboeva.

Human Rights Watch (HRW) says at least 11 more human rights defenders remain in Uzbekistan's prisons -- one of them in a closed psychiatric ward -- for politically motivated reasons.

#14

Chevron to help Kazakhstan skirt Russia with pipeline Houston Chronicle, June 6, 2008

Chevron will help Kazakhstan's state oil company build a \$1.5 billion pipeline from the nation's biggest producing field to the Caspian Sea, expanding export routes to world markets that bypass Russia.

The U.S. crude producer, the main shareholder in Kazakh oil venture TengizChevroil LLP, will help construct the link from Yeskene, near Atyrau, to Kuryk, near the Aktau port, Chief Executive Officer David O'Reilly said in a statement posted on President Nursultan Nazarbayev's Web site late Thursday.

The pipe will add to Chevron's export options as it ramps up production in Kazakhstan. The venture plans to boost output almost 60 percent to 540,000 barrels a day by the end of this year, or about 25 million tons a

year, Ian MacDonald, regional vice president, said May 28. Of that, 13 million tons will be exported via the Chevron-led Caspian Pipeline Consortium link and 12 million tons transported in rail cars, MacDonald said.

Kazakhstan, which holds 3.3 percent of the world's oil reserves, and San Ramon, California-based Chevron have for years sought Russian approval to expand the CPC link. Russia agreed on May 7 to double the pipeline's capacity to as much as 67 million tons of oil a year by 2012.

The 750-kilometer (465-mile) Yeskene-Kuryk link will be built in two years and have an initial capacity of 23 million metric tons a year, Nazarbayev's press secretary Yerlan Baizhanov said, according to the state-run Kazinform news service.

State-run KazMunaiGaz National Co. said in January it would start sending oil across the Caspian Sea to the BP Plc-led Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline in 2012. The new link will carry oil from the Kashagan and Tengiz fields to Kuryk for shipment by tanker to Azerbaijan, where the BTC link to Turkey originates.

"The new pipeline will increase its capacity to 56 million tons of oil when crude production at Kashagan will start," Baizhanov said. Kazakh Energy Minister Sauat Mynbayev said May 12 that commercial output at Kashagan may not begin until 2012 or 2013.

#15

Long in diaspora, Armenians return home The Associated Press, June 8, 2008

What would prompt a young family to abandon a comfortable life and move to a poor country where running water is still a luxury for many, politics are messy and the threat of war looms large?

For Aline Masrlan, 41, her husband, Gevork Sarian, and their two children, it was their motherland calling.

"It is something special when you live in your own land," said Masrlan, who moved here after her family had lived for generations in Syria.

Lured by the economic opportunities in a fast changing country and the lure of home, some people from Armenia's vast diaspora are moving to the land that their ancestors had long kept alive as little more than an idea. Longtime residents, meanwhile, are no longer fleeing the country in large numbers.

While 3.2 million people live in this landlocked Caucasus mountain nation — the smallest of the ex-Soviet republics — an estimated 5.7 million Armenians reside abroad. The largest disappears are in Russia (2 million), the United States (1.4 million), Georgia (460,000) and France (450,000), according to government data.

Most of the diaspora, like Masrlan's family, are descendants of those who fled the killings of up to 1.5 million Armenians in Ottoman Turkey during World War I — a tragedy Armenia wants to be recognized as genocide but modern Turkey insists was an inherent part of the war's violence.

Much later, others ran away from the economic collapse that Armenia suffered following the 1991 breakup of the Soviet Union, when electricity was available only several hours a day, people had to chop down trees for heat, and bread and butter were strictly rationed.

The devastating conflict with neighboring Azerbaijan over the disputed territory of Nagorno-Karabakh, in which over 30,000 people have died, compounded the exodus. An estimated 500,000 people left the country in 1992-94, many heading to Russia.

However, over the past four years Armenia has registered an overall population inflow of 33,200, the first positive trend since gaining independence in 1991 with the Soviet collapse, said Vahan Bakhshetian, a migration expert with the Territorial Management Ministry. While it's difficult to tell how many Armenians are returning permanently, Bakhshetian said the trend offers hope.

"We are now seeing many of those who had left return," said Foreign Ministry spokesman Vladimir Karapetian.

Among the returnees are many from the Russian diaspora. Some are lured back by economic improvements here, while others are escaping growing xenophobia in Russia, where attacks on dark-skinned people from the Caucasus are frequent.

Garik Hayrapetyan of the United Nations' Population Fund said Armenians also are no longer leaving in large numbers, but he cautioned that the emerging repatriation will not be sustained without economic and political progress.

For many, the country's biggest asset is its rich cultural heritage. Two millennia ago, Armenia was a vast kingdom stretching between the Black and Caspian seas. Eventually it was divided and absorbed by bigger states, including the Ottoman empire and czarist Russia, and later the Soviet Union.

Armenians like to brag that Noah's Ark came to rest in their country, on the biblical Mount Ararat — though the snowcapped mountain is now part of Turkey, overlooking Yerevan. The country is said to be the first state to adopt Christianity as its religion.

Still, in many ways Armenia remains an unlikely place to attract returnees. Despite economic progress in recent years, over a quarter of the population lives in poverty and the average monthly wage is a meager \$275.

Outside aid is crucial. Diaspora Armenians send millions of dollars for investment and aid projects, and much of the population survives on individual money transfers from relatives abroad. The International Monetary Fund estimates that remittances make up 10 percent of the country's economy.

Those sending money are moved by the same love of country that draws Armenians back. James Tufenkian, an Armenian-American, has invested some \$30 million in reviving the traditional carpet industry — largely destroyed in the Soviet era — building hotels and running charity efforts. Today, he provides jobs to over 1,000 people here.

Tufenkian, 47, said he decided to help after his first visit at the height of Armenia's economic decline in the early 1990s.

"I felt like I had a chance to do something to improve people's lives, that it was my homeland calling," Tufenkian said in a telephone interview from New York.

Today, Yerevan is slowly transforming itself from a run-down city into a vibrant, modern capital. The downtown boasts Western boutiques, expensive restaurants and young people in trendy outfits.

Yet the rest of the city, perched on steep hills, is a bleak mix of Soviet-era concrete apartment blocks and dilapidated two- and three-story houses with laundry hanging on balconies. The air is heavily polluted, mostly from the exhaust of the battered Soviet-era cars that clog the city. Some districts in Yerevan continue to have shortages of running water, which were common in the 1990s.

While Armenia is considered one of the freer countries among post-Soviet republics, its fragile hold on democracy became apparent earlier this year. Eight people were killed in clashes between government forces and opposition activists protesting election results. The Nagorno-Karabakh conflict also keeps tensions high.

But ask Gevork Sarian about life in Armenia, and the emigre who returned from Syria with his wife and children talks more about finding a homeland than about the wider political climate.

The bearded, smiling Sarian attended university in Yerevan in the early 1980s and said he always wanted to return. The family moved back in 1998, and he started several successful businesses, including a lingerie store run by his wife.

Now 46, Sarian said he had felt separated from his Syrian neighbors. "Even if they look at you in a good way, you are still a stranger — this is the feeling of Armenian diaspora everywhere," he said.

His 15-year-old son Ardag added that in Armenia "you feel that it is your country."

Repatriation wasn't as easy for Aline Masrlan, the wife in the family. She recalled a middle-class life in the northern Syrian city of Aleppo, with running water available 24 hours a day and the markets full of fruits and vegetables. In Yerevan, when the family first arrived, water was on just two hours a day, sometimes the only bread she could find was stale, and she missed the job she had loved, as a construction engineer.

But 10 years later, sitting in a new, spacious apartment decorated with family photos, Aline said she has no regrets. "I decided that this is my country."

More recent returnee Zorair Atabekian, 36, hopes for a similar future. He came back in 2005 after five years in Canada, homesick and hoping to go into business. Though he still earns far less selling jewelry in Yerevan than he did running an apartment design firm in Montreal, he said he knew his decision would eventually prove right.

"Today this country offers a lot of possibilities," he said. "That is why many diaspora are returning here to start up businesses."

#16

Analysis: Former Armenian President Plans Mass Rally

By Ruzanna Stepanian

RFE/RL, June 6, 2008

Former Armenian President Levon Ter-Petrossian and the opposition parties that backed his candidacy in the February 19 presidential election reaffirmed on June 3 their intention to hold on June 20 their first major rally since the postelection clashes in Yerevan on March 1-2.

In a written statement, Ter-Petrossian's Popular Movement, an umbrella structure uniting more than two dozen opposition groups, offered to cooperate with the municipal authorities and the Armenian police in maintaining public order during the planned rally. Senior Ter-Petrossian aide Levon Zurabian told journalists that the organizers will formally ask the Yerevan mayor to authorize the gathering. But he made it clear they will urge supporters to converge on the city's Liberty Square even if that application is rejected.

The date of the planned demonstration is just three days before the start of the June session of the Council of Europe's Parliamentary Assembly (PACE) that will discuss Yerevan's compliance with a PACE resolution adopted in mid-April on the political situation in Armenia. One of the key demands of the resolution is the repeal of controversial legal amendments that enable the authorities to ban antigovernment street protests practically at will.

The authorities have been keen to thwart such protests since the deadly March 1 clashes between security forces and thousands of Ter-Petrossian supporters protesting against official results of the disputed presidential election. The violence left at least 10 people dead and nearly 200 others injured, leading to the imposition of a 20-day state of emergency in the capital.

The authorities initially maintained their de facto ban on opposition protests even after the end of emergency rule by enacting controversial amendments to the law on public gatherings, but in response to Western pressure, the Armenian parliament passed in the first reading in late May a bill easing those restrictions. Council of Europe officials have welcomed the move.

However, the Ter-Petrossian camp insisted on June 3 that the changes are "cosmetic." Its statement said the administration of President Serzh Sarkisian has also failed to meet other demands included in the PACE resolution such as the launch of an independent inquiry into the March 1 violence and the release of political prisoners.

Speaking at a news conference on June 3, Zurabian would not say what the Ter-Petrosian-led opposition will do if the police again cordon off Liberty Square and surrounding streets in the city center. He said only that the opposition would hold the authorities responsible for any ensuing violence.

On May 30, Ter-Petrosian's movement praised the revised and final assessment of the February presidential election released by the Organization for Security and cooperation in Europe (OSCE). Whereas the initial assessment made public shortly after the ballot was largely positive, the final report concluded that serious irregularities during the vote count and recount "devalued the overall election process." "While the 2008 presidential election mostly met OSCE commitments and international standards in the preelection period and during voting hours, serious challenges to some commitments did emerge, especially after election day," according to the OSCE final assessment. "This displayed an insufficient regard for standards essential to democratic elections and devalued the overall election process. In particular, the vote count demonstrated deficiencies of accountability and transparency, and complaints and appeals procedures were not fully effective."

"The OSCE has effectively abandoned its previous evaluations legitimizing Armenia's recent presidential elections, as the Popular Movement demanded," the opposition said in a statement commenting on the OSCE assessment. That statement said the OSCE observers' initial conclusion that the presidential ballot was administered "mostly in accordance" with democratic standards only emboldened the authorities to use lethal force against opposition protesters. "Had the evaluations been objective right from the beginning, the regime would not have dared to take the criminal step of slaughtering its own people," it claimed.

#17

Russia's Medvedev to visit Turkmenistan in July

Reuters, June 6, 2008

Russian President Dmitry Medvedev said on Friday he would travel early next month to Turkmenistan, a Central Asian gas producer being courted by both Russia and the West for access to its energy resources.

Medvedev also said he hoped at about the same time to visit Azerbaijan, an ex-Soviet state across the Caspian Sea from Turkmenistan that the West is eyeing as a transit route for energy supplies from Central Asia.

The Russian president had bilateral meetings with Turkmenistan's President Kurbanguly Berdymukhamedov and Azerbaijan's leader Ilham Aliyev at a summit of ex-Soviet heads of state in Russia's second city of St Petersburg.

"I am planning to be in Turkmenistan on an official visit in early July and then we can continue our discussion (on cooperation)," Medvedev said after his talks with the Turkmen leader.

Most of the energy resources exported by Central Asian states are shipped via Russian territory. The European Union and the United States are keen to break this virtual stranglehold by developing alternative routes away from Russia.

One proposal that has been raised is to build a pipeline under the Caspian Sea to ship gas from Turkmenistan to Azerbaijan. From there, it could flow into an existing pipeline that transports Azeri gas to Turkey.

Industry analysts say Russia is wary of these proposals and is mounting a diplomatic drive to retain its control over Central Asian energy exports.

#18

U.S. president prolongs sanctions against Belarusian leadership

Ria Novosti, June 7, 2008

U.S. President George Bush on Saturday prolonged for at least one year sanctions imposed in June 2006 on a number of Belarusian officials, including President Alexander Lukashenko.

A statement signed by the U.S. president stated that the sanctions had been prolonged on the grounds that the actions of Belarusian leadership threaten U.S. security and foreign policy.

The U.S. and the European Union have accused Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko of clamping down on dissent, stifling the media and rigging elections. Lukashenko, who was re-elected to a third term in 2006, and other senior Belarusian officials have been blacklisted from entering the U.S. and EU.

In June 2006 President Bush signed a resolution freezing all property and financial assets in the United States owned by the country's president, the head of the security service, Stepan Sukharenko, the head of national television and radio company, Alexander Zimovsky, Interior Minister Vladimir Naumov and other Belarusian officials.

Lukashenko, dubbed by Washington as 'Europe's last dictator', repeatedly denied that he had any property or assets in the United States.