



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

NCSJ WEEKLY NEWS BRIEF
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Fighting to preserve a nation's heritage

By Abdul Turay

The Baltic Times, July 09, 2008

When Tobias Jasetas was a small child, his family emigrated to England. One summer his mother decided to go back to Lithuania for an extended holiday to visit relatives. She took Jasetas, who was then nine years old, with her.

It turned to be one of the saddest decisions made by anyone, anywhere, ever. The year was 1939 and within a few months of arriving war had broken out. The mother and son were stranded in a country under Soviet occupation. The Soviets deported Jasetas' relatives to Siberia. Then the Nazis came and things got even worse.

Jasetas is now 87 and still lives in Vilnius in a run down apartment with basic utilities. He doesn't like to reflect on what might have been. He is the ultimate survivor. He lived through the first Soviet occupation, the Ghetto, the murder of his mother and other relatives. He escaped from the Ghetto just before the "Child Achtung" in 1944 when Ghetto children were singled out and slaughtered. He was hidden by a Lithuanian family.

He lived through the second Soviet occupation when Jewish culture was crushed. Today Jasetas is struggling to get by on a meager pension and allowance that he gets from the Lithuanian government as a survivor of the Jewish Ghetto.

However, there is one fight left that that this old warrior would like to see resolved before he passes on. It is a struggle that faces all of Lithuania's 3000 strong Jewish community, all that is left of a once thriving population. They want the Lithuanian government and people to recognize the enormous contribution that Jews have made to the Lithuanian nation.

Practically this would partly be achieved by returning property stolen by the Soviets from people murdered by the Nazis. (See page 1 story).

"This is where I was born, this is where I married and this is where I will stay because this is my country," Jasetas said.

Jasetas is now one of the leaders of the 800 survivors of the Holocaust of which 109 survived the Ghetto and concentration camps.

The average age of the survivors is 78 and 30 percent of these people cannot take care of themselves.

"They need medicine they need food. A big part of the need is to allow them to have a normal existence," Simon Gurevicius, executive director of the Jewish community of Lithuania said.

Gurevicius explained that the elderly Jewish community has suffered three types of occupation: Nazi, Soviet and what he called, "a poverty occupation."

Survivors of the Ghetto and concentration camps receive 200 litas (57 euros) a month. A tiny sum compared to what the Soviets stole.

The people in the Ghetto or camps were murdered and most of the survivors alive today, hid outside, often helped by kindly Lithuanian families. They get nothing.

Now with their families dead, it is the younger members of the community, and not blood relatives that they rely for any kind of support.

"We are trying to make them so that they wouldn't feel lonely. We try to provide as much as possible.

“There are a lot are lonely people, especially lonely women. They don’t have family in Lithuania,” Gurevicius said.

He explains that as a young community leader he faces tough challenges.

“We feel bad because we have a choice between whether to give food or whether to give medicine because we have a limited budget,” he said.

In general, things are not looking good for the Jewish community. Not only has the government failed to make any attempt to return stolen property but neo-Nazi skinheads were allowed to march openly through the streets of Vilnius. It took the government 10 days to condemn the march.

Yet many young Jewish people chose to stay rather than emigrate to the U.S. or Israel. They are motivated by a sense of patriotism and duty.

“We look to Lithuania as our country. We are ready to stand and defend the independence of the country when needed.

“I believe a lot in fighting for the country, in defending family and community. We are responsible for building a monument for people who passed away, a monument not of stone but of ideas,” Gurevicius said.

Lithuania used to be a center of Jewish and Yiddish culture in Europe. Vilnius was once known as the Jerusalem of the North. There were Jews in the country for a thousand years.

Jewish leaders around the world have come together to demand that something of that culture is restored.

“The Jewish community that remained in Lithuania struggles hard to revive Jewish life and even convert it into a center of Jewish culture for the entire region.

“Amid much hardship, the local community has managed to rebuild Jewish life in the country in just a few years. It is now becoming a Jewish center for the Baltic region,” Michael Thaidigs-mann a representative of the world Jewish Congress said.

He explained what Vilnius means to the Jewish community worldwide.

“It’s a huge historical tragedy. A whole world disappeared... It is heart wrenching,” he said

He added that Lithuania had much to gain by celebrating its Jewish heritage instead of rejecting it.

“Cities in Europe that have addressed this issue has become tourist hotspots. The festival of Jewish culture in Krakow attracted 25,000 people. The Jewish museum in Prague had three quarters of a million visitors,” he said.

Daniel Mariaschin, executive vice president of B’nai B’rith International the oldest Jewish service organization in the world said:

“There is a great attachment for Jewish people all over the world to Lithuania. One does not have to have family from Lithuania to feel that attachment.”

Ultimately the Jewish community can’t wait forever for the government to do something. With each passing year, more of the survivors are dying off.

“Time is passing away, people are passing away. This a big moral issue. It is still possible to ensure dignified living conditions for them,” Gurevicius said.

Medvedev Voices Distress Over U.S. Shield

By Anna Smolchenko

The Moscow Times, July 10, 2008

President Dmitry Medvedev said Wednesday that Russia was "distressed" by a U.S. deal to place parts of a missile-defense shield in the Czech Republic and promised to respond with "concrete steps."

Medvedev also balked at a G8 proposal to impose sanctions on Zimbabwe, reflecting Russia's reluctance to punish governments for votes that the West describes as not free and unfair — a description that it has repeatedly heard about its own elections.

As a three-day Group of Eight summit wrapped up, it appeared that the mild-mannered Medvedev was adhering closely to the course laid out by his tough-talking predecessor, Vladimir Putin. He refused to give an inch in one-on-one talks with other G8 leaders, and his public remarks echoed those made by Putin in the past — even if that left Russia at odds with the other G8 countries. Medvedev's three top aides at the summit — foreign aide Sergei Prikhodko, economic aide Arkady Dvorkovich and deputy chief of staff Alexei Gromov — were formerly aides to Putin.

The U.S. missile-defense deal, signed Tuesday, soured the mood for Russia at the summit's final day, with Medvedev saying Russia was "greatly distressed" with Prague's approval of Washington placing elements of a shield on its territory.

"This does not suit us. And while we, of course, won't whip up any kind of hysteria, we will consider concrete steps," Medvedev said, without elaborating.

Putin had warned that Russia would point nuclear missiles at the Czech Republic and Poland, which is also considering hosting components of the missile-defense shield, if they reached an agreement with the United States.

A senior Polish official said Wednesday that Medvedev's reaction underlined the need for Europe to seek closer security ties with the United States. "It is absolutely unacceptable for one country to threaten another for acts that are not aggressive in character," presidential aide Michal Kaminski told reporters in Warsaw, Reuters reported. "The eventual construction of the shield is not directed against Russia."

On Zimbabwe, Medvedev's stance sharply diverged from the position of the United States and Britain, which back sanctions against what British Prime Minister Gordon Brown called "an illegitimate regime with blood on its hands."

But after much deliberation Medvedev joined a summit declaration calling for "financial and other measures" against President Robert Mugabe's officials responsible for violence. He said the measures would not necessarily be sanctions.

The stance of Russia, which does not have any considerable economic interests in Zimbabwe, reflects its apparent unwillingness to go after governments for elections criticized by the West. The March election that brought Medvedev to power has been described in the West as tightly controlled and stage-managed.

On Tuesday, Russia was of two minds about the Zimbabwe declaration, with the country's G8 envoy, Alexander Pankin, warning that meddling in Zimbabwe's internal affairs might trigger an unpredictable outcome.

It remained unclear Wednesday night why Russia chose to support the strongly worded statement, but Brown's spokesman James Roscoe said graphic images of a Zimbabwean driver tortured to death had been shown to the G8 leaders. Britain's Daily Mail reported on its web site that Medvedev "dramatically caved in" after Brown showed him the horrific pictures of a mutilated and burned corpse of a driver for Zimbabwe's opposition Movement for Democratic Change. Roscoe, however, said Brown did not specifically show the pictures to Medvedev.

Brown called Zimbabwe "a developing tragedy" at the center of the summit's agenda and said Britain and the United States had circulated a draft resolution calling for sanctions in hope of gaining support.

The declaration that was reached "shows that the whole of the international community is now not prepared to accept an illegitimate government," Brown told reporters Wednesday.

Jasuo Fukuda, Japan's prime minister and the summit's host, used more cautious language, saying, "Sanctions would be possible. They would be conceivable as well."

Medvedev, speaking hours later, said, however, that the declaration was meant to express concern but that there was no agreement on concrete measures. Medvedev only addressed the issue when asked by a reporter to comment.

In contrast, Brown started and finished his news conference with his statements on Zimbabwe. It is now up to the United Nations to "make the pressure of the world clear," Brown said.

The UN Security Council is expected to vote in the upcoming days on a draft resolution calling for sanctions over election violence in Zimbabwe.

The G8 gathering, Medvedev's first international outing as president, has become the summit of many firsts.

A summit of BRIC nations took place within the framework of the G8 talks, with Chinese President Hu Jintao, Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, Brazilian President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva and Medvedev agreeing to coordinate economic activities and take steps to tackle a global food crisis.

The 34th summit also was the biggest ever, with leaders of 16 non-G8 states participating in the talks. Seven African heads of state were invited for so-called outreach sessions.

Among the other guests were United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon, World Bank President Robert Zoellick and European Commission President Jose Manuel Barroso.

For the first time, the G8 pledged as a group to halve emissions worldwide by 2050, although it has yet to agree on a midterm timeframe. The G8 nations agreed that major developing economies would need to act as well for the climate change talks to bear fruit, but countries like China refused to endorse that vision.

On energy security, the leaders agreed on the need for "increased production and refining capacities," a better balance between supply and demand and increased transparency of the energy markets.

Medvedev said, however, there would not be any easy solutions in the energy sphere. "New sources of energy are not appearing very quickly, and there are not enough old sources of energy," he said.

The International Energy Agency said it was pleased with the leaders' decisions. "They recognize the need for greater investment to ensure energy supply but are also committed to increasing the level of energy efficiency and promoting new energy technology," IEA executive director Nobuo Tanaka said in a statement.

Many environmentalists and other activists were skeptical about the gains of the summit. "Several governments championed steps forward, but in the end this summit did not deliver the breakthroughs so urgently needed," said Jeremy Hobbs, executive director of Oxfam International. "The consensus reached was at best shallow, especially on climate."

The leaders said they worked around the clock and did their best. U.S. President George Bush, attending his last G8 summit, said it produced "a lot of meetings on important subjects, and we accomplished a lot."

"Day and night we engaged in serious discussions," Fukuda said, and "at times our discussions got heated."

Medvedev said he was pleased to discover the summit was not a "hangout" where leaders read from documents prepared by their aides, but a discussion of complex issues without the help of diplomats.

#3

Medvedev Is Neither Tsar Nor Saint

By Boris Kagarlitsky

The Moscow Times, July 10, 2008

Russians have a serious problem on their hands. They don't know which of the two tsars is the real one.

Russia has been governed by collective leadership more than once, starting when Tsar Peter (before he became "the Great") shared the throne with his half-brother, Ivan V. In addition, there were attempts at collective leadership after Josef Stalin's death and after Nikita Khrushchev's ouster. I remember when I started school back in 1965, some first graders received textbooks with Khrushchev's portrait in them, and others got the same books without any portrait. We were confused by all of this. Even though we were school children, we knew that Khrushchev was no longer the main leader, but we couldn't understand why the portrait of somebody new did not replace him in the books.

Collective leadership has always ended with one man emerging triumphant and wielding undivided authority. But our current leaders seem determined to keep us guessing by not offering any good clues. Since Vladimir Putin took the position of prime minister, he has been handling rather mundane domestic issues, crunching numbers and appointing various officials of only secondary importance. These tasks are hardly fit for a tsar.

For his part, Dmitry Medvedev's behavior has not been very presidential either. He talks about sports and pop music and discusses football with high school students on their graduation night. Although this gives a human face to the presidential post, the people expect something more heavy-handed from a tsar, such as banishing a corrupt oligarch to Siberia or wasting terrorists in the outhouse.

But this is a serious matter because the presidency is losing credibility among the people. Until the presidential election in March, it was clear in everybody's mind that we have Putin at the helm and that he has matters under control. Whether he was doing a good job or a bad one was not a subject for debate. He had the country's highest position, and nobody had the right to ask how the national leader did his job -- or whether he did it at all. Putin was a living symbol, an embodiment of the national idea and the Russian spirit. He was practically a saint.

Now Putin is just a bureaucrat -- albeit a very high-ranking one. He is still popular, but the real issue concerns the mysticism surrounding the tsar. The mystical aura around Putin has vanished, and Medvedev's has not been able to fill his shoes.

The various clans among the elite have yet to jockey for position in the new government as they would normally do. This is actually the reason for the current ambiguity. Everybody is trying to watch his step, to avoid any sudden movements and to keep from making enemies. The shared goal is to avoid upsetting the fragile balance of power that has been struck and to demonstrate loyalty to both leaders.

Unfortunately, this perceived balance has people worried. An open struggle for power would be nothing new, but this collective leadership actually seems to work and elicits feelings of confusion that border on panic.

Eventually, however, the scales will tilt and that fragile balance will be broken. Once the first serious dispute among the clans breaks out, the factions will go running to their respective patrons for support. Of course, Putin and Medvedev are doing their utmost to ensure that every clan is satisfied, but they can't realistically expect to prevent all disagreements among the ruling elite.

For the time being, there is equilibrium and tranquility among the elite, but no one should be overly complacent. The moment there is some kind of significant event that forces the clans to choose sides, we will see very clearly just how shaky that balance really was.

Boris Kagarlitsky is the director of the Institute of Globalization Studies.

#4

Raid in Ingushetia Kills 3 Reuters, July 10, 2008

An armed group raided a village in Ingushetia and killed three men linked to the security forces, witnesses said Wednesday, adding to growing instability in the area.

On Wednesday, police and special forces in armored personnel carriers patrolled the dusty village of Muzhichy, which nestles in the foothills of the Caucasus mountains in southern Ingushetia, next to Chechnya.

An eyewitness said a group of 15 armed men dragged the three men from a group standing outside a shop on Tuesday night and shot them in a well-planned attack.

"The whole attack lasted no more than 15 minutes," said Isa Gandarov, a lawyer. "There were no more than 15 rebels, and they spoke in Chechen, Ingush and Russian."

The dead men were a policeman, a former Interior Ministry officer and a military teacher, according to Russian news reports.

Most of the people living in Muzhichy hurried on when asked for comment Wednesday. One woman said in an exasperated voice: "Why were these people killed? Because they were trying to support their families?"

This is the latest in a string of attacks against Ingush authorities, in which dozens of policemen, judges and other officials have died. Human rights groups accuse the authorities of reacting with excessive force to the attacks.

Last year, the federal government boosted the number of its soldiers in Ingushetia and declared a counterterrorist operation in the region to combat increased rebel operations.

Rebel activity has shifted from Chechnya to Ingushetia and Dagestan over the last couple of years after Chechen President Ramzan Kadyrov improved security in his republic.

Now military helicopters fly hourly over Ingushetia, and the army sweeps the roadsides daily for bombs.

#5

Georgia Says Russia Spoiling Rice Visit Reuters, July 10, 2008

Georgia on Wednesday accused Russia of sending fighter jets into its airspace to undermine a visit by U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice.

Rice arrived in Tbilisi late Wednesday with a message of support for Georgia's government in its conflict with Russia over its breakaway regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, and to endorse the country's bid to join NATO.

The deputy commander of Georgia's military, Zurab Pochkua, said four Russian jets had spent a total of 40 minutes over South Ossetia on Tuesday night. He said Georgian forces did not fire on them to avoid loss of life on the ground.

A spokesman for Russia's Air Force declined to make an immediate comment. Russia has denied allegations in the past that its jets flew into Georgian airspace.

Georgian Foreign Minister Ekaterine Tkeshelashvili said Russia was ratcheting up tension hours before Rice's arrival because it wanted to sabotage talks on Western countries taking a more active role in mediating the separatist conflicts.

"It's a well-known policy of the Russian Federation to arrange provocations to coincide with high-level diplomatic activities. It's not only this visit of Miss Rice," Tkeshelashvili told reporters.

"Every time when diplomatic activity becomes strong enough to bring changes to the peace process, meaningful changes, then the Russian Federation does something to jeopardize that," she said.

Earlier Wednesday, Russia accused Georgia in the most explicit form yet of being behind attacks this month, including a cafe bomb in Abkhazia that killed four and an exchange of fire in South Ossetia that killed two separatists.

"The actions of Tbilisi present a real threat to peace and security in the South Caucasus and put the region on the edge of a new armed conflict with unpredictable consequences," the Foreign Ministry said in a statement.

Rice, speaking in Bulgaria, made it clear which side Washington favored in the conflict.

"The United States considers Georgia to be a good friend," Rice told reporters. "There have been a number of moves recently by the Russian Federation that in fact have not been helpful in terms of the frozen conflicts there with Georgia and Abkhazia."

Rice also said her visit to Georgia, whose bid for NATO membership Russia opposes, is a matter between the United States and an ally.

"I'm going to visit a friend, and I don't expect much comment on the United States going to visit a friend," Rice said.

Rice paid a one-day visit to Bulgaria to receive the country's highest honor from President Georgi Parvanov for her help in securing the release of six Bulgarian medics from Libya nearly a year ago.

On a previous leg of her trip, Rice angered Moscow by signing a deal with the Czech Republic to host elements of the missile shield Washington wants to build in Eastern Europe.

Rice said Russia had no cause for worry and called Moscow's threat of military action "predictable, if disappointing."

In a separate development, Georgian security forces clashed with Abkhaz separatists in the Kodor Gorge, a regular flashpoint. Temur Iakobashvili, Georgia's minister for reintegration, said four separatists were killed, but the breakaway region's administration said none of its men were killed.

#6

Ukraine: 'Climate of fear' after 'alarming' rise in racist attacks-new report Amnesty International, July 10, 2008

Violent attacks downgraded to 'hooliganism', Jews attacked, Roma fingerprinted

There has been an 'alarming' rise in the number of racist attacks in Ukraine, said Amnesty International today, as it released a new report condemning the Ukrainian authorities for failing to tackle the issue.

Last year six people were murdered in racist attacks in Ukraine, and this year the figure already stands at four further racist killings, with at least 30 serious racist incidents reported.

In one case a South Korean man was attacked in the street by a gang of four wearing spiked boots who stamped on the victim's head 'until his brains came out'. The attackers allegedly responded to a call from one

of the group to kill the man because of his nationality. In another case, a Ghanaian refugee was attacked by a gang of 10 people wielding metal bars and bottles who discussed cutting his throat, an attack later described as a non-racist robbery by the police.

Amnesty's 39-page report makes it clear that racial discrimination is not peculiar to Ukraine, but that the authorities there are nevertheless failing to meet the challenge of racism, frequently classifying violent racist attacks as 'hooliganism' by 'skinheads'. Amnesty's report notes that while the authorities will admit that so-called 'everyday racism' does exist in Ukraine, they deny any wider pattern of discrimination

Amnesty International UK Campaigns Director Tim Hancock said:

'There has been an alarming rise in racist attacks in Ukraine in recent years and foreigners and ethnic minorities now live in a climate of fear.

'Ukraine's police, prosecutors and politicians need to urgently confront the scourge of racism, not sidestep it by calling hate crimes acts of 'hooliganism'.

'In the UK it took an outcry after Stephen Lawrence's murder for the authorities to finally wake up to the challenge of confronting violent racism, and Ukraine effectively needs to do the same.'

Amnesty's report shows that all people of colour and foreigners are at risk in Ukraine. In the words of Tomas Lukayi, Director of the African Association of Kiev, 'We fear for our children who are going to schools and kindergarten ... they can be attacked or killed at any time.'

As well as the risk of violent attack, Amnesty's report shows that minorities in Ukraine are subjected to harassment, discrimination and abuse from state officials and ordinary members of the public.

Foreign-looking people are arbitrarily stopped for document checks, all members of some Roma villages including women and children have been fingerprinted and photographed by the police apparently because of their ethnic identity, and there is prejudice as well as violent attacks against Jews and Jewish properties.

Last year, for example, there were nearly 30 attacks on Jewish people or property, including an attack on the director of a Jewish girls' school and his wife, while in another incident 302 graves in a Jewish cemetery in Odessa were daubed with swastikas, including with the message 'Happy Holocaust'. Meanwhile, one academic study in Ukraine has shown a near doubling in anti-Semitic views among the general public from the mid-1990s to 2006.

Amnesty is calling for the Ukrainian authorities to create an inter-agency body to combat racial discrimination and to begin monitoring and publicising all racist incidents across Ukraine. Meanwhile, the authorities are being asked to end the classification of racially motivated crimes as 'hooliganism' and to review police procedures regarding document checks to ensure that they are not conducted in a discriminatory manner.

#7

Israel Seeks To Boost Jewish Immigration From Former USSR

By Anshel Pfeffer

Ha'aretz, July 10, 2008

The Jewish community in the former Soviet Union could disappear in a generation unless assimilation is curbed there, Prime Minister Ehud Olmert told the weekly cabinet meeting on Sunday. The government decided to set up a special body to increase immigration from those countries and strengthen Jewish identity there.

In the special cabinet discussion, a representative from Nativ—a once-covert agency founded in the Prime Minister's Office in the 1950s to bring Jews to Israel and to serve as a liaison for Jewish dissidents in the Soviet Union—told the ministers that there are some 880,000 people in its former territories who are eligible to

immigrate to Israel under the Law of Return. More than half, the representative added, are not Jewish according to religious law.

The special government body created to address the problem will act as an inter-ministerial committee, jointly chaired by the Jewish Agency, the Ministry for Immigrant Absorption, and Nativ. It will be headed by Cabinet Secretary Oved Yehezkel.

The briefing on the state of the Jews in the former Soviet Union revealed that only 10 percent of this population are involved in Jewish activity, with assimilation reaching 80 percent in some communities.

Nativ's director, Naomi Ben Ami, said that in light of these figures, "the Jewish Diaspora is going to lose this region's Jewry in one generation." Additionally, the cabinet was told that some 38,000 Jews who came to Israel during the years 1989 and 2007 have returned to their countries of origin.

Some 70 percent of the people eligible to emigrate from the former Soviet Union are older than 45; 36 percent of them are older than 65.

Immigrant Absorption Minister Jacob Edery called on the government to increase funding for immigrants by 50 percent, to open new absorption channels that will attract young professionals and to expedite the tax reforms necessary for attracting immigrants.

The cabinet meanwhile resolved to put extra emphasis on and increase funding for Nativ and Agency activity in the states in question. In addition, it has been agreed that immigration-assistance organizations, including Nativ, will focus on Russian-speaking Jews living in Germany, who constitute a sizable minority there.

The initiative to expand Nativ's operations to include Germany has angered Jewish community leaders, who blasted it in talks with Olmert last year. Nonetheless, Nativ is planning to operate cultural centers in Germany, focusing on Russian-speaking young adults and teenagers, in the coming months.

Germany has made no official protest, but senior German foreign ministry officials said they supported the Jewish community's position and expected explanations from Israel.

The 211,000 Jews from the former Soviet Union currently residing in Germany are also considered "in great danger of assimilation," as one government official involved with Nativ's activity there said last year. "There's a window of opportunity of a few years, after which we are liable to lose this community," he added.

#8

Hitler portraits adorn Russian train station JTA Brief, July 10, 2008

Hitler portraits have been painted on a train station in Russia's Far East.

Spray-painted graffiti portraits of Adolf Hitler began to appear in and around a train station near the Russian city of Vladivostok earlier this month, according to a monitor report from the Federation of Jewish Communities.

The portraits and the words "Hitler was right" appear at several stops on the train line, as well as on the walls of houses in the region, the group reported.

A local Web portal appealed to the Ministry of Internal Affairs for the region on Russia's Pacific coast but has not received an answer as to whether an investigation would be launched.

The Vladivostok chief of police said he planned to send out a unit to paint over the portraits.

#9

Moscow recognizes Jewish projects

JTA Brief, July 10, 2008

The mayor of Moscow recognized the president of a Chabad-led umbrella group for his efforts developing the city.

Alexander Boroda, the head of the Federation of Jewish Communities, developed a sprawling complex in the Marina Roscha district that includes the largest synagogue and Jewish community center in Eastern Europe, a medical and charity center, and an educational complex.

Plans call for a Museum of Tolerance in the district dedicated to Jewish history with a focus on Russia.

Mayor Yury Luzhkov noted Boroda's "great contribution to the development of the construction industry in Moscow and many years of dedicated work," according to the federation's Web site.

Luzhkov has deep connections to the booming real estate and development industries of Moscow. His wife, Yelena Baturina, Russia's only female billionaire, heads one of the largest construction companies in the capital.

Real estate analysts say it is nearly impossible to gain ground for any major development project without the city government's blessing.

#10

Russian-speaking Jewish lawmakers meet

JTA Brief, July 10, 2008

Russian-speaking Jewish lawmakers from several countries gathered in Moscow for a two-day conference.

The World Congress of Russian-Speaking Jews, headed by Boris Shpigel, a member of Russia's upper house of parliament, invited its Parliamentary Club of Russian-speaking legislators for a conference Thursday and Friday.

The event includes members of the Israeli Knesset and Ukraine's Rada, as well as lawmakers from the United States, Latvia and Germany. Members of Russia's Duma and Federation Council, the upper and lower houses of parliament, also are hosting the event.

Shpigel said the members of the Parliamentary Club represent a significant political force.

The conference includes meetings with Russian government officials and is designed in part to work out recommendations for model laws in the members' home countries.

"The parliamentary club will become a new effective instrument of dialogue and cooperation among nations," Shpigel told Itar-Tass.

#11

Rice Urges End to Separatist Violence in Georgia

By David I. McKeeby

U.S. Department of State, July 10, 2008

Russia must do more to help defuse rising tensions between neighboring Georgia and its breakaway regions, says Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice. "It needs to be a part of resolving the problem and solving the problem and not contributing to it."

In a July 10 briefing in Tbilisi with Georgian President Mikhail Saakashvili, Rice underlined U.S. support for Georgia's emerging democracy and stepped-up international diplomatic efforts to resolve ongoing disputes over Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Her visit follows several months of simmering tensions in the region,

including a recent series of bombings in Abkhazia, as well as a clash between South Ossetian separatists and Georgian security forces.

"There are many things that could be done and we're going to pursue them, but I do think we need to do it more intensively," Rice said. She also stressed the need for direct dialogue between the Georgian government and Abkhazia.

Following a series of meetings with both government leaders and opposition party members, Rice thanked Georgia for its contributions of troops to both Iraq and Afghanistan and encouraged continued progress toward developing democratic institutions. "A strong parliament, strong independent media, a strong civil society and an independent judiciary will ultimately serve as the foundation for democracy in Georgia," Rice said.

The Abkhazia and South Ossetia regions declared independence from Georgia following brief but violent conflicts in the early 1990s that displaced thousands of families and remain among several unresolved "frozen conflicts" across the territory of the former Soviet Union.

The United States supports the Georgian government's commitment to peace, Rice said, and is working with France, Germany, Russia and Britain through the Friends of the U.N. Secretary-General on Georgia to get the process back on track. "Violence should not be carried out by any party. And we, through the Friends process, will do everything that we can to help resolve those conflicts," Rice said.

But while Russia may be a member of the Friends group, many of its recent actions in the region have caused concern in Washington, Rice said.

Russia has extended passports to many current residents of the disputed territories, and Russian troops are known to be serving in both separatist governments as well as their armed forces. Rice also expressed U.S. concern about Russia's April 2008 order to expand its cooperation and assistance programs to the two breakaway regions as well as the Kremlin's decision to deploy 500 additional troops into the Abkhaz conflict zone without Georgia's consent.

"Georgia is an independent state. It has to be treated like one," Rice said in a recent interview.

While Russian peacekeepers have operated under the auspices of the Commonwealth of Independent States in both territories, Georgia has called for them to be replaced by a new international presence, pointing to repeated Russian violations of Georgia's territory, such as the July 8 incursion of four Russian warplanes into Georgian airspace; artillery and air strikes on Georgian villages bordering the regions; and the recent Russian shoot-down of a Georgian unmanned surveillance plane.

The European Union has proposed taking part in the new peacekeeping force, the first step in a new Friends group peace proposal which has been endorsed by all members except Russia.

Rice repeated America's strong support for Tbilisi's efforts to secure a Membership Action Plan (MAP) -- a multiyear program of advice, assistance and support for reforms ahead of applying for NATO membership.

"I think the NATO MAP would be a very good status from which Georgians could move to resolve their frozen conflicts, in much the way that we've seen the MAP work to help any number of countries deal with difficult issues," Rice said.

#12

Georgia: Ambassador to Russia Recalled

By ANNE BARNARD

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Georgia recalled its ambassador to Russia for consultations after the Russian Foreign Ministry announced that a Russian military aircraft had flown over a breakaway, pro-Moscow region of Georgia this week. The flight,

and Georgia's response, further escalated tensions between Russia and Georgia, a former Soviet republic, as Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice visited Tbilisi, Georgia's capital.

The Russian Foreign Ministry said in a statement that it had received a warning this week from Russian peacekeeping forces in the breakaway region, South Ossetia, that Georgia was considering sending in forces to rescue four of its servicemen held by separatists. Russia said the flight was conducted to observe the situation and to send a message that "dampened the zeal of hotheads in Tbilisi."