



**WASHINGTON, D.C. June 27, 2008**

**TO: NCSJ Leadership and Interested Parties**

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

In Brief: Spotlight on Russia

Dear Friend:

Earlier this week, the Senate Foreign Relations Committee approved John Beyrle's nomination as U.S. Ambassador to the Russian Federation. It is expected that the full Senate will vote on his nomination shortly. Ambassador Beyrle has much experience in dealing with Russia and has worked with NCSJ for many years on issues related to the former Soviet Union. Before his most recent posting, as ambassador to Bulgaria, he was the Deputy Chief of Mission at our Embassy in Moscow. We have included his statement to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee in this week's update.

Also included are a number of interesting Russia stories. Long-time reform politician Grigory Yavlinsky is turning over the Yabloko Party to Sergei Mitrokhin. Although Mr. Yavlinsky's influence has greatly diminished, he played a crucial role in economic and political transformation of Russia in the 1990s. Russian journalist Julia Latynina details what happens when a lack of accountability exists on the part of government officials and how little legal recourse there is for businesspersons as well as average Russian citizens. The LA Times' correspondent Megan Stack highlights the intersection of religion and education in one Russian local public school. The Orthodox Church, with the apparent blessing of the Russian government, has increased its influence throughout the public school system – much to the concern of other religious dominations.

Two other Russia stories describe President Medvedev's attempts at striking a more independent role from his predecessor. It appears that the seamless transition of the last month and a half may take a more circuitous route.

For those unable to attend last week's Board of Governors meeting, please go to the NCSJ Web site for a report and pictures of the meeting.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads 'Mark B. Levin'. The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

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 27, 2008

-----INDEX OF ARTICLES-----

1. *Statement of John R. Beyrle, Ambassador-Designate to the Russian Federation*  
US Senate Foreign Relations Committee, June 19, 2008
2. *Two Torahs dedicated in Ukraine; Anti-Semitic attack in Volgograd; Belarus celebrates 'Days of Israel'*  
*Ex-prisoners decry insurgents' recognition; Israel names new Belarus envoy; Lone Tajik synagogue*  
*razed; Monument honors slain Ukraine rabbi*  
JTA Briefs, June 20-26, 2008
3. *Open Season: Life in Putin's Russia*  
By Julia Latynina  
Washington Post, June 22, 2008
4. *Veteran Russian politician quits with dig at Putin*  
Reuters, June 22, 2008
5. *In Russia, reading, 'riting and religion*  
By Megan K. Stack  
Los Angeles Times, June 23, 2008
6. *Human rights group criticizes Putin's Russia*  
By Barry Schweid  
AP, June 23, 2008
7. *Kremlin's new man strikes a different pose*  
By David Schlesinger and Michael Stott  
Reuters, June 25, 2008
8. *Russian Reformer Voices Optimism About Medvedev*  
By Andrew Osborn  
Wall Street Journal, June 25, 2008
9. *Siberian Summit Looks for New Start*  
By Anna Smolchenko  
Moscow Times, June 25, 2008
10. *Lithuania bans public display of Soviet and Nazi symbols*  
By Deutsche Press-Agentur  
Haaretz, June 19, 2008
11. *Experts checking if Vilnius building constructed on Jewish cemetery*  
By Deutsche Press-Agentur  
Haaretz, June 25, 2008

12. *Europe's Shameful Honoring of Vilnius*  
By Andrew Baker  
Forward, June 26, 2008
13. *John McCain's War on Russia*  
National Public Radio (NPR), June 25, 2008
14. *Belarus Cracks Down on Internet Ahead of Vote*  
By Yuras Karmanau  
Moscow Times, June 26, 2008
15. *Georgia and Russia can avoid war – if the West helps*  
By Kenneth Yalowitz and William Courtney  
Christian Science Monitor, June 27, 2008

## #1

### **Statement of John R. Beyrle, Ambassador-Designate to the Russian Federation US Senate Foreign Relations Committee, June 19, 2008**

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Committee, I am honored to appear before you today as President Bush's nominee to be the next U.S. Ambassador to Russia. I am grateful for the confidence and trust expressed in me by the President and Secretary Rice through this nomination. If confirmed, I will do my utmost to advance and defend American interests in Russia, and look forward to consulting and cooperating closely with the Committee and its staff, and with your colleagues in Congress, in pursuit of those goals.

It's a special pleasure to be back here in Dirksen 419, where I spent so many hours during the 101st Congress as a Pearson fellow on the staff of the late Senator Paul Simon.

I've now spent over three decades studying, working, and living in Eastern Europe, the Soviet Union and in Russia. I believe I have gained a broad range of experience related directly to the challenges and opportunities I would face if confirmed for this position.

I made my first trip to Russia as a university student in Leningrad in 1976, after four years of studying Russian in college. In the late 1970s I spent almost three years traveling to dozens of cities across the USSR on American cultural exhibitions organized by the U.S. Information Agency. I spent 2002 to 2005 as Deputy Chief of our Mission in Russia, but my first tour at the U.S. Embassy in Moscow was 25 years ago. The world has been transformed since then. Most importantly, no longer are the United States and the Soviet Union pitted in the ideological and military confrontation of the Cold War. Our bilateral relationship has experienced great change in these years, and the world is safer place for those changes. Today our relationship is much more complex, including elements of strategic cooperation, and areas where we have sharp differences.

As much as things have changed, however, important elements remain the same. Russia remains a great power. The largest country in the world, the Russian Federation enjoys enormous global influence. It is the only nuclear power comparable to the United States, and the world's largest producer of hydrocarbons. As a permanent member of the United Nations Security Council, Russia's attitudes and influence matter in almost every issue of importance to America, whether the fight against global terrorism, non-proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, or strategic and regional issues involving North Korea, Iran, or the Middle East.

The United States recognizes the shared challenges that our countries face. We seek to cooperate with the government of Russia wherever possible, because we will always achieve much more with Russia's cooperation than without it. This principle was spelled out in the Strategic Framework Declaration announced by Presidents Bush and Putin at Sochi in April. A roadmap for the way forward in U.S.-Russian relations, the Declaration states that the two countries will work together to promote security, prevent the spread of weapons of mass destruction, combat terrorism, and advance economic cooperation. In less than two decades, we have built a strong record of concrete, cooperative achievements in these areas. For example, under the 20-year-old Intermediate Nuclear Forces Treaty, together we have eliminated an entire category of our nuclear weapons.

Under the Cooperative Threat Reduction program, the United States has helped Russia improve physical security at chemical, biological and nuclear research, production and storage facilities. The United States has helped Russia dispose of fissile material through the Agreement material from dismantled warheads is being down-blended into nuclear fuel used in the United States. Two Russian plutonium-production reactors have recently been shut down and will be replaced by fossil fuel plants with U.S. assistance. U.S.-Russia trade is growing, totaling nearly \$27 billion last year. U.S. companies and their foreign subsidiaries have invested more than \$16 billion in Russia, and Russian companies have invested more than \$5 billion in the United States since 2000. Both Russia and the United States can and should point to such achievements with pride and use them as benchmarks for future progress.

At the same time, our desire to strengthen our relations with Russia and to see a democratic and strong Russia as a constructive influence in world affairs means that we must be open and honest about the areas in which we have disagreements, or concerns about Russia's development. Both the President and Secretary Rice have been forthright about these issues in their public statements and their discussions with Russian leaders. They include concerns about trends that are moving Russia away from a stronger democratic future, weakening the institutions of civil society, and endangering the sustainability of economic growth. We have seen opposition political parties and supporters facing increased restrictions. Non-governmental organizations and the media have been subject to pressure, harassment, and sometimes violence. Problems with corruption and the rule of law persist in ways that hinder the operation of foreign businesses and dampen the investment climate. Freedom for civil society to operate and for citizens to express their political will is vital to the democratic development of any country, but especially a country as influential as Russia.

We are also very concerned about Russia's relations with its closest neighbors. While we appreciate the great influence Russia has in the world, we would like to see Russian leaders exercise that influence in a way that does not increase regional tensions, but contributes to peace and stability. Russia's long-term interests are best served by having strong, sovereign, prospering neighbors, and by energy dealings in which the terms are transparent, market-driven, and mutually beneficial.

The United States has a strong stake in Russia's success. However, that success, as Russian President Dmitry Medvedev recently acknowledged, can be built only upon a foundation of democratic and free market reforms. These reforms are in Russia's own interest, and we remain committed to working with the Russian people and their leaders to implement them.

Mr. Chairman, if confirmed I will build upon the excellent work of my predecessor, Ambassador William Burns, to expand the cooperation we have already undertaken with the Government of the Russian Federation, and to speak plainly with Russian leaders when we encounter areas of disagreement. We will work to implement the roadmap of the Strategic Framework Declaration, including cooperation in the field of nuclear energy and non-proliferation; the expansion of Russian-American commercial ties and the integration of Russia into global economic institutions; the struggle against terrorism and transnational crime; and the encouragement of the development of democratic institutions, rule of law, and a vibrant civil society in Russia.

Mr. Chairman, these are but a few of the many challenges and opportunities that define the relationship between the United States and Russia today. If confirmed, I believe that my experience in and knowledge of Russia, its history, culture, people and language will enable me to be an effective advocate for the United States' foreign policy interests. Thank you for the honor of appearing before you today, and for considering my nomination.

## **#2a**

### **Two Torahs dedicated in Ukraine JTA Brief, June 20, 2008**

Torahs were dedicated in two Ukrainian Jewish communities this week.

The Jewish community in the central Ukrainian city of Cherkassy held a ceremony to install a restored Torah scroll into its synagogue.

The Torah was found in Dnepropetrovsk; the Jewish community there donated it to the Cherkassy community, which lacked a scroll.

The restored scroll is over 100 years old. Its restoration was sponsored by Vitaly Zaidner, a member of the Board of Trustees of the Dnepropetrovsk Jewish Community.

Another Torah scroll was installed this week in eastern Ukraine's Zaporozhye synagogue, the first such ceremony in that town in ten years.

## **#2b**

### **Anti-Semitic attack in Volgograd JTA Brief, June 20, 2008**

A Russian Jew is recovering after being attacked by two men for being Jewish.

Oleg Polonsky, 40, went to a cafe in Volzhsky in Russia's Volgograd region to eat dinner, but before he could order, he was approached by two men who saw his Star of David key chain, according to the Web site Jewish.ru.

The men asked, "Are you a Jew?" the June 18 report said. When Polonsky said yes, the two men attacked him, beating him to the point where he needed hospitalization for his injuries.

The police have not arrested anyone in connection with the beating, but the head of the local Jewish community has requested that the mayor oversee an investigation into the crime.

## **#2c**

### **Belarus celebrates 'Days of Israel' JTA Brief, June 25, 2008**

Belarus is celebrating the "Days of Israel" in honor of the Jewish state's 60th anniversary.

The three-day celebration, sponsored by the cultural center of the Israeli Embassy, started Monday in the city of Brest. It includes concerts, screenings of award-winning Israeli films, an exhibit of Israeli artists' paintings and a book exhibit.

Brest officials and foreign diplomats attended the opening events.

The same event will be held later this month in the Belarusian city of Bobruisk.

## **#2d**

### **Ex-prisoners decry insurgents' recognition JTA Brief, June 25, 2008**

Former concentration camp prisoners called on Ukraine's president not to recognize Ukrainian Insurgent Army members as heroes. In an open letter to Victor Yushchenko, members of the International Union of the Former Juvenile Prisoners of Fascism wrote, "The resurrection of the nationalistic forces from the Ukrainian Insurgent Army, or UPA, in Ukraine, and your personal rather strange attitude to this issue alarms us."

Last October, Yushchenko signed a decree calling for a law recognizing Ukrainians who fought alongside the Nazis. For years after Ukrainian independence in 1991, UPA fighters have demanded official veterans' status similar to that of Soviet Red Army veterans.

Several international Jewish organizations called on Yushchenko in 2007 to reverse his decision to award Gen. Roman Shukhevych, a commander of the insurgent Nachtigal battalion, with his country's highest award, the Hero of Ukraine. Some of the celebrations honoring Shukhevych included anti-Semitic manifestations.

Holocaust researchers and Jewish groups have charged that a force under Shukhevych's command took part in pogroms in 1941 in which 4,000 Jews were killed. Visiting Israel last November, Yushchenko defended the top honor for Shukhevych and said he did not deliberately massacre Jews.

"This is immoral to award those who were related to pogroms and murdered Jews and others during and after WWII," Boris Zabarko, the chairman of the All-Ukrainian Association of Former Jewish Prisoners of Ghetto and the Nazi Concentration Camps, told JTA. "That is why we are protesting."

## **#2e**

### **Israel names new Belarus envoy**

**JTA Brief, June 26, 2008**

Israel appointed a new ambassador to Belarus.

Eddie Shapiro will begin his work in Minsk at the end of this year, Zeev Ben Arieto, the acting Israeli ambassador, told the Belapan news agency. Ben Arieto's credentials are set to expire in approximately six months.

Shapiro, 46, has worked at Israeli embassies in Russia, Ukraine, Uzbekistan and Thailand.

He came to Israel with his parents from the former Soviet republic of Moldova at the age of 11. He has a degree in management from Tel Aviv University.

## **#2f**

### **Lone Tajik synagogue razed**

**JTA Brief, June 26, 2008**

Tajikistan's lone synagogue was demolished.

The 19th century Dushanbe shul was razed last weekend to make way for a park, the Tajiki Jewish community reported.

The government has promised to allocate land for a new synagogue, though details on the plan are sketchy.

"It's painful to lose something very dear, something that cannot be valued in money terms," said a rabbi, Mikhail Abdurakhmanov, in an interview with Reuters. "At the moment the existence of Tajikistan's only Jewish community is under threat."

The community, which numbers some 350 people, is descended from Persian-speaking Bukharan Jews who have lived in Central Asia for centuries. Many Tajiki Jews left for Israel after Tajikistan won independence from Soviet rule.

## **#2g**

### **Monument honors slain Ukraine rabbi**

**JTA Brief, June 26, 2008**

A rabbi murdered during World War II was honored with a new monument in eastern Ukraine.

The opening ceremony for a monument built in memory of Rabbi Dov Ber Schneerson, a brother of the Lubavitcher rebbe, Menachem Mendel Schneerson, was dedicated June 22 on the outskirts of the eastern Ukrainian city of Dnepropetrovsk.

According to the leaders of the local Jewish community, the memorial complex erected at the actual location of Schneerson's shooting was dedicated on the date he was killed by Nazi soldiers in 1941. A witness helped local Jews identify the site.

Local authorities, Jewish leaders and members of the Jewish community took part in the opening.

### **#3**

#### **Open Season: Life in Putin's Russia**

**By Julia Latynina**

**Washington Post, June 22, 2008**

MOSCOW—On Nov. 9, 2007, during a special operation in the village of Chemulga, in the republic of Ingushetia, Russian special forces shot and killed an individual by the name of Rakhim Amriyev. Eyewitnesses said that they shot him in the head and placed an automatic rifle beside his body. Then, as dozens of villagers who had run out of their homes looked on, the troops used an armored personnel carrier to demolish a wall of the one-room house where Amriyev lived and announced that he had died in a shootout.

You may ask how I can be sure that things happened this way -- that Amriyev didn't fire back, that he wasn't a terrorist and that the automatic rifle was planted. I'm absolutely certain -- because Rakhim Amriyev was 6 years old.

The most striking thing about everyday life in the Russia of Vladimir Putin (and make no mistake, it is Putin's Russia, despite the election of a new president, hand-picked by the great man) is the incredible corruption of the courts, the police, the special forces -- all the institutions that are supposed to uphold law and order in a democracy and that in Russia today have been transformed into a cancer that's devouring the state. Consider these further examples:

On May 20, 2005, in Moscow, a car driven by the son of Defense Minister Sergei Ivanov struck and killed 68-year-old Svetlana Beridze as she crossed the street. Beridze, who was in the crosswalk, was hit with such force that she was thrown high into the air and the keys in her handbag were crushed. No criminal charges were brought against the minister's son, who, his father publicly stated, had "experienced physical and emotional suffering" as a result of the accident. Instead, in what appeared to be an effort to intimidate the dead woman's family, authorities opened a criminal investigation against her son-in-law, for allegedly assaulting the minister's son.

Last Sept. 10, Muscovite Natalia Trufanova was driving to her dacha with her family in her old Zhiguli when a motorcade carrying Supreme Court President Vyacheslav Lebedev came speeding down the road toward them, driving in her lane. One of the vehicles in the motorcade tore through Trufanova's car. Eyewitnesses reported that the head of the Supreme Court kept going, leaving it to his underlings to comb through the bodies and the heap of twisted metal. Without batting an eye, the police declared that Trufanova had "driven into the oncoming lane," which meant that, if she survived, she could be brought to trial. When angry witnesses started posting video on the Web clearly showing that it was the motorcade that was driving in the wrong lane, the lead investigator looking into the accident said that he didn't have access to the Internet.

On a rainy September evening a week after Natalia Trufanova fell under the wheel of justice, I witnessed an accident on Moscow's government thoroughfare -- the famous Kutuzovsky Prospect. A silver Lexus, traveling at what looked to be about 90 miles an hour, flew out of the far left lane and crossed four lanes of oncoming traffic, crashing into several cars. As I drove past the scene of the accident, the wind blew bits of crushed metal, pieces of cloth and broken glass along the asphalt; bodies still sat in some of the cars. Within the hour, I learned that the driver of the Lexus was a 27-year-old woman with no known occupation; with her in the car was a deputy minister of economic development.

I learned this from a mutual friend (of mine and the deputy minister's) named Pavel, who had rushed to the scene. The minister was already dead; the young woman was in a daze, due to either pain or drugs. A police sergeant, cheerfully surveying the pile of bodies the girl had left in her wake, asked Pavel in the most businesslike fashion: "So, how are we going to solve this problem?" Apparently they "solved the problem" -- they didn't even bring charges against the woman.

Strange but true: It's not only ministers, their wives and their children -- as well as their lovers -- who are going unpunished, but also high-priced prostitutes, high on cocaine, with important addresses in their little black books.

Crime in Russia is hardly being investigated. In May of last year, the body of 4-year-old Nastia Mokryakova, her throat slit, was found in the woods outside Moscow. What do you think the police told the news media? "The child got lost and died of exposure." A month later, in the Moscow suburb of Tomilino, some maniac strangled 10-year-old Nastia Butenkova, and the first thing the police did was to say that the girl, who'd been found on a staircase with her pants pulled down around her ankles, may have caused her own suffocation. (A public outcry ultimately led to an investigation of both murders.)

It's not as though this unwillingness to investigate is limited to crimes whose victims are poor. On Dec. 6, 2007, Oleg Zhukovsky, a prominent banker who worked with major clients of the state-run bank VTB, was apparently killed in his suburban dacha. The killers reportedly tied the victim's hands behind his back, put a plastic bag over his head and threw him into the pool. Before killing him, they apparently forced him to write a suicide note. "Suicide!" the police promptly declared. It's hard to believe, but their unwillingness to investigate the death of a high-ranking banker had nothing to do with politics or the state. The police simply can't be bothered.

Of course, there are some crimes that the police do investigate. They accused an acquaintance of mine of giving \$20 million to the leader of the Chechen terrorists. Another person I know was accused of trying to privatize the air space above the Arctic Ocean. Of a third, a prosecutor wrote that his bank was trying to foment a revolution and overthrow Putin. These three suspects all had something in common: They are on the Russian Forbes 100 list.

A fourth acquaintance of mine isn't on that list. He was simply building a highrise in the southern city of Makhachkala. The local prosecutor telephoned and asked him what discount he'd give him on an apartment in the building. "Twenty percent," my acquaintance replied. The prosecutor thereupon ordered an investigation that turned the man's company upside down, then called again and demanded a 50 percent discount.

Is this the legacy of the Soviet past? Not at all. In the Soviet Union, criminals were thrown into prison along with the dissidents. Is it the legacy of former president Boris Yeltsin? There was nothing like this under Yeltsin.

This is the distinctive nature of the Putin regime.

Under Putin, the Russian businessman has been transformed into game being hunted by people in epaulets. Who was the first victim of this hunt? Oil company executive Mikhail Khodorkovsky, who was sentenced to eight years in prison for tax evasion in 2005, and his company, Yukos, which the government dismantled and sold off after his arrest. Who was the hunter? Then-president Putin.

The right to commit crime has become part of official privilege. If the victim doesn't raise a fuss, no one is punished. If the victim appeals to the public, he or she is harshly punished. The very fact of appealing to the public is perceived as a challenge to the regime. But who laid down these rules of the game? Who never punishes his friends? Putin.

In the republic of Ingushetia, death squads are executing people. They're being shot in front of witnesses, in crowded places, in market squares, at bus stops, and then weapons are being planted on them and they're being photographed as dead "terrorists." In some instances, the crowd has shielded the intended victims. In others, the local Ingush police have nearly beaten the Russian executioners to death. Who's being killed? Those on the so-called Wahhabi lists. These lists were compiled at the order of the FSB (the successor to the

KGB) soon after the Moscow theater massacre of 2002, in which Chechen terrorists took an audience hostage and 130 people died when Russian special forces stormed the theater.

But who ordered these lists to be drawn up? Who would think, to stop the problem of terrorism in the northern Caucasus from spreading, of executing fundamentalist Muslims wholesale, simply for their convictions, not for any crimes that they may have committed? Such an order couldn't have been given without Putin's knowledge. In the 1970s, then-Israeli prime minister Golda Meir had those who had taken part in the massacre of Israeli athletes at the 1972 Munich Olympics annihilated. But since the Moscow theater incident, Putin has gone her one better -- he has even wiped out people who had nothing to do with it.

Each such execution, however, has created more terrorists than it has eliminated, and for all intents and purposes, Russia has lost control of Ingushetia -- the only republic where authorities have fully followed the execution order. Who will dare to inform the great Putin, the former KGB man, the courageous hero, who happily sits for photographs in the cockpit of a fighter plane and poses bare-chested on a fishing trip?

In the West, people read that Putin has restored Russia's power and strengthened the ruling hierarchy. This is the image that the PR agencies he has hired are trying to project. There may not be democracy in Putin's Russia, they say, but there is order.

Don't buy it. The Russian authorities aren't in control of the country -- unless we consider their ability to throw any businessman in prison and seize his company to be control. And yet these guys really think they're strong -- and that the measure of a ruler's strength is the amount of cash in his bank accounts.

*Julia Latynina is a Russian journalist, novelist and radio host. This article was translated from the Russian by Outlook assistant editor Zofia Smardz.*

#### **#4**

#### **Veteran Russian politician quits with dig at Putin Reuters, June 22, 2008**

MOSCOW - Veteran politician Grigory Yavlinsky stepped down as leader Russia's Yabloko opposition party on Sunday, with parting shots at President Dmitry Medvedev and his predecessor Vladimir Putin.

Yavlinsky, a 56-year-old economist who advised the Russian government at the start of the 1990s on the transition from communism to a market economy, will be replaced by the head of the party's Moscow branch, Sergei Mitrokhin.

Yavlinsky said Putin and Medvedev were dependent on Russia's centralized power structures to rule the country.

"Our party has shown that we cannot be sold and act on our principles," he told a party congress where he announced his resignation.

There was no hint that Yabloko anticipated a change in the political climate under Medvedev.

The new Russian president promised to crack down on corruption and improve the rule of law, which led some political analysts to say he might take Russia in a more liberal direction than Putin, whom he succeeded last month.

Yabloko, meaning "apple" in Russian, has been critical of what it says is the repression of civil rights and democratic freedoms in Russia, but has lost ground to the pro-Kremlin parties such as United Russia and Fair Russia.

"Our policy and the slogan 'Freedom and Justice' remain unchanged," Mitrokhin told Reuters after his election.

Yabloko performed poorly in last December's parliamentary election, winning 1.6 percent of the vote, well below the 7 percent required to secure seats in the lower house, known as the Duma.

Putin has become the leader of United Russia since quitting as president and taking the role of prime minister under Medvedev.

Putin also said as president he wanted to see liberal parties represented in Russia's parliament, but they fared badly in the last two elections, with Yabloko and others complaining they were prevented from having airtime on state broadcasters.

Under Yavlinsky the party did not formally align itself with the street protests of chess grandmaster Garry Kasparov and the Other Russia movement, although many party members want it to co-operate with other anti-Kremlin groups.

## **#5**

### **In Russia, reading, 'riting and religion**

**In the name of cultural unity, school officials say, Orthodox Christian classes are needed to assimilate immigrant children.**

**By Megan K. Stack**

**Los Angeles Times, June 23, 2008**

KOSTROVO, RUSSIA - Today they would learn about drawing, Russian Orthodox saints and God. The 7-year-olds sat straight at their desks, sun pouring through lace curtains and cherry trees blooming in the fields beyond. The teacher set a birch branch before the children and told them it was fragile and unique, just like their souls.

"If you think you can't draw properly, who will help you?" she asked.

"God will help us," a boy called out.

"Yes, God will guide your hand, so be confident, have faith."

This is Tuesday, one of the two days a week dedicated to Orthodox education at this sleepy public school in the lush forests outside Moscow. All the girls and women have forgone pants in favor of skirts, and every student is learning Christian catechism along with reading, writing and arithmetic.

It's an unlikely scene, not least because this is a public school in a country that, just a few decades back, prided itself on institutional atheism. It's also a strange sight because as many as half of the pupils are Muslim, with a few Jews, Buddhists and nonbelievers mixed in. Many of their families arrived recently from Central Asia and the Caucasus in search of better schools and jobs.

At school, the students paint massive murals of Jesus, memorize myriad details about Orthodox saints and discuss New Testament stories with the local priest, who barrels into class in flowing black robes to oversee the students' spiritual formation. At home, some of the children are learning to read the Koran in Arabic.

"Some of the parents doubted. Some were against it," school administrator Natalia Korolchenko said. "But I told the parents, because more and more children of different nationalities are coming, something should unite them. Something should be done to make them respect the culture of this country."

Pictures of Jesus, saints

Whereas the United States has haggled over prayer in schools, many Russian schools have swung wildly from Marxist havens to institutions steeped in Orthodox symbols and doctrine. With pictures of Jesus and the saints displayed on the walls, Kostrovo's public school probably would be mistaken for a parochial institution by an uninformed visitor.

The struggle over the national religion is playing out across this vast country. A grass-roots movement driven by eager priests and local school officials has brought "Basics of Orthodox Culture" classes to regions throughout Russia in recent years.

The constitution orders the separation of church and state, but many observers believe that the gap is narrowing. Under the eight-year presidency of Vladimir Putin, who is rumored to be a fervent believer, Orthodox leaders took on a new prominence. They blessed the military, praised the country's rulers, encouraged priests to work on behalf of national interests and carefully avoided any criticism of the government's human rights or democracy record.

In exchange, the government and oligarchs close to the Kremlin have lavished the patriarchy with cash to restore monasteries and churches that went to seed during the Soviet era. An Orthodox construction boom is underway across the country.

The government has so far avoided entanglement in a growing debate over whether the classes are appropriate for public education. The decision over whether to add them -- and the nebulous question of where culture ends and theology begins -- has been left in the hands of local school officials.

The advent of religious education has provoked outcry from diverse segments of Russian society: Communists, Muslim and Jewish leaders and wary educators have raised alarms over the growing popularity of the classes.

"This seriously affects the unity of the country," said Arsan Sadriyev of the Russian section of the Spiritual Directorate of European Muslims. "This will lead to the breakup of the country. Ethnic groups will consolidate themselves and look for ways to protect their interests."

But supporters believe that the courses in Orthodox history and culture will unify Russia by filling an ideological void left by the collapse of the Soviet Union. Orthodox Christianity is the defining core of Russian history and identity, they say, and should be a compulsory subject for every student. Muslim immigrants from Central Asia and the Caucasus are in particular need of Orthodox understanding, they contend, so they can grasp the culture of their new home.

"If we go to Turkey, we must learn the basics of Islamic culture," school administrator Korolchenko said. "When children come here, they should learn Orthodox culture. It will be easier for them."

Clerics are locked in debate with the Education Ministry over whether the Orthodox courses should be discontinued or standardized, said Archpriest Vsevolod Chaplin, a spokesman for the Moscow patriarchy.

"Some people are afraid of any religion in the schools," he said. "They still want to keep the monopoly of materialism and positivism that existed in Soviet times."

A flood of newcomers

But Russia itself is changing. In Soviet days, this bucolic town was home to a homogenous population of ethnic Russian families who made their living working at the government cattle farm.

Today this region of rolling, fertile hills has been flooded with newcomers: Chechens, Azerbaijanis, Armenians, Tajiks and Uzbeks. Korolchenko declares, proudly, that the school is no less dogmatic today than it was when she arrived 30 years ago as a Communist Party member. But now, instead of communism and agriculture, the school is teaching religion to give the children a moral framework.

"If you understand the general Christian dogmas and the moral code of communism, it's the same thing," she said.

The federal government has made its approval plain. In 2004, the Education Ministry presented the school with an award for "spiritual and moral rebirth of village residents."

The town's priest, Vadim Sorokin, is also a former Communist who was an adult when he was baptized. He came to Kostrovo in 1995 and set about reconstructing the ruined hulk of St. Nicholas the Sanctifier Church.

Today, sunlight streams through intricately painted cupolas. Gold chandeliers dangle from an ornate ceiling, throwing light on icons etched with a wolf's fang and set in hand-carved mahogany.

The renovation cost millions of dollars, all donated by the government and wealthy businesspeople. Sorokin started out buying books for the school and slowly worked up to introducing the Orthodox culture classes in 2003.

He haunts the hallways on appointed days, popping from class to class as the pupils, ages 7 to 17, talk about saints and souls.

In an upstairs classroom, Sorokin beamed as teenagers in the oldest class thrashed through a theological discussion.

"What did Cain and Abel do?" the teacher grilled them. "They both brought gifts to God. So what was the difference?"

"Sincerity and lack of sincerity," one of the girls called out, springing to her feet and then sitting again.

"Good kids!" the teacher exclaimed. "You understand!"

## **#6**

### **Human rights group criticizes Putin's Russia**

**By Barry Schweid**

**AP, June 23, 2008**

WASHINGTON - Propelled by a surge of oil and natural gas wealth, Russia has become the leading antidemocratic force in its region, a private democracy watchdog organization says.

Nearly two decades after the fall of the Berlin Wall, the vision of a wider Europe "whole and free" remains unrealized, Freedom House also says in a report being released Monday.

"Over time, we have seen rising oil prices correlate clearly with sharply falling democracy performance, especially in Russia, Kazakhstan and Azerbaijan," the group's director of studies, Christopher Walker, said in an interview. "The resource curse is taking root."

As energy prices increased over the past decade, the three ex-Soviet states based their growth on natural energy resources, the report said. The period was marked by "a concurrent and striking decline in the openness and independence of institutions," the report said.

In Russia, by last year, it became clear that Vladimir Putin's era had ushered in a new elite that grabbed power, Freedom House said. Experimenting in "authoritarian capitalism," an "Iron Triangle" of state power, industry chiefs and security services is leading a decline in the electoral process and increased control over political opponents and news media, the report said.

"Independent voices of consequence have been muzzled and are unable to challenge or moderate the leadership's whims and excesses," according to the report.

Courts, the backbone of the legal system, are targeted by dominant powerholders to make sure they cannot provide unbiased and independent justice, Walker said.

As for the media, Walker said, influential powerholders "want to make sure their enormous assets and use of them are not scrutinized and not taken away, and that contributes to repression."

The growing authoritarianism is also shaping foreign policy, producing "a more assertive and often belligerent posture by Russia toward its neighbors," the report said.

For instance, it said, Russia keeps trying to undercut reform in neighboring Georgia and is applying pressure on Estonia.

While yielding the post of president to Dmitry Medvedev, Putin holds the post of prime minister and has assumed leadership of the country's dominant political party. The report said it is not clear how the still-evolving authoritarianism will fare without him directly at the helm.

When he took the oath of office in May, Medvedev pledged "to protect the rights and liberties of every citizen." He also declared that "human rights and freedoms ... are deemed of the highest value for our society and they determine the meaning and content of all state activity."

In early June, the new president urged the Russian parliament to scrap a bill widely seen as restrictive to the media, saying the measure "could only create obstacles to the normal functioning of mass media."

## **#7**

### **Kremlin's new man strikes a different pose**

**By David Schlesinger and Michael Stott**

**Reuters, June 25, 2008**

MOSCOW - Russian President Dmitry Medvedev played down differences with his predecessor Vladimir Putin in an interview with Reuters but the contrast in style and tone between the two men was striking.

Medvedev -- a longtime Putin ally -- presented himself as a continuity figure during the presidential election campaign this year and he repeated that mantra in the interview, saying the essence of Putin's policies would not change.

"Politicians are also people and they should also have their own tone and their own style," Medvedev said. "But that does not change the basic tenets of policy."

That said, the new president cloaked the message from Moscow in very different words to those of his predecessor.

During the hour-and-a-half-long conversation, there were none of the harsh attacks on the West which became a Putin trademark in his final years as president.

Instead, choosing his words carefully, the new man in the Kremlin stressed freedom, the rule of law and private property.

Analysts and diplomats in Moscow are divided over Medvedev, a trained lawyer who first met Putin when the two men worked together in the St Petersburg mayor's office in the 1990s. Putin picked him last December as his chosen successor.

Some, including a number of Western ambassadors, see Medvedev as a deliberately more liberal choice, ushering in a new phase of Putin's long-term plan for Russia which will stress freedom, private property and foreign investment.

Others, including Cold War-era hawks, tend to view him with suspicion as an insider moulded by his years in the Kremlin who will turn out to be little more than a Putin puppet.

Medvedev's remarks to Reuters, his first interview with a Western media outlet since taking office in May, seemed likely to give more support to the first camp than the second.

Whereas Putin blasted NATO's plans to expand around Russia's borders, accused Washington of starting a new arms race with plans for a missile shield and to cut transport links to ex-Soviet neighbour Georgia, Medvedev mentioned none of these issues.

## NATIONAL INTEREST

The essence of Russia's foreign policy, he said, would be to defend the national interest but it would be guided by "freedom, democracy and the right to private property".

Asked about criticism of Russia's foreign policy, Medvedev avoided Putin's oft-laid charges of Western hypocrisy and double standards.

Complaints were normal, he said -- after all, Moscow also had its problems with other nations.

When asked about threats to Russia, he listed common global problems and then named poverty and corruption as specific problems for Russia.

Putin, who grew up in a rough neighbourhood where he chased rats down staircases, liked direct, earthy language, jokes and colloquialisms. But Medvedev's middle class upbringing as the child of university professors showed in his considered, lawyerly phrases laced with subordinate clauses.

When speaking about financial matters, Medvedev did not copy Putin's habit of reeling off statistics and specific policy initiatives, preferring to talk in more general terms.

On one point, however, the two men were at one.

When asked about government control over Russian media, Medvedev became more animated and said he "could not agree" with the question.

Russia's television channels, newspapers and websites were "absolutely free", he insisted, adding: "There are not today, have not been in the past and will never be problems of closedness of information in Russia".

That answer could have come straight from Putin.

*(Full interview at [http://kremlin.ru/eng/speeches/2008/06/25/2050\\_type82916\\_203066.shtml](http://kremlin.ru/eng/speeches/2008/06/25/2050_type82916_203066.shtml))*

## #8

**Russian Reformer Voices Optimism About Medvedev  
Energy Executive Expects Influence Of Kremlin to Ease  
By Andrew Osborn  
Wall Street Journal, June 25, 2008**

MOSCOW -- The architect of Russia's post-Soviet privatization program said he believes new President Dmitry Medvedev will deliver on promises to loosen the Kremlin's grip on economic and political life. But Anatoly Chubais, one of Russia's leading economic reformers, also defended the growing clout of state gas giant OAO Gazprom, denouncing as "madness" Europe's efforts to check the company's expansion.

Mr. Chubais said in an interview that President Medvedev's pledges to improve the rule of law, strengthen democracy and implement market reforms are more than just rhetoric.

"We're going in a liberal direction," Mr. Chubais said.

Mr. Chubais's optimism follows years of occasionally biting criticism of former President Vladimir Putin, who chose Mr. Medvedev as his successor. In December, Mr. Chubais slammed Mr. Putin's United Russia party as "Soviet," calling parliamentary elections that handed it a landslide victory "disgusting." In January, he denounced the Kremlin's confrontational foreign policy as harmful to the economy.

His optimism about Mr. Medvedev reflects hope among some liberals that years of growing authoritarianism are about to give way to a softer, looser style of government. Some other liberals fear that Mr. Medvedev's pledges are just rhetoric.

Mr. Chubais, 53 years old, was speaking as he prepared to step down as CEO of state-controlled electricity giant RAO Unified Energy Systems. In what he said was the only major economic-liberalization move of its scale under Mr. Putin, UES has been broken up into nearly two dozen companies that are to compete in a market for electric power.

Mr. Chubais's overhaul has attracted billions of dollars in foreign investment to build power plants. In a meeting last week, Mr. Putin, now prime minister, endorsed the effort as "a pilot program for reform," according to Mr. Chubais. Once UES ceases to exist next week, Mr. Chubais said he plans to retire.

Mr. Chubais said that while there has been little concrete evidence that Mr. Medvedev will loosen the Kremlin's grip over politics and the economy, he was encouraged by the president's recent speeches.

"We don't need a revolution...full freedom or democracy starting on Monday. That's not workable for Russia," Mr. Chubais said. "But this is the historical vector we need. Mr. Medvedev's personality and political resources suggest we are going in this direction."

At the same time, Mr. Chubais defended some of the Kremlin's most-controversial economic policies of recent years. He said Gazprom was right when it briefly cut supplies to Ukraine in a pricing dispute in 2005. He rejected Western criticism that the move amounted to using energy as a political weapon.

"Putin was 100% right," Mr. Chubais said, noting that Russia had been subsidizing prices for its neighbors for years. "If it was any other country than Russia it would have been perceived as normal."

Mr. Chubais also criticized European Union attempts to curb Gazprom's expansion in Europe. The result, he said, would be higher prices as Europe's gas supply was reduced. "It means forcing your own population to pay for your political fears," he said. "It's madness."

But in January, Mr. Chubais objected to the Kremlin's treatment of the U.K.'s cultural arm, the British Council, which was ordered to stop operating outside Moscow to comply with Russian law. Britain and others said it was retaliation for the U.K.'s robust response to the 2006 murder in London of former Russian security agent Alexander Litvinenko. Britain is one of Russia's largest foreign investors.

Mr. Chubais is seen as one of Russia's leading liberal reformers, a reputation he won in the 1990s when he masterminded the sale of state assets that were bought at bargain-basement prices by businessmen who became known as oligarchs. He is highly respected by some in governing circles, but many ordinary people, particularly older Russians, blame him for the anarchic carve-up of post-Soviet assets that enriched a few but left many mired in poverty.

**#9**

**Siberian Summit Looks for New Start**

**By Anna Smolchenko**

**Moscow Times, June 25, 2008**

KHANTY-MANSIISK - Russia and the European Union hope to turn a page in their stalled relations when their leaders meet in this Siberian oil town this week. But the most tangible result to come out of the meeting is expected to be an announcement of the start of talks.

What will come next remains anybody's guess.

"For Russia and the EU, the agreement is needed and essential," Deputy Foreign Minister Andrei Grushko told reporters in Moscow on Tuesday. But, he added, "We understand the negotiations will be tough."

The talks are scheduled to officially start on July 4 in Brussels through a series of plenary sessions and working groups. President Dmitry Medvedev's meeting in Khanty-Mansiisk with three top EU officials at this week's summit will be largely symbolic in nature, Russian officials said.

Medvedev, accompanied by Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov and Economic Development Minister Elvira Nabiullina, is due to arrive Thursday evening, before holding an informal dinner with European Commission President Jose Manuel Barroso, EU foreign policy chief Javier Solana, and Slovenian Prime Minister Janez Jansa, whose country currently holds the rotating EU presidency.

Finnish President Tarja Halonen, Estonian President Toomas Ilves and Hungarian President Laszlo Solyom are due to join Medvedev on Saturday for a Finnish-Ugric forum.

The choice of Khanty-Mansiisk, whose streets are littered with billboards reading "EU-Russia: The Pulse of Cooperation," could have been meant to highlight Russia's newfound wealth and its increased bargaining power.

The start of talks on a new Partnership and Cooperation Agreement, a wide-ranging pact that governs a host of political, economic and social arrangements between Brussels and Moscow, has long been delayed over objections raised by new EU members whose relations with Russia remain particularly strained. The current agreement, a nearly 200-page document adopted 10 years ago when Russia remained mired in post-Soviet chaos, expired at the end of last year. Its terms were automatically extended until a new agreement is concluded. Poland vetoed the start of negotiations over a meat dispute with Moscow in 2006, and Lithuania, demanding that Russia improve ties with Georgia and Moldova and cooperate on judicial issues, blocked the start of the talks earlier this year.

Medvedev and the EU officials plan to adopt two political declarations at the summit, said Sergei Ryabkov, a senior Foreign Ministry official who is helping with summit preparations. Ryabkov declined to identify the documents, which are believed to be a declaration on the start of the strategic partnership talks and an agreement on cross-border cooperation.

Despite the fact that no major breakthroughs are expected, the summit will be important in many respects, Russian officials said. Earlier this month, Ireland dealt a stinging blow to European unity, rejecting the Lisbon treaty in a referendum. "It is very important for us to understand how serious this crisis is," Konstantin Kosachyov, a senior State Duma deputy, said in televised comments Monday night.

Such moves chip at the EU's ability to use a single voice when speaking with Russia, making any bilateral negotiations even more difficult, observers said.

Ireland's rejection of the treaty will also be discussed at the summit, said Ryabkov, head of the Foreign Ministry's European cooperation department.

"We sympathize with the difficulties the EU is facing on its path to finding its own identity," he said by telephone.

Russian officials said a new mechanism - similar to one existing within the framework of the NATO-Russia Council that makes joint decisions - may help improve ties. Moscow has made a proposal on the new mechanism to Brussels but so far has not heard back, Ryabkov and Grushko said.

It will be the first time that Medvedev represents the country at the Russia-EU summit, and many Europeans have put hopes into the mild-mannered politician, widely considered to be more liberal than his mentor, Prime

Minister Vladimir Putin. At last June's summit in Volzhsky Utyos, near Samara, and presided by Putin, the leaders appeared to have failed to agree on anything of substance, and a joint news conference after the talks was suffused in acrimony and mutual accusations.

Ryabkov said the tone might be milder this week, but the foreign and economic policies will remain completely the same. "We have a 100 percent continuity. There should be no doubt about it," he said.

Grushko said Putin would not attend the summit.

Officials on both sides expect the talks on the new partnership agreement to last for months, and some said they expect the agreement to be ready in 2009. "Nobody can predict how long the talks will last," said Lyudmila Babynina, a senior researcher at the Academy of Science's Institute of Europe. Energy security tops the EU priority list. Europe wants Moscow to open up its energy sector to investors and spell out the terms and conditions in the new agreement. Moscow, by contrast, wants only a new framework document, which can be gradually expanded, Babynina said.

She said she could not predict which side would eventually win, but "Russia will likely be able to defend its position."

Grushko chalked the difficulties in the ties with the EU to Russia's increasing economic confidence.

"As the Russian economy has become part of the global economic order, which we are also helping to stabilize, we are becoming competitors," he said, referring to Russia and the EU.

"We need a new agreement, not only to open up the potential of our cooperation, but to put rules onto that competition," he said.

Yet he sought to dismiss the common notion that Europe was too reliant on Russia's hydrocarbon riches, saying there was interdependence among the nations. "In the energy sphere Russia doesn't depend on the EU any less than the EU depends on Russia," he said. Europe gets 25 percent of its gas from Gazprom, while the gas giant depends on Europe for the bulk of its revenue.

Russia's priorities include moves toward a visa-free regime, Grushko said. "That would be one of the true forms of strategic cooperation," he said.

In other areas of common plans, Moscow and Brussels are planning to have a joint peacekeeping operation in Chad and Central African Republic, Ryabkov and Grushko said.

*Staff Writer Miriam Elder reported for this story from Moscow.*

## **#10**

### **Lithuania bans public display of Soviet and Nazi symbols**

**Soviet and Nazi imagery, memorabilia and national anthems forbidden under new law.**

**By Deutsche Press-Agentur**

**Haaretz, June 19, 2008**

The Lithuanian parliament has passed a law banning public displays of Soviet and Nazi symbols and the performing of the respective national anthems, local media reported Wednesday.

The law forbids the display of the images of Soviet and Nazi leaders as well as flags and memorabilia exhibiting the hammer and sickle, red star, or swastika at public gatherings.

Also banned are the open display of the Soviet and Nazi coats of arms as well as the playing of their national anthems.

Equating Soviet symbols with Nazi symbols will be likely to anger Moscow as Russians see their defeat of Nazi Germany as one of the cornerstone events of Russian history.

During an hour-long debate, members of parliament wrestled with the proposal, ru.delfi.lt news portal reported.

Member of parliament, Vytautas Cepas was asked to explain what measures ought to be taken against a Russian football team when they come to Lithuania to participate in a match.

Following protocol, national anthems are to be played ahead of the match. However it could be illegal under a new tougher measure as the Russian and Soviet anthems employ identical melodies.

The Soviet Union occupied Lithuania in 1940, after Joseph Stalin signed a pact with Nazi Germany a year earlier.

Many Lithuanians were deported by the Soviets to die in Siberian gulags one year before the Germans occupied the territory in 1941. Some Lithuanians fought alongside the Nazis, while others joined the Red Army.

The Soviets re-established control over Lithuania in 1944, which they retained until 1990 when the small Baltic nation declared independence. A year later the Soviet Union collapsed.

## **#11**

### **Experts checking if Vilnius building constructed on Jewish cemetery**

**By Deutsche Press-Agentur**

**Haaretz, June 25, 2008**

Israeli experts Wednesday launched a 10-day research project to determine if newly constructed offices and apartments sit on an old Jewish cemetery in Lithuania's capital.

Questions about the site's past have caused international controversy. Lithuanian Jews, who opposed the construction work, say the site was a 15th century cemetery. Developers dispute their claim.

Protests from abroad include a letter from then-U.S. presidential candidate Hillary Clinton. The U.S. House Foreign Affairs Committee passed a resolution in February condemning the construction on the possible cemetery site.

Last year, Jews from across Europe rallied in protest outside the headquarters of European Union institutions in Brussels.

The Jewish community in Vilnius - called the Jerusalem of Europe - was almost wiped in the Holocaust during the World War II, when 6 million Jews died at the hands of Germany's Nazi regime.

Czarist Russian authorities shut down the cemetery in 1831 and partly built over it. In the 1950s, the Soviets built a stadium and concert hall on part of the site, allowing the remains of the Vilna Gaon, a famous 18th-century Jewish rabbi and scholar, to be removed.

## **#12**

### **Europe's Shameful Honoring of Vilnius**

**By Andrew Baker**

**Forward, June 26, 2008**

The European Union has designated Vilnius as the "European Capital of Culture" for 2009. It is a recognition Lithuania does not deserve.

Vilnius, with its beautiful old town and venerable history, is without a doubt charming. Workers are busy restoring churches and palaces, and the first-time visitor is likely to be smitten by the postcard-perfect scenes.

But behind Vilnius's picturesque facade is something far less appealing to behold: Lithuania's record of systematically ignoring a major element of its cultural heritage. Jews have lived in Lithuania for a millennium. Vilnius — or Vilna, as it was also known — was a major center of Jewish life and scholarship, boasting so many yeshivas and prominent rabbis in the 18th century that it was known as “the Jerusalem of Lithuania.” By the 20th century one-third of the city's population was Jewish. It was a world center of Yiddish culture and scholarship.

That ended with the Holocaust. The Nazis, with the assistance of Lithuanian collaborators, murdered 200,000 Jews, more than 90% of the country's Jewish population.

Today, six decades later, the small, reviving Jewish community is seeking the return of former Jewish communal property as a means of restoring and preserving Jewish heritage sites and supporting its own limited religious and cultural needs. The Lithuanian Jewish community seeks to follow the paths taken by Jewish communities in neighboring countries such as the Czech Republic, Poland and Slovakia, where community property restitution was implemented years ago.

In Prague the restored Jewish quarter, with its eight synagogues, is again the center of Jewish activity in the Czech Republic and a magnet for tourists. The Krakow neighborhood known as Kazimierz hosts an annual Jewish Cultural Festival that brings 25,000 people together for a week of concerts, films and lectures that display Poland's rich Jewish legacy. In Slovakia a government-endowed foundation, created as a partial settlement for looted Jewish assets during the Holocaust, aids the elderly and restores cemeteries and synagogues.

None of this is happening in Lithuania. Instead, the Lithuanian government, for more than six years, has continually delayed an agreement on communal property restitution. Meanwhile, former Jewish properties have been privatized and the community lacks the most basic support for education and welfare.

Vilna's historic Jewish cemetery, for example, was hundreds of years old, but in the mid-19th century tsarist Russia built a military fort on the site, and in the 1950s the Soviets replaced it with a sports arena. The pattern of disrespect continued under Lithuania's post-Communist leadership. Despite promises that no graves would be desecrated under their watch, the land was privatized, sold to developers and, ignoring regulations to the contrary, city permits were issued to allow the construction of luxury apartments. Lithuania's president promised in September 2007 to stop construction, but it has yet to be halted.

Holocaust knowledge also is wanting in Lithuania. The country was annexed by the Soviet Union before World War II ended, leaving no possibility of any critical, objective examination of Lithuania's Holocaust history until it regained its freedom in 1991. A presidential decree created an international historical commission in 1998 to report on both the Nazi and Soviet occupations. Among its prominent members was Yitzak Arad, the founding director of Yad Vashem in Jerusalem.

Arad was born in Lithuania. The Nazis killed his family, and as a teenager he fled and joined the Soviet Partisans. When the war ended he left for Palestine. Sixty years later a Lithuanian newspaper translated excerpts from his diary, describing the Partisans' battles with Germans and Lithuanian collaborators. Last year Lithuania's general prosecutor decided this was prima facie evidence that Arad might be guilty of war crimes and opened an investigation. The historical commission has published several scholarly works that detail the role of Lithuanians in the Holocaust. But the actions of the general prosecutor now make a mockery of these findings.

In March, when Lithuania celebrated its independence from the Soviet Union, several hundred neo-Nazis and skinheads paraded along Gedimino Avenue in central Vilnius, walking past the Parliament and the prime minister's office, waving flags with a Lithuanian swastika and shouting “Juden Raus.”

This was not the first neo-Nazi rally in Eastern Europe. Last November a similar group organized a march in Prague with the provocative goal of walking through the city's Jewish quarter. But in the Czech capital the neo-Nazis were greeted by thousands of vocal counter-demonstrators and nearly all the country's political leaders. In Vilnius, where incitement to ethnic hatred is a crime, police made no arrests while providing the marchers with an escort. Lithuania's president, to be fair, did voice criticism — 10 days after the event.

Twisting Holocaust memory, desecrating cemeteries, ignoring antisemitism and refusing to return communal property — surely this is not the best cultural capital Europe can offer. The E.U. should reconsider the honor accorded Vilnius.

*Rabbi Andrew Baker is director of international Jewish affairs for the American Jewish Committee.*

**#13**

**John McCain's War on Russia**

**National Public Radio (NPR), June 25, 2008**

MIKE PESCA, host: Back on March 26th, John McCain gave a speech in front of the Los Angeles World Affairs Council, his first major foreign policy address since becoming the presumed Republican nominee. Here's what he said about our former Cold War enemy and the future of trans-Atlantic relation. (Soundbite of speech)

Senator JOHN MCCAIN (Republican, Arizona): We should start by ensuring that the G8, the group of eight highly industrialized states, becomes again a club of leading market democracies. It should include Brazil and India, but exclude Russia.

PESCA: Newsweek editor, Fareed Zakaria, called McCain's plot to push Russia out of the G8, quote, "the most radical idea put forward by a major candidate for the presidency in 25 years." So how come this major foreign policy issue has flown so low on the media and the general public's radar this election season? What else might we all be missing as we talk about Iran and Iraq? Well, Michael Signer was the foreign policy advisor for John Edwards and he's also the senior policy advisor at the Center for American Progress. Hello, Mr. Signer.

Mr. MICHAEL SIGNER (Senior Policy Advisor, Center for American Progress): Hi.

PESCA: What do you notice about John McCain wanting to boot Russia out of the G8? Did it immediately set off bells in your head? Or are you like the rest of us and just figured that out months after the fact?

Mr. SIGNER: Well, it was interesting. Actually, he first made the proposal that I know of in a cover article in the magazine Foreign Affairs last November, which even goes more to your point, which is it's a really profound proposal with pretty vast implications for this relationship we have with Russia and Russia's direction in the world. And you're right. It's kind of throwing a stone in the pond.

PESCA: Is this because - obviously, a lot of the blame falls on guys doing what I do, which is the media. But what about guys doing what you did, which is being a policy expert and working with campaign? How much blame falls on you guys?

Mr. SIGNER: Well, I feel fairly strongly that campaigns are generally trying to find as much political advantage as they can, both on - both positively in constructing a case for their candidate, and also - we call them contrast issues, where you find something that really, you know, creates a vast distinction between the different candidates. That happened last fall with Iran, for instance, to declare the Revolutionary Guard a terrorist organization.

That became a very powerful issue in the Democratic primary, even though it was about a country that a lot of people - that hadn't gotten into the race all that much. But you know, if John McCain really put - these are major foreign policy speeches. When he did that speech, the campaign wants a lot of coverage on it. I mean, when you put it in a cover story, you know, in a magazine like Foreign Affairs, you trying to make news. These

campaigns are trying to make news most of the time, so I really do think the blame falls more on the media than on the campaign.

PESCA: I will accept that, but what about the Barack Obama campaign? Shouldn't he be jumping up and down, quoting Fareed Zakaria, who is not a guy who is hostile to Republicans by any means, and also a very respected guy, just kind of trying to talk about how radical an idea this is? Why isn't the Barack Obama team doing that?

Mr. SIGNER: Well, I wouldn't be surprised if that does happen. I mean, he really has been only just shifting into this role as the nominee over the last couple weeks. The Russia proposal by John McCain, I think, is - could be a tremendous flashpoint in talking about these two, you know, the two approaches.

And the Obama campaign, if you will notice, they really started rolling out a way of talking about McCain as Bush Redux, you know, really doubling down on a lot of the approach of the Bush presidency, and in as much as this would be, you know, returns belligerence, to a strongly unilateral approach, to not sort of thinking around the next corner but doing what seems right, you know, at the moment. I mean, this proposal is to lock Russia out of the G8.

Most expert opinions agree that the biggest mistake we can make with Russia is not embracing the more within the fold of the West and all of our institutions. And if we take a stance for them that turns them away and makes them buck against all of our institutions, the United States, and turns to the East, then we - it's a very dangerous course and we have - we are tremendously interlinked with them now on issues from nuclear proliferation, to obviously, gas and oil, especially right now, to issues like how to deal with Iran. We've gotten a lot of support from them recently in dealing with Iran's nuclear ambition. So it's a really bizarre proposal he made and I think it will - I would not be surprised if the Obama campaign does give it a lot of attention.

PESCA: I don't know exactly what Barack Obama or his campaign thinks about Russia. I Googled the phrase "Obama on Russia." I got 10 total hits. If you Google on "Obama on flag," you get 20,000 hits. Do you know what the Obama campaign thinks about Russia? Do they agree with what you were just saying, embracing them more in the international fold?

Mr. SIGNER: Yes. And they - he thinks it's a complicated relationship, I mean, which is a part of - you know, there are limits. I mean, you know, it's, like, you listen sometimes to what people say and what people don't say, and each can speak volumes. And Obama has talked about the framework that he would have for Russia. He said that it's a complicated relationship there. They are at the same time a partner as well as a competitor. There are very alarming trends going on in Russia, with, you know, the trend toward authoritarianism and against democracy.

At the same they have, again, worked constructively with us on some economic issues against Iran. And so he has talked generally about a framework, which is very instructive. I mean, part of what goes on within the foreign policy element of these campaigns is you do get a clue into how the candidate would approach different issues, and you can - you know, sometimes it does rise to the level of politics, which is, I wouldn't be surprised again if that does happen with the Russia vote.

But sometimes you just listen to how a candidate would approach an issue and that tells you a lot about how they would be as commander in chief, and I do think Obama has done that. He has talked about Russia, going back to his own foreign affairs piece last fall. And he has - in the campaign, he has talked about how he would deal with it.

PESCA: I know that you are very frustrated with the lack of attention and your candidate, John Edwards, got with a lot of his policy speeches. That's politics and it's, like we all said, the shame of the media, to some extent. But can you, very quickly - let's say that you were advising the networks who are conducting the next debate, and they said, give me a curveball foreign policy issue to throw these guys. Can you suggest one?

Mr. SIGNER: Well, one would be if you take as a premise that the world we're in right now is dramatically changing, even year to year, you have a very - it is literally a new world. You have powerful non-state actors

from terrorist groups to ethnic movements that are re-shifting the boundaries of nation-states. You have, you know, new multi-lateral organizations. You have corporate powers that are very powerful.

You have globalizations. You have Brazil, Russia, India, China, which are called the brick countries, which are growing in their powers. How does a candidate think about themselves in that new world? What is their foreign policy for the new world? Do they see themselves as not just adapting but as moving forward, into a new world that itself is changing. That is a very...

PESCA: That is a good question. Michael Signer, senior policy advisor for the Center for American Progress. Thanks very much.

Mr. SIGNER: Oh, you're welcome. Thanks a lot.

**#14**  
**Belarus Cracks Down on Internet Ahead of Vote**  
**By Yuras Karmanau**  
**Moscow Times, June 26, 2008**

MINSK -- Belarussian lawmakers have given final approval to a crackdown on Internet journalism, one of the last remaining independent sources of information in the country.

The legislation also forbids all Belarussian media outlets from accepting foreign funding, a restriction that will effect about 30 publications that now receive U.S. or EU money.

The bill, drafted by President Alexander Lukashenko's office and approved Tuesday by lawmakers, "is among the harshest in Europe and throws Belarus back to the worst Soviet times," said Oleg Gulak, leader of the Belarussian Helsinki Committee, a rights group.

The new restrictions come before parliamentary elections, which Lukashenko on Tuesday set for Sept. 28.

His government argues that the Internet needs to be brought to heel to shield the population from foreign propaganda. "We have to protect society from the negative effects of the Internet," First Deputy Information Minister Liliya Ananich told parliament members Tuesday.

The bill was given final approval in parliament's lower house in a vote of 96 to 2. It now goes to the upper house, which can introduce no changes, before heading to the president to be signed into law.

The new measures require all Internet sites to be officially registered with the government; many independent newspapers that have been closed down by the authorities have taken refuge in cyberspace.

The legislation also toughens controls on journalists, who can be imprisoned for two years for reproducing foreign media reports that "discredit Belarus."

Lukashenko promised that the upcoming elections would be democratic.

"We want to show the West and Russia how to have elections," he was quoted by the Belarussian news agency BelTA as saying Tuesday. "We will make them so democratic that you will be convinced of the real result, of who has the people's support today."

**#15**

**Georgia and Russia can avoid war – if the West helps  
War could mean more pressure on already sky-high oil prices  
By Kenneth Yalowitz and William Courtney  
Christian Science Monitor, June 27, 2008**

Hanover, N.H.; and Washington - Russia may be provoking a war with Georgia in a territorial dispute over Abkhazia.

Some say Moscow's provocations are merely an effort to prevent Georgia from joining NATO, which it was promised at the alliance's summit in Bucharest this April.

But a war between these two countries would threaten security in the volatile Caucasus and eastern Black Sea region and the booming exports of Caspian energy through Georgia, adding pressure to already sky-high oil prices throughout the world. It would also endanger US and NATO security interests in an area not far removed from the Middle East.

War is worth preventing, but it'll take some help from the United States and European Union.

Thanks largely to wise Russian diplomacy at the time, the breakup of the Soviet Union in 1991 saw the emergence of peaceful borders between the 15 new states. One exception was, and still is, Abkhazia, a strategically located separatist region in Georgia. Russia borders the region to the north and exerts military control and economic leverage over it. And now, Russia, which fiercely opposes Georgian membership in NATO, appears to be taking steps to annex Abkhazia – to the chagrin of Georgia.

In April, then-President Vladimir Putin extended Russia's economic, legal, and administrative writ to Abkhazia. A few days later, a Russian fighter aircraft destroyed a Georgian unmanned surveillance plane, though Russia denies it.

Ruffling Georgia's feathers even more, Russia put 1,000 troops into Abkhazia for peacekeeping and railway repair. Georgia now seems at a breaking point.

If Russia steps down from this posturing, it could lead to the reopening of land transport through Abkhazia to Georgia and Armenia; a peaceful Winter Olympics in Sochi in 2014; and more tourism, shipping, and investment in the eastern Black Sea region.

If Georgia and Russia can avoid military confrontation, Georgia could benefit with the return of internal refugees to their homes in Abkhazia, enhanced confidence in energy security, and entry into NATO.

But, if Russia and Georgia continue as they have, it could quickly spiral into war.

What can be done?

First, Georgia must strengthen its own democracy and demonstrate it is confident enough to handle the complicated issues surrounding Abkhazia. This will help convince ethnic Abkhaz that their rights will be respected after reintegration.

Last month's parliamentary elections in Georgia were an improvement over presidential elections held last January and a step forward from November 2007 when government forces broke up large opposition demonstrations.

A massive demonstration last month, however, suggests that more must be done to heal fissures. Georgia needs to be open to freedom of the press and political parties and civil society having freedom of activity. Opposition forces in Georgia must recognize the rules of the democratic game, take their seats in parliament, and contribute constructively to political dialogue.

Second, Russia must recognize that its long-term interests are best served through peace in the eastern Black Sea region. Russia is not and will not be another USSR, but some of its current actions are reminiscent of that era.

Russia should recall its successful diplomacy of the early 1990s. In fact, at a meeting on June 6 in St. Petersburg, Russian President Medvedev and Georgian President Saakashvili said the two countries could resolve their differences. It was a promising step, but with no follow-through thus far.

Third, Georgia and Russia require outside help. As Sens. Joseph Biden and Richard Lugar recently stated, "Georgia cannot win this standoff alone." They called on Europe "to get off the fence," and the US to lead an intensive effort to internationalize the negotiations and the Russian peacekeeping missions in Abkhazia and a second separatist region, South Ossetia.

In order for that to happen, the US and Europe need to rebalance their priorities: Russia has taken advantage of US and European preoccupation in Iraq and Afghanistan, and Europe's slow rolling of Georgia's ambitions to join NATO and the EU.

The US and the European Union should recognize the risk of war and jointly commit more resources to work with Russia and Georgia to avert it. This requires energizing the Friends of Georgia group at the United Nations (France, Germany, Russia, Britain, and the US), and reaching out to Black Sea states such as Turkey and Ukraine.

The US and the EU should also offer substantial assistance for reconstruction in Abkhazia. Deeper US and NATO support for Georgia's security, including training, exercises, and equipment, and launching the NATO Membership Action Plan, will give Georgia more confidence to take political risks to help solve their issues with Abkhazia.

In March, President Saakashvili offered an encouraging framework for a solution – broad autonomy for Abkhazia in return for accepting Georgia's writ. According to a May 31 Le Monde press report, President Putin called it a "good plan."

To calm the storm that seems to be gathering dangerous momentum in the region, the US and Europe should give the Abkhazia issue new priority and work with Russia and Georgia to resolve this crisis.

Both US presidential candidates should endorse these efforts. The interests of regional peace and unimpeded energy flow demand no less.

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