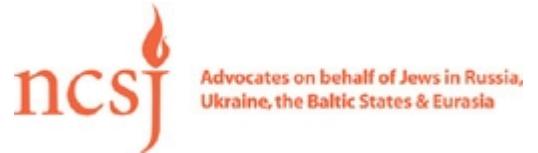


WASHINGTON, D.C. December 5, 2008

TO: NCSJ Leadership and Interested Parties

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



In Brief: Anti-Semitism; NATO ministers meet

Dear Friend,

Our thoughts and prayers are with the families of Rabbi and Mrs. Gavriel Holtzberg after their tragic murders during the Mumbai siege. It is another example of Jews targeted by terrorists just for being Jewish. We must continue to stand in solidarity with our fellow Jews in Israel and around the world in fighting bigotry, extremism and anti-Semitism.

In the last few weeks there have been a series of anti-Semitic incidents in Russia and Ukraine. The Russian government has taken several steps to punish those engaged in these incidents. There is no single reason for this upswing in hate, but the increase in ultra-nationalism and the economic downturn make a volatile combination for hateful behavior. There are several articles in this week's update highlighting both the problem and the Russian government's reaction.

Ukraine and Georgia's quest to join NATO hit a roadblock this week at the ministerial meeting in Brussels. The foreign ministers' gathering did not support a membership action plan (MAP) for either country, merely reaffirming an earlier statement endorsing eventual membership. The ministers also agreed to resume dialogue with Russia, which has been suspended since the August war with Georgia. Not surprisingly, the Russian government responded positively to both decisions.

The U.S. government continues to confront strong opposition from the Germans and French on MAP for Ukraine and Georgia. A senior U.S. official noted that NATO can grant membership without MAP, and this could become a serious possibility. Both candidate countries enjoy support from most of the alliance's newer members. Please see the articles in the update for detailed information.

This week, Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin continued his tradition of hosting a nationally televised phone-in where he answers questions from Russian citizens. He first started doing this as president and it remains very popular with the electorate. He spent more than three hours answering over 70 questions from a studio audience, the internet and closed circuit hook-ups around the country. Some observers were surprised that Putin and not President Medvedev updated the public on the state of the nation.

Finally, we have a full and exciting program scheduled for next week's annual Broad of Governors meeting in Washington, D.C. Please visit our web site www.ncsj.org for details.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Mark B. Levin".

Mark B. Levin
Executive Director



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

NCSJ WEEKLY NEWS BRIEF
Washington, D.C. December 5, 2008

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#1a

Wooden crosses erected on Ukraine synagogue site AP, December 2, 2008

A Jewish community in Ukraine says nationalist groups are seeking to thwart the construction of a synagogue and have erected crosses on the site.

The chief rabbi of the southern city of Poltava says a group of nationalist activists have put up seven wooden Orthodox crosses on land allocated by local authorities for the synagogue.

Rabbi Yosef Yitzchak Segal said Tuesday it was a provocation aimed at stirring religious hatred in the city. No group has claimed responsibility.

Jewish groups complain that anti-Semitism persists in Ukraine and there is little respect for Jewish cemeteries and memorial sites.

#1b

Ukrainian synagogue attacked JTA, December 2, 2008

Several windows were shattered in an attack on a Ukrainian synagogue.

Vandals threw stones early Tuesday at the synagogue in Rovno in northwestern Ukraine. No one was hurt, and the vandals fled before police arrived. Law enforcement agencies are investigating.

Rabbi Shneur Shneerson, the chief rabbi of Rovno and the region, said he believes the attack could be in response to Sunday's City Council elections.

But Gennady Fraerman, the leader of the Rovno city Jewish community and Hesed organization, told JTA he believes it was an act of hooliganism since several windows were shattered as well on two nearby buildings.

#1c
Russian protest turns anti-Semitic
JTA, December 2, 2008

Demonstrators at an anti-immigration march in Russia shouted anti-Semitic slogans.

Police detained several of the 70 protesters -- supporters of far-right movements and a labor union -- as they marched Sunday through the streets of Perm, a city near the Urals in central Russia. The marchers included supporters of the Movement Against Illegal Immigration, the Union for People's Sobriety and the trade union Solidarity, according to the Russian tabloid Komsomolskaya Pravda.

The protesters, some of whom wore gas masks, at first directed their ire toward illegal immigrants and shouted in support of Russia. March leaders said they wanted to draw attention to the problems illegal immigrants create for native Russians.

Komsomolskaya Pravda reported that the march became more violent, with the demonstrators shouting "Glory to the Holocaust!" and "Beat the Jews! Save Russia!"

Local authorities denied witness accounts that anti-Semitic or extremist slogans were shouted. The local leader of the Movement Against Illegal Immigration, Yevdokim Knyazev, also said the intent of the march was not to target Jews.

"I did not hear these slogans," he told the newspaper. "The march went off perfectly."

#1d
Extremist Russian weekly shut down
JTA, December 2, 2008

A judge in Moscow ordered an extremist weekly newspaper with an anti-Semitic past to stop publishing.

The court also revoked the Duel's license this week, according to the court's Web site. It ruled that an article published in the newspaper on July 4, 2006, was extremist.

The article, which also included anti-Semitic slurs, declared "Death to Russia," describing the country as a state ruled by "kikes" bent on domination, according to reports from the Union of Council for Jews in the Former Soviet Union.

The paper presents itself as a player in the "battle of social ideas." Its editors received a written warning in April 2007 from the Russian government agency monitoring mass media. The shutdown relied upon that written warning as justification.

The ruling overturns a decision in February by the Moscow City Court to let the paper remain open.

#1e

FSU Chabad emissaries remember Holtzbergs
JTA, December 2, 2008

Chabad emissaries across the former Soviet Union memorialized the victims of last week's terrorist attacks in Mumbai.

Many among the tight-knit group serving in synagogues and community centers across the former Soviet Union -- the largest Chabad network outside Israel and Brooklyn -- knew Rabbi Gavriel and Rivkah Holtzberg. The Holtzbergs were killed in an attack on their Chabad House.

In Moscow, more than 100 people attended a prayer service Tuesday afternoon in the city's large community center. Russia's head Chabad rabbi, Berel Lazar, was in Israel to attend the memorial service for the young couple as a representative of Russian Jewry.

"In moments like this, when Jews are killed once again only because they are Jews, we must be united," Lazar said in a letter to the Russian Jewish community. "We know that unity is our people's pledge of salvation."

Rabbi Ari Edelkopf, a Chabad emissary in Sochi, Russia, said his heart was heavy as he watched the attacks unfold. He could not leave his duties in southern Russia, but said he planned to watch Tuesday's funeral via Web cast.

The head Chabad rabbi of St. Petersburg, Menachem Mendel Pezner, called on the city's Jews to remember the family, whom he knew personally.

Rivkah Holtzberg was the cousin of an Israeli working in the Chabad community of Odessa, Ukraine. The city's chief rabbi had worked with Gavriel Holtzberg several times over the course of his studies and time as a Chabad emissary.

Rabbi Avraham Wolf of Odessa called on members of his community to strengthen their solidarity in the face of terrorist attacks.

"I hope that in the future we will receive only good news, awarding us complete deliverance and the arrival of the Messiah in a rebuilt Israel," he said, according to Jewish.ru.

#1f
Russia synagogue arson suspect arrested
JTA, December 2, 2008

Officials in a central Russian city arrested a suspect in a synagogue arson case.

In June 2005, a Molotov cocktail was thrown through a broken window in the synagogue in Penza, and three teens were seen leaving the scene, according to a report by the Stephen Roth Institute for the Study of Contemporary Anti-Semitism. The city's branch of Russia's organized crime unit received a tip leading them to the suspect.

The now 20-year-old reportedly is cooperating with the investigation, according to a report by the local news service PenzaNews. The suspect accused of throwing the firebomb, who was detained last week and is now under house arrest, faces up to five years in prison.

The two others who fled the scene will serve as state witnesses in the case, which will be handed over for prosecution by the end of this month.

Any suspects older than 14 at the time of the crime can be tried for hate crimes.

Following a series of attacks in 2005, local community leaders decided to build a fence around the synagogue and community center.

Penza, located about 400 miles southeast of Moscow, is a sister city with Ramat Gan, Israel, according to Wikipedia.

#1g

Jewish musician beaten in Moscow

JTA, December 3, 2008

Three teenagers attacked an award-winning Jewish musician in the Moscow subway.

The assailants approached Mikhail Altshuller, asked him a random question and then began to beat him as the train passed between two stations, according to a statement from the Russian Jewish Congress.

During the Nov. 26 attack, the teens shouted nationalist slogans before fleeing when the train stopped at the next station. Altshuller identified the suspects, all males, to police after the attack, the Russian Jewish Congress reported. Police detained two of the assailants, the Lenta.ru Web site reported.

Altshuller, a singer and instrumental soloist for a Jewish musical group, suffered a concussion and bruised ribs in the attack.

"Judging that the police reacted quickly and that they were convinced of their conclusions, it is likely that the case will be appropriately assigned and sent to court," Altshuller said in a statement released by the Congress.

Altshuller is an award winner at international Jewish music festivals.

#1h

Moscow court convicts skinheads

JTA, December 4, 2008

A Moscow court convicted seven members of a skinhead gang for their roles in 20 murders and 12 assaults.

The victims of the attacks between August 2006 and October 2007 were from the Caucasus region in south Russia and central Asian republics. None of the victims was Jewish.

Gang members were in their teens or early 20s at the time of the killings. Two defendants, Artur Ryno and Pavel Skachevsky, both 17, were considered leaders of the gang and the jury decided Nov. 28 that they did not deserve leniency.

Sentencing will be held Dec. 10.

Two members were acquitted for lack of evidence after the jury split its votes.

There were more than 280 charges against the gang, which was influenced by chauvinist and nationalist rhetoric prescribing the inferiority of non-Slavics.

The same court recently charged a similar group of 13, all but one minors, to three to 10 years in prison for the murder of two people and assaults on nine others.

"Both groups followed a common pattern in committing these crimes," said the prosecutor in the case involving seven skinheads, the Interfax news agency reported.

#1i
Kiev gets Jewish deputy mayor
JTA, December 4, 2008

A prominent Ukrainian Jewish leader was appointed a deputy mayor of Kiev.

Yevgeny Chervonenko, a prominent Jewish leader and an aide to Ukrainian President Viktor Yushchenko, was appointed Thursday as a first deputy mayor responsible for preparations and hosting the Euro 2012 European football finals in the capital city.

Chervonenko, 48, is a former chairman of the Ukrainian National Agency for Euro 2012, which was created in August 2007 but was liquidated Nov. 19 by the Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine. A coordination bureau will be set up within the Cabinet Secretariat.

He is a member of board of trustees of the World Jewish Congress; a special envoy of the European Jewish Congress for matters related to cooperation with Central and Eastern Europe; a vice president of the United Jewish Community of Ukraine; and a vice president of the Euro-Asian Jewish Congress.

Chervonenko has never been shy about his Jewish heritage: As a former transportation minister, he was the first Jewish official in Ukraine to affix a mezuzah to his government office in 2005.

#1j
Jewish leaders praise Russian police
JTA, December 4, 2008

A Russian Jewish umbrella organization lauded Russian law enforcement for its efforts to catch perpetrators of hate crimes.

The praise Thursday from the Chabad-run Federation of Jewish Communities of Russia came in response to this week's arrest of a suspect in a 3-year-old arson case.

The federation, which has close ties to the Russian government, in a statement pointed to an increase in the number of people charged with hate crimes. Specifically, it pointed to two other arrests made this year in cases of synagogue vandalism -- one in January in the central Russian city of Nizhny Novgorod, another in July in the southern city of Orenburg.

"These positive developments show that the state is demonstrating real determination to combat xenophobia and anti-Semitism," the statement said. "The situation has been improved in comparison with the state of affairs a few years ago."

#2
After Israel Pulls Out, Obama Faces Tough Decision on Durban II Racism Conference
By Marc Perelman
Forward, November 26, 2008

One of the first foreign policy issues facing Barack Obama when he takes office in January will be to decide whether the United States will participate in a United Nations conference on topics close to his heart: racism and discrimination.

The Bush administration has indicated that American diplomats would not attend the so-called "Durban II" review conference, scheduled for April in Geneva. The current administration has expressed concern that the conference would turn into an anti-Israel event, just as the first U.N. conference on the subject did seven years ago in the South African city of Durban.

In mid-November, Israeli Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni told the United Jewish Communities General Assembly that Israel has decided to skip the Geneva conference after reviewing a draft statement issued following a preparatory meeting. The draft accuses Israel of “practices of racial discrimination against the Palestinians,” saying that its policies constitute “a new kind of apartheid, a crime against humanity [and] a form of genocide.”

Jewish groups have seconded Israel’s position, although some say that America’s participation could help defeat efforts to single out Israel.

Canada announced early this year that it was boycotting the meeting, and Western European countries have hinted they might follow suit.

Washington has not attended the negotiation sessions over the forthcoming review conference’s outcome document and claimed that it would likely not attend the event. Bush administration officials have added that a delegation from the United States still could go to Geneva if it determined that the anti-Israel rhetoric would be removed from the proceedings. The officials have said that a final decision should be made by the new administration.

While Jewish groups are pressing the United States to skip Durban II, human rights and civil rights groups have urged Washington to attend in order to combat more effectively any anti-Israel discourse and to weigh in on myriad racism issues that the conference is supposed to examine.

“This will be one of the first U.N./human rights issues the new administration will have to deal with,” said Tad Stahnke, director of the fighting discrimination program with Human Rights First, an organization that supports the participation of all U.N. member states in the racism parley. “The election of someone with a special interest in a conference on racism and who has vouched to pursue multilateral diplomacy creates an opening.”

The Obama campaign did not reply to requests for comment.

During the presidential campaign and since Obama’s election, the president-elect has not taken a known position on the issue.

The day after he claimed victory in the Democratic primary race, both Obama and his main competitor, New York senator Hillary Clinton, spoke at the annual gathering of the American Israel Public Affairs Committee. Clinton, who is now slated to become secretary of state and, as such, would directly oversee the issue, told Aipac at the time that Durban II would be “a test of resolve” for the next president.

“We should take very strong action to ensure antisemitism is kept off the agenda at Durban II,” she said. “And if those efforts should fail, I believe that the United States should boycott that conference.”

Obama, for his part, pledged to “always stand up for Israel’s right to defend itself in the United Nations and around the world,” but did not mention the racism parley.

His administration will also have to decide whether the United States should stand for election in May to the U.N.’s Human Rights Council, the Geneva-based body overseeing the planning for the racism conference. The Bush administration has declined to take part in the last three elections to the council because of its excessive focus on Israel.

In Congress, Florida Democratic Rep. Alcee Hastings, head of the Helsinki Commission, an independent agency set up by Congress to oversee human rights issues, appeared to favor American participation.

“While the Congressman has not heard whether the U.S. will participate in this particular conference, he will urge the new administration to carefully consider whether participation would assist in meeting the underlying goal of combating all forms of racism and discrimination,” said Lale Mamaux, communications director for the Helsinki Commission.

Leading civil rights groups have been pressing U.N. officials and the conference's organizing committee, which comprises 20 countries and is headed by Libya, to ensure that the event would not be hijacked by Israel's enemies. In a letter to the U.N. Human Rights high commissioner, Human Rights First and the Leadership Conference on Civil Rights urged the defeat of any effort to use Durban II "to promote antisemitism or hatred against members of any group or to call into question the legitimacy of any state."

In Durban, the NGO forum turned out to be the scene of anti-Israel and even antisemitic manifestations, prompting the American and the Israeli delegation to depart prematurely.

Kenneth Roth, executive director of Human Rights Watch, noted that while the NGO confab did indeed cross the line in terms of bashing Israel, the final document from the governmental meeting contained much milder language, as a result of pressure from Western European countries.

"The best way to ensure that the next race conference looks like the NGO rather than the governmental conference in Durban would be for the E.U. and the U.S. to boycott it," he told the Forward.

#3

Don't rush Georgia and Ukraine into NATO

By Michael O'Hanlon

Washington Times, December 2, 2008

According to press reports, the Bush administration is pursuing a final bold foreign policy move in its last weeks. Bypassing normal procedures, it wants European allies and Canada to agree to offer Georgia and Ukraine rapid membership into NATO.

This is a singularly bad idea, much more likely to worsen U.S.-Russia relations and increase the risk of war than to do any real good for the new democracies of Central Europe.

The idea might seem a natural response to Russia's brutal invasion of Georgia in August, by any measure a disproportionate and unwarranted action in response to tensions over the breakaway provinces of South Ossetia and Abkhazia. But as most now realize, Russia's aggression, while unjustified, was not unprovoked. Among other things, Georgia had fired artillery rounds carelessly into disputed regions at the outset of the crisis. President Mikhail Saakashvili's desire to reintegrate South Ossetia and Abkhazia back into Georgia proper, while understandable at one level, has been pursued with wanton disregard for the role of the international community and for the need to pursue this goal carefully and peacefully. Future policymaking must seek to deter not only Russia, but other regional actors, from the kind of irresponsible behavior that pushed the Caucasus toward all-out war just three months ago.

Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice and Defense Secretary Robert Gates are experienced Russia hands. But they seem to operate too much from a classic deterrence model of international relations. By quickly putting Georgia and Ukraine under NATO's Article V security guarantee, they seem to hope Prime Minister Vladimir Putin and President Dmitry Medvedev of Russia would back off, recognizing that to pick a fight with Georgia or Ukraine would be to pick a fight with the United States.

If Russia today was like Adolf Hitler's Germany, or Josef Stalin's Soviet Union, or we might have little choice in the matter. But few would argue such a model explains Russia's current behavior. Perhaps the logic is that, even if Russia is only bent on reasserting its sphere of influence among the former Soviet republics and vassal states, it is still better to nip any bullying in the bud. That is a fair enough hypothesis - even if one can debate whether the stakes are high enough to warrant an implicit threat of war against a nuclear-armed state in its own backyard in response. But will it work using NATO membership as our primary policy tool?

To answer that important question, it is worth going back to the exact language of Article V of the NATO Charter. Its precise wording is as follows: "The Parties agree that an armed attack against one or more of them in Europe or North America shall be considered an attack against them all and consequently they agree that, if such an armed attack occurs, each of them, in exercise of the right of individual or collective self-defense recognized by Article 51 of the Charter of the United Nations, will assist the Party or Parties so attacked by

taking forthwith, individually and in concert with the other Parties, such action as it deems necessary, including the use of armed force, to restore and maintain the security of the North Atlantic area."

Here's the problem with Article V. It has long been presumed to constitute an implicit threat to use force nearly automatically in the event allies are threatened - and there is a very real danger that President Saakashvili of Georgia would interpret it that way, feeling even more unbound to challenge Russia once inside the alliance.

But in fact, Article V does not require a military response, and wily characters like Mr. Putin and Mr. Medvedev would likely figure that out. Even if they did not want to challenge us blatantly by overthrowing Mr. Saakashvili in the future, they could quite likely pick future fights with him over borders, or the treatment of minorities, or other such issues - calculating that American and other alliance leaders would not risk nuclear war over small parts of central Eurasia that few Americans had ever heard of. And they would probably be right. By this analysis, the net effect of premature NATO membership for Georgia and Ukraine could well be to make war more likely, not less likely. And once we were on this slippery slope in a future crisis, with Article V gradually losing its credibility, there could also be a risk of NATO overreaction, as we sought to shore up our international credibility by forcing a direct showdown with Russia from which no one would benefit.

NATO has a membership path that is well-designed and well-conceived. Among other things, it calls for the clear establishment of democratic rule among aspiring member states, as well as a policy of settling territorial disputes without the use of force. Today, neither Georgia nor Ukraine (nor Russia) qualifies based on these criteria. We should stick to the established policy, and slow things down.

The United States in particular must not foster an attitude among Russians that NATO is designed explicitly to weaken them, or that other key foreign policy initiatives such as the planned missile defense bases in Poland and the Czech Republic are pursued at their expense. Alas, two decades into the post-Cold War era, we have not succeeded in this task. To be sure, cynical and ruthless Russian politicians are the primary problem here. But they are not going away anytime soon. And we are doing just enough to feed their worldview - such as White House Press Secretary Dana Perino's regrettable comment in August that our decision to firm up plans for the Poland and Czech missile defense system in the midst of the Georgia crisis was "mostly coincidental," after we spent years telling Russia it was not in any way designed against it. Moscow will interpret suspending normal NATO membership rules for Georgia and Ukraine as punishment, not statesmanship.

The best Russia policy now is to avoid further unnecessary provocation on all sides, and give President-elect Obama a chance to work with NATO allies to devise a more patient Russia strategy next year. This is the kind of calming advice we tend to give to other countries in crises like the current one. We should heed our own counsel.

Michael O'Hanlon is a senior fellow at the Brookings Institution.

#4

NATO Agrees to Re-engage Russia

By David Brunnstrom

Reuters, December 3, 2008

NATO on Tuesday agreed to gradually resume contacts with Russia that were suspended after Moscow's military intervention in Georgia, NATO Secretary-General Jaap de Hoop Scheffer said.

"Allies agreed on what I would qualify as a conditional and graduated re-engagement with Russia," de Hoop Scheffer said at a news conference after a meeting of the alliance's foreign ministers.

De Hoop Scheffer said operational meetings of the NATO-Russia Council, a forum that manages the relationship, would resume informally. But he said this did not mean that NATO had changed its view that Russia had used "disproportionate" force in invading Georgia in August or that it was acceptable for Russia to threaten to station missiles near NATO borders.

The 26 NATO allies reaffirmed a pledge — which has angered Russia — that Georgia and Ukraine would one day join the alliance and agreed that they would assist them in that process, de Hoop Scheffer said.

The decision came hours after the 27-member European Union resumed talks on a broad-ranging partnership pact with Moscow, reflecting a general acceptance that any attempt to isolate a key trade and energy partner would damage European interests.

The EU agreed last month that Russia had complied sufficiently with the terms of a Georgia cease-fire to permit this, while keeping the relationship under review.

Before de Hoop Scheffer's announcement, several NATO foreign ministers were explicit in their desire to re-engage Russia.

"I think the time has come to resume," said Italian Foreign Minister Franco Frattini, proposing a start with ambassadorial contacts and a full resumption of the stalled NATO-Russia Council by a NATO summit next April.

Norwegian Foreign Minister Jonas Gahr Stoere said contacts were needed with Moscow at all levels. "I fail to see that we gain anything by limiting channels of communication," he said.

But Washington has been reluctant to make any early moves. U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice said before the meeting that she did not oppose "in principle" reviving contacts with Russia via the NATO-Russia Council. But referring to Russian troops still in Georgia's breakaway regions, she said NATO should be very cautious about any move on military-to-military cooperation.

At the NATO meeting, Germany led resistance to U.S. moves to advance the membership aspirations of Ukraine and Georgia.

Concern about Russia's reaction prompted Germany and France to block a U.S. push at an April NATO summit in Bucharest to give Ukraine and Georgia formal routes to join the alliance known as Membership Action Plans, or MAPs. That summit gave Georgia and Ukraine vague promises of eventual NATO entry and agreed to review their MAP requests by the year's end.

Germany insisted on Tuesday that there were no grounds at the moment for NATO to deepen ties with Ukraine and Georgia.

"I hope we will agree to stick with the agreement from Bucharest. I see no reason to go beyond that for now," German Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier told reporters.

#5

Rice: Go slow on cooperation with Russia

By Anne Gearan

AP, December 2, 2008

The United States has softened tough lines against what it views as Russia's illegitimate drive for influence over former Soviet vassals, although Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice is urging European states to show their disapproval of Moscow's invasion of Georgia.

U.S. compromises were on display Tuesday as Rice made her final speech to NATO allies.

Having backed away from a call for Ukraine and Georgia to be prepared for NATO membership when it was clear that NATO allies would not go along, Rice suggested ahead of the NATO gathering of foreign ministers here that the U.S. is also considering relaxing its opposition to restoring ties with Russia that were suspended over the war with Georgia in August.

Immediately after Russian forces moved on Georgia, the Bush administration led the initiative to freeze the NATO-Russia Council. The forum had provided a setting for regular meetings of Russian and alliance foreign ministers. Several European allies are pushing for a return to talks with Moscow.

"I think the time has come to resume negotiations," Italian Foreign Minister Franco Frattini told reporters at the NATO meeting Tuesday. Talks with Russia could start soon at a lower level, then be formally relaunched at a NATO summit scheduled in April, he said.

Rice said that ties with Russia already had been resumed at a lower, technical level. She said the United States has no quarrel with that step-by-step approach, at least in principle. She said the alliance should be cautious and avoid overt military cooperation.

The timing of renewed cooperation should be subject to several considerations, including whether Russia is meeting its cease-fire commitments in Georgia, or "acting on its quite ill-tempered decision" to recognize two breakaway Georgian provinces as independent.

"Those are ... the touchstones of when it makes sense," Rice told reporters during a goodbye stop in London on Monday.

"I think you'd want to be very careful, for instance, about doing things that look military-to-military, because the Russian military is still sitting in the secessionist states," Rice said. She was referring to the breakaway provinces of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, which the U.S.-backed government in Georgia claims.

Two days of NATO talks had been expected to focus on Georgia's and Ukraine's hopes of joining the alliance, with the U.S. pushing for faster consideration. France and Germany have warned against opening pre-membership talks with Ukraine and Georgia, saying such a move could antagonize Russia. The U.S. backed down last week amid opposition in Europe and Russia.

U.S. Assistant Secretary of State Daniel Fried told reporters a week ago that the two countries could bypass a program intended to prepare countries for membership but eventually join it anyway.

Attempting to reframe a losing debate with some European countries ahead of this week's meeting, U.S. officials said NATO should offer the post-Soviet nations more help in modernizing their militaries and bolstering their democracies.

Some alliance countries have opposed allowing Georgia and Ukraine to join NATO's Membership Action Plan (MAP) and blocked a U.S. push for offering the program at the alliance's April summit. However, the alliance said at the summit that the two countries would eventually become members and agreed to discuss the issue at the foreign minister's meeting.

With the alliance still divided on the issue, the United States is now looking for a new way to win membership for the countries.

Fried said he expects the foreign ministers to affirm NATO support for building a missile defense system in Europe. Those plans have also increased tensions with Moscow.

Rice is cutting her attendance at the NATO session short to travel to India, scene of a 60-hour terrorist rampage last week.

#6
Why Russia May Become A Big Problem for Barack Obama
By Thomas Omestad
US News and World Report, December 1, 2008

Something has gone badly wrong in post-Soviet Russia's relations with the United States and, for that matter, with the West in general. As a result, dealing with a resurgent Russia that is trending toward autocracy will be a key challenge for the incoming Obama administration.

The fall from the optimistic heights of the 1990s is startling. The collapse of the Soviet Union at the end of 1991 not only ended the Cold War and its menace of potential nuclear catastrophe, it marked the most momentous strategic shift in the international landscape in many decades. The Soviet breakup spawned a newly democratic Russia seemingly ready to set aside past antagonisms and get on with the business of developing itself into a modern society.

But among all the current and emerging great powers of the world, Russia stands out for the degree to which its relationship with the United States has deteriorated during the first decade of this young century. A Russian penchant for strongman-style rule re-emerged under then President and now Prime Minister Vladimir Putin. Power was recentralized inside the high walls of the Kremlin. Through Putin's United Russia party, the Russian Parliament fell into lock step, while both the news media and provincial authorities were stripped of much of their autonomy and clout.

Assertive U.S. policies on NATO expansion, arms control, and other issues stirred popular resentment inside Russia—and aided Putin's nurturing of a new Russian nationalism. Fueled by proceeds from the export of oil and natural gas, Russia began reasserting itself abroad, especially in areas that had once fallen under Moscow's domination. The Russian invasion and partial occupation of Georgia this August serves now as Exhibit A of its willingness to flex muscles that had once atrophied. Russia recognized the independence of breakaway republics South Ossetia and Abkhazia, drawing condemnation in the West. Elsewhere, Russia has turned off the energy spigot to pressure Ukraine and dispatched naval forces to Latin American waters for first time since the Soviet era.

Collectively, the turn of events may represent the most damaging strategic turnabout in what, for lack of a better term, has been known as the post-Cold War era. "We've lost Russia," declares Walter Russell Mead, a historian of diplomacy at the Council on Foreign Relations. Writes Rose Gottemoeller, a Russia specialist and former U.S. national security official with the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, "The crisis in Georgia brings us face-to-face with the reality that the United States and Russia have squandered the opportunity to build a relationship that works for both parties."

As seen from Moscow, the United States—particularly under President Bush but starting with President Clinton—ran roughshod over Russian interests through a period of Russian weakness. "Russia believes that we are besieging them," says French Foreign Minister Bernard Kouchner.

In Washington, the private mood of some Bush administration officials toward the Kremlin is one of disdain. Russian officials, meanwhile, contend that Washington has acted unilaterally. Their list of perceived offenses is long: the U.S.-led bombing of ally Serbia in Clinton's time; the U.S. abrogation of the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty; the expansion of NATO to the doorstep of Russia; U.S. military activities in Central Asia; attempts to route energy pipelines outside of Russia; support for Ukrainian and Georgian political movements considered anti-Russian; military aid to Georgia; and backing the independence of Kosovo from Serbia over Russia's opposition.

Just one day after Obama won election, Russian President Dmitry Medvedev brushed past the usual congratulations and vowed to install missiles in the Russian enclave of Kaliningrad if the United States—read the future Obama administration—persists in placing a missile-defense shield in Poland and the Czech Republic. That is the sort of tit-for-tat mentality that characterized the Cold War. "I think there is no trust in Russia-U.S. relations," Medvedev allowed later in November. "On many stances, we can't find common ground."

Obama has said that he supports missile defense in principle, if the system can be shown to work right. But he has also emphasized reaching out to Russia for cooperation on securing loose nuclear materials, deepening arms control, and defeating al Qaeda and other terrorists.

The global financial and economic crisis, coupled with the current drop in oil prices, has slammed Russia's stock market and spurred the flight of capital, raising doubts about the durability of its resurgence. But in the longer term, Stephen Sestanovich, the Clinton administration's ambassador-at-large for the former Soviet Union, argues in the journal *Foreign Affairs*, "Russia's power may actually keep growing, and carry the country's ambitions with it."

Obama could use Russia's help on an array of other problems, from persuading Iran and North Korea to give up their nuclear programs to bolstering energy security to confronting global warming. But that will likely require changes from Washington. "We have not treated them very well," says Brent Scowcroft, the former national security adviser. "We need to show some delicacy and respect and not simply push ahead."

#7

Georgia Acted in Self-Defense

By Mikheil Saakashvili

Wall Street Journal, December 2, 2008

Since Russia invaded Georgia last August, the international community seems stuck on one question about how the war started: Did the Georgian military act irresponsibly to take control of Tskhinvali in the South Ossetia region of Georgia?

This question has been pushed to the center in large degree by a fierce, multimillion-dollar Russian PR campaign that hinges on leaked, very partial, and misleading reports from a military observer from the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) that claimed Georgia responded militarily in South Ossetia without sufficient provocation by Russia. Judging from recent media coverage, this campaign has been successful.

Focusing on this question distracts from Russia's intense, blatant policy of regime change that has long aimed to destabilize Georgia through ethnic manipulation, and thus thwart our democracy while stopping NATO's expansion. Furthermore, it has never been in dispute whether our forces entered South Ossetia. I have always openly acknowledged that I ordered military action in South Ossetia -- as any responsible democratic leader would have done, and as the Georgian Constitution required me to do in defense of the country.

I made this decision after being confronted by two facts. First, Russia had massed hundreds of tanks and thousands of soldiers on the border between Russian and Georgia in the area of South Ossetia. We had firm intelligence that they were crossing into Georgia, a fact later confirmed by telephone intercepts verified by the *New York Times* and others -- and a fact never substantially denied by Russia. (We had alerted the international community both about the military deployment and an inflow of mercenaries early on Aug. 7.)

Second, for a week Russian forces and their proxies engaged in a series of deadly provocations, shelling Georgian villages that were under my government's control -- with much of the artillery located in Tskhinvali, often within sites controlled by Russian peacekeepers. Then, on Aug. 7, Russia and its proxies killed several Georgian peacekeepers. Russian peacekeepers and OSCE observers admitted that they were incapable of preventing the lethal attacks. In fact, the OSCE had proven impotent in preventing the Russians from building two illegal military bases inside South Ossetia during the preceding year.

So the question is not whether Georgia ordered military action -- including targeting of the artillery sites that were shelling villages controlled by our government. We did.

The question is, rather: What democratic polity would have acted any differently while its citizens were being slaughtered as its sovereign territory was being invaded? South Ossetia and Abkhazia are internationally recognized as part of Georgia, and even some areas within these conflict zones were under Georgian government control before the Russian invasion. We fought to repel a foreign invasion. Georgians never stepped beyond Georgian territory.

My government has urged the international community to open an independent, unbiased investigation into the origins of the war. I first proposed this on Aug. 17, standing with German Chancellor Angela Merkel in Tbilisi. I offered to make every shred of evidence and every witness available. Russia has yet to accede to such terms of inquiry.

Also, last Friday I stood for several hours before a commission established by the Georgian Parliament, chaired by a leader of an opposition party, to investigate the conduct of the war. This is the first time that any leader from this part of the world has been scrutinized live on national television for his or her wartime decisions by a legislative investigation. I have also required every member of my administration and military to make themselves available to the committee.

The real test of the legitimacy of Russia's actions should be based not on whether Georgia's democratically elected leadership came to the defense of its own people on its own land, but on an assessment of the following questions. Was it Georgia or Russia (and its proxies) that:

- Pursued the de facto annexation of the sovereign territory of a neighboring state?
- Illegally issued passports to residents of a neighboring democracy in order to create a pretext for invasion (to "protect its citizens")?
- Sent hundreds of tanks and thousands of soldiers across the internationally recognized borders of a neighboring democracy?
- Instigated a series of deadly provocations and open attacks over the course of many months, resulting in civilian casualties?
- Refused to engage in meaningful, bilateral dialogue on peace proposals?
- Constantly blocked all international peacekeeping efforts?
- Refused to attend urgent peace talks on South Ossetia organized by the European Union and the OSCE in late July?
- When the crisis began to escalate, refused to have any meaningful contact (I tried to reach President Dmitry Medvedev on both Aug. 6 and 7, but he refused my calls)?
- Tried to cover up a long-planned invasion by claiming, on Aug. 8, that Georgia had killed 1,400 civilians and engaged in ethnic cleansing -- "facts" quickly disproved by international and Russian human-rights groups?
- Refused to permit EU monitors unrestricted access to these conflict areas after the fighting ended, while engaging in the brutal ethnic cleansing of Georgians?

These are the questions that need to be answered. The fact that none can be answered in Russia's favor underscores the grave risks of returning to business as usual. Russia sees Georgia as a test. If the international response is not firm, Moscow will make other moves to redraw the region's map by intimidation or force.

Responding firmly to the Putin-Medvedev government implies neither the isolation nor the abandonment of Russia; it can be achieved in tandem with continuing engagement of, and trade with, Russia. But it does require holding Russia to account. Moscow must honor its sovereign commitments and fully withdraw its troops to pre-August positions. It must allow unrestricted EU monitoring, and accede to the international consensus that these territories are Georgia. Such steps are not bellicose; they are simply the necessary course to contain an imperial regime.

We all hope that Russia soon decides to join the international community as a full, cooperative partner. This would be the greatest contribution to Georgia's stability. In the interim, we should make sure that we do not

sacrifice democracies like Georgia that are trying to make this critical part of the world more stable, secure and free.

#8

An opportunity with Russia

By Andranik Migranyan

Washington Times, December 3, 2008

After his Inauguration, President Barack Obama will inherit quite a sad situation in U.S.-Russian relations, which are at their lowest point since the end of the Cold War.

And while the Cold War is thankfully a bygone era, the mindsets created then persist today. The new leadership in Russia and the United States have an opportunity to move past this outdated approach.

Several factors - notably NATO expansion, U.S. withdrawal from the ABM Treaty, and installation of components of defense systems in the Czech Republic and Poland - have led Russian leaders to believe Washington is still pursuing a policy of containing and weakening Moscow.

On the other hand, many Western leaders, particularly in Washington, think Russia's efforts to enhance cooperation with China, Iran and Venezuela, as well a number of other countries in Asia, Africa and Latin America, is a manifestation of anti-Western policy.

Today, the Russian leadership, as never before, is prepared to become a serious and responsible partner of the United States and assume its role in ensuring global security in the world. Since the fall of the Soviet Union, U.S. administrations have viewed Russia as a defeated power and have never tried to integrate Russia into global economic, military or political institutions. Russia firmly believes that unless it strengthens its position in international relations, the United States will never view it as a serious force whose interests must be taken into account.

To turn our relationship into a real partnership, President-elect Obama must answer one key question: How does the United States view Russia today in international relations - as a partner, ally or as an adversary? The answer will largely determine the future of U.S.-Russia relations.

If the Obama administration gives up unilateralism in foreign policy, it will open up great prospects for constructive cooperation with Russia on the issues where the two countries' interests align.

One of Mr. Obama's priorities is to end the war in Iraq as soon as possible and to move the center of gravity to Afghanistan to take decisive action for the eradication of the Taliban. In the wake of Sept. 11, 2001, Russia was the main partner of the United States and made a significant contribution to inflicting decisive blows on the Taliban in Afghanistan. Centering military operations to that region strengthens the natural alliance between Russia and the United States.

Another priority of the Obama administration is nonproliferation of nuclear weapons and preventing Iran from becoming a nuclear power. Here again, Russia is a natural ally of the United States, since it has significant potential for influencing a solution of this issue.

Mr. Obama has a unique opportunity to solve a strategic task of the West with regard to Russia by encouraging it to become an integral part of the West and a responsible member of the international community. Supporting Russian President Dmitry Medvedev's proposal to establish a new universal Euro-Atlantic security system could be a first step in that direction. This can profoundly change U.S.-Russian relations.

Allowing Russia to become a full-fledged member of new Euro-Atlantic security structures would make Mr. Obama a truly great political figure, one able to put an end to the Cold War. Indeed, a true end of the Cold War involves integrating Russia into the Western community where it would have both significant rights and serious obligations before its partners in the area of preserving international peace and security.

Only time will tell if Mr. Obama will be able to make this choice, but one thing is clear: Russia is ready and willing. We hope the U.S. is, too.

Andranik Migranyan is director of the Institute for Democracy and Cooperation. He has been an acting member of the Public Chamber of the Russian Federation since 2005 and a professor of political science at the Moscow State Institute of International Relations

#9

Russia Claims Victory After NATO Delays Enlargement

By James G. Neuger and Henry Meyer

Bloomberg, December 3, 2008

Russia said that a NATO decision to rule out near-term membership for Ukraine and Georgia shows that the U.S.-led military alliance is shying away from interfering with the Russian sphere of influence.

Western European countries led by Germany yesterday maintained a veto on membership roadmaps for the two former Soviet republics and succeeded in lifting a U.S.-driven freeze on the North Atlantic Treaty Organization's ties with Russia.

"There is an open split within NATO and it will widen if NATO tries to expand further," Dmitry Rogozin, Russian ambassador to NATO, said today on the Web Site of state broadcaster Vesti-24. "The schemes of those who adopted a frozen approach to Russia have been destroyed."

After failing to halt NATO's expansion into eastern Europe following the demise of the Soviet Union, the newly oil-enriched Russia is striking back, notably by waging a five-day war against Georgia in August.

Russia has called Georgia a tool of U.S. President George W. Bush's administration, warned that NATO entry would break Ukraine into two mini-states, and denounced a planned U.S. missile-defense shield in Europe by threatening to deploy missiles in Kaliningrad, a Russian exclave on the Baltic Sea.

Georgia War

U.S. Assistant Secretary of State Daniel Fried dismissed the Russian rhetoric as bluster, saying the 26-nation alliance hasn't handed the Kremlin an effective veto over its future expansion.

"Russia says a great many things along these lines," Fried told reporters at NATO headquarters in Brussels today. "I have learned, and I think we have all learned, not to take them at complete face value."

In the wake of the invasion of Georgia, NATO halted high-level contacts with Russia and said it may bolster contingency planning to defend eastern European allies such as Poland and the Baltic states.

NATO softened that stance yesterday, embarking on what Secretary General Jaap de Hoop Scheffer called a "conditional and graduated reengagement with Russia," to start with informal contacts with Rogozin, Russia's Brussels-based envoy to NATO.

Post-Soviet Russia was powerless to oppose NATO's embrace of 10 eastern European countries -- including the remaining members of the Warsaw Pact and the three Baltic republics -- between 1999 and 2004.

'American Project'

Foreign Minister Urmas Paet of Estonia, one of three Baltic republics that broke away from the Soviet Union shortly before its collapse in 1991, said Russia is misguided in pretending it can sway allied policy.

"It is not a victory of someone," Paet said. "Russia is not a NATO member state."

Russia claimed that western European NATO allies -- such as Germany and Italy, two countries building up their reliance on Russian oil and gas -- had frustrated what it saw as a U.S.-led bid to encircle Russia.

Membership for Georgia and Ukraine "is an utterly American project, which has had a lot of money and effort poured into it," said Konstantin Kosachyov, head of the International Affairs Committee in the State Duma, Russia's lower house of parliament. "Now it's clear that this would mean bringing a host of unresolved problems and even irresolvable ones into the alliance," he said in comments cited by Vesti.

Georgian officials said membership is on track, pointing to a separate NATO decision to help the country strengthen its civil service and modernize its military in order to qualify for entry.

A NATO statement today affirmed an April vow that Georgia and Ukraine will eventually find a place in the alliance and laid out a process to monitor annual progress.

"We are much closer to the ultimate goal we have, which is membership of this organization," Foreign Minister Eka Tkeshelashvili said at the start of a Georgia-NATO meeting today. A separate meeting is scheduled later today with Ukraine.

#10

Ukraine Forms Group To Improve Ties With Russia Reuters, December 2, 2008

Ukraine's president has formed a "strategic group" to improve relations with Russia, a top official has said, after four years of strains under the ex-Soviet state's pro-Western leaders.

President Viktor Yushchenko, swept to power by 2004 Orange Revolution rallies, has irritated the Kremlin by ignoring its objections and pressing ahead with a bid to join NATO.

The group's creation coincided with a meeting in Brussels of NATO foreign ministers considering a deepening of the alliance's relations with Ukraine but almost certain not to put Kyiv on a fast track to membership.

It also emerged a little more than a year before a presidential election in which Yushchenko may run along with his ally-turned-rival, Prime Minister Yulia Tymoshenko.

"This strategic group will work out a mechanism for a dialogue of constant action," Raisa Bogatyryova, secretary of the National Security and Defense Council, told reporters. "We have many controversial issues, many issues which politicians are uncomfortable with."

Issues bedeviling ties include Ukraine's support for Georgia against Russia in their brief conflict in August, rows over gas supplies, different interpretations of Soviet-era history, and Kyiv's call for Russia's Black Sea fleet to quit Ukraine's Crimea peninsula in 2017.

Yushchenko has called on NATO to offer Ukraine a Membership Action Plan, a first step before joining the alliance, despite fierce opposition from Moscow.

The president has repeatedly accused Tymoshenko and her government of undermining policy on Russia -- particularly by being less vocal in its support of Georgia.

Some officials close to the president have accused Tymoshenko of trying to curry favor with the Kremlin in order to secure backing of some sort in the presidential race.

#11

Is NATO Expansion Into The Former Soviet Space Dead?

By Brian Whitmore
RFE/FL, December 3, 2008

Dmitry Rogozin could barely contain his glee.

Shortly after NATO declined to grant Georgia and Ukraine their coveted Membership Action Plans (MAPs) at a foreign ministers' meeting this week, the firebrand nationalist who is Russia's envoy to the Atlantic alliance was gloating in front of the television cameras.

"Ukraine and Georgia did not get their plans. Those who took an ice-cold position toward Russia have been thwarted," Rogozin said in an interview on Russian television on December 2.

And at first glance, Rogozin appears to have reason to celebrate. It was the second time in eight months that the Western alliance balked at giving Georgia and Ukraine MAPs, detailed and tailor-made blueprints for military and political reforms that constitute a key step before formally joining the alliance.

Both times -- at the NATO summit in Bucharest in April and at this week's foreign ministers' meeting in Brussels -- the allies appeared to back down in the face of fierce Russian resistance to Tbilisi and Kyiv's bids.

And as Rogozin delighted in pointing out, in both instances the Western alliance was deeply divided with the United States, Great Britain, and a group of Eastern European members supporting expansion, and Germany, France, and Italy staunchly opposing it.

"The divisions in NATO are openly visible. And these will deepen every time NATO tries to expand," Rogozin said.

So is this the end of NATO expansion into the former Soviet space? Not so fast, say analysts familiar with the process.

"I think it is the end of the dream of fairly rapid NATO expansion to Ukraine and Georgia," says Edward Lucas, deputy foreign editor of the British weekly "The Economist" and author of the book "The New Cold War: How The Kremlin Menaces Russia And The West."

"I think we'll continue to see NATO working quite hard on Ukraine and Georgia, but on specific programs of military reform and modernization. But it won't have a label attached with the word membership."

Changing Geopolitical Landscape

It would be a mistake to assume that the current geopolitical landscape is permanent, analysts say. A new U.S. administration under President-elect Barack Obama will take office in January and will likely have more clout in Europe than that of deeply unpopular outgoing President George W. Bush. Falling oil prices, meanwhile, are battering Russia's economy and reducing Moscow's ability to throw its weight around abroad.

"I think that with President Obama, there will be more understanding between Europe and America. And I'm not sure [this means] that the Russians will have something to be happy about," says Eugeniusz Smolar, director of the Warsaw-based Center for International Relations.

In Bucharest, NATO made a formal pledge to Georgia and Ukraine that they would eventually become members, despite denying them MAP status. That pledge was reiterated again in Brussels this week. The alliance also said it would work closely with each country to help them complete necessary reforms via the NATO-Ukraine Commission and the NATO-Georgia Commission.

Speaking at a press conference in Brussels on December 3, Georgian Foreign Minister Eka Tkeshelashvili put an optimistic spin on what was clearly a disappointing decision.

"We do feel very firmly that we are much closer to the ultimate goal that we have, which is membership of this organization, in the way how the Bucharest decisions have been reaffirmed," Tkeshelashvili said.

Nitty-Gritty Reform

Georgia and Ukraine's best hope for eventually winning NATO membership, analysts say, is to push ahead with military reforms and hope the international environment turns more favorable to their aspirations.

"I think the hope in NATO and in the incoming Obama administration is that after a few years of nitty-gritty military reform, maybe after a few years both Georgia and Ukraine will look like more credible candidates and maybe the wider political climate will be more favorable," Lucas says.

In addition to reforming their militaries to meet NATO standards, both countries also have a lot of work to do on the political front.

Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili damaged his country's democratic credentials and harmed its NATO bid in November 2007 when he broke up massive antigovernment demonstrations in Tbilisi and temporarily closed down independent media outlets. Georgia's five-day war with Russia in August and Saakashvili's often erratic conduct during that conflict have also given many in the Western alliance pause.

Ukraine, where a majority of the population oppose membership, is mired in a political crisis and constant bickering between President Viktor Yushchenko and Prime Minister Yulia Tymoshenko.

"If you imagine in three years' time, if we have a stable government in Ukraine, a different Georgian leadership, a Russia that is preoccupied with its own problems, and a more popular American administration, NATO expansion might not look so crazy," Lucas says. "I'm not saying that any of those is certain, but they are all possible, or even probable."

#12

NATO Chief Defends Engaging With Russia

By Steven Erlanger

New York Times, December 4, 2008

The NATO secretary general, Jaap de Hoop Scheffer, on Wednesday strongly defended the alliance's decision to begin "a conditional and graduated re-engagement" with Moscow, saying that "Russia is such an important factor in geopolitical terms that there is no alternative for NATO than to engage Russia."

But Mr. de Hoop Scheffer, speaking in an interview after the end of a two-day meeting of NATO foreign ministers, said Russia's sense of grievance and encirclement, genuine or not, was difficult to assuage.

"It's not so easy to know how to approach someone, in daily life or in foreign policy, who feels themselves victimized," he said. "I think there is no reason for Russia to feel victimized, not to be taken seriously, but if that is the perception, we have to discuss it, because I have to try to convince them that democracy and the rule of law coming closer to Russia's borders -- why should that be a problem?"

He emphasized that his initial contacts with Russia would be informal and about only political matters, and that he would then report to NATO foreign ministers about whether to deepen contacts or not -- something that is unlikely to happen before March. Even with the softening, he said, relations with Russia are still "not business as usual" after the August war with Georgia, though cooperation continues on issues like Afghanistan, fighting terrorism and narcotics.

What matters in the conversation with Russia, he said, is to try to understand "what was behind Georgia" and the short war, and whether it meant a lasting change in Russia's attitude toward international law, sovereign borders and the "disproportionate" use of force.

"I'm basically an engager," Mr. de Hoop Scheffer said. "But engagement can't take place in the context of spheres of influence. We have to see if Georgia is a watershed or not, and I hope not, and I'll do my best that it will not be."

NATO continues to insist that Moscow live up to its agreement in August to return its forces to their positions before the war and rejects Russia's recognition of independence for South Ossetia and Abkhazia.

In a final communique by the foreign ministers, which went through 22 drafts, officials said, the ministers gave unanimous support to the planned deployment in Europe of an American missile defense system, which Washington says is aimed at Iran, not Russia. The ministers called it "a substantial contribution" to Western defense and encouraged Russia to take up American proposals for greater cooperation on missile defense.

There was no mention in the communique of President-elect Barack Obama's skeptical remarks about the system or of comments last month by President Nicolas Sarkozy of France that the missile defense system "would complicate things and make them move backward." Russia has threatened to respond by installing short-range missiles of its own in Kaliningrad, a Russian enclave bordering Poland and Lithuania.

The NATO foreign ministers also criticized Russia for its suspension of the Conventional Forces in Europe treaty, which limits conventional arms and forces in the region, saying, "The current situation, where NATO C.F.E. allies implement the treaty while Russia does not, cannot last indefinitely."

President Dmitri A. Medvedev of Russia has suggested talks on a new "security architecture" for Europe, but Mr. de Hoop Scheffer said ministers made it clear that there was nothing to discuss without specific proposals.

He said that NATO members were "quite happy with the security structure as it exists." "There is not a shimmer of a chance that, whatever the discussion, NATO could or would be negotiated away," he said at a news conference with Georgia's foreign minister, Eka Tkeshelashvili.

Ms. Tkeshelashvili expressed satisfaction with the outcome of the meeting, in which ministers reconfirmed that Georgia and Ukraine would eventually become members of NATO and said that NATO would accelerate cooperative reform programs with both countries through existing NATO commissions.

Ms. Tkeshelashvili said Georgia welcomed "a commitment to the process by which we can achieve our goal" of membership, "with maximized efforts to assist Georgia."

The ministers decided to move ahead with that cooperation and leave to the future, "without prejudice," decisions about whether both countries will also need to go through a formal "membership action plan," as Germany and France now insist.

Russia's ambassador to NATO, Dmitri Rogozin, welcomed the decision to resume informal talks with Russia, saying, "I personally do not see the difference between formal and informal sittings, except that you don't have coffee in an informal meeting but you still can order one."

Mr. Rogozin also said that the decision not to give a formal action plan to Georgia and Ukraine showed that relations with Russia were more important to NATO than with either applicant. He predicted to the daily newspaper Kommersant that NATO would retreat from admitting Georgia and Ukraine, a prospect that "does not cheer anyone in the alliance."

On the Web site of a Russian state broadcaster, Vesti-24, Mr. Rogozin asserted Wednesday: "There is an open split within NATO, and it will widen if NATO tries to expand further."

Mr. de Hoop Scheffer said Mr. Rogozin could say what he liked, and American officials dismissed his comments as bluster aimed at a domestic audience.

There was little controversy in the talk here about NATO's involvement in Afghanistan. But everyone understands that Mr. Obama as president will ask European allies for a larger commitment of troops, money and development workers.

"It's crystal clear that we need more forces in Afghanistan," Mr. de Hoop Scheffer said, and he said he had no doubt that Mr. Obama would set phones "ringing in European capitals."

"The allies need to do better," he said in the interview. "I want to see the balance in this alliance. I don't want to just see more American troops. It has to be a combination of a military and civilian surge, and what slightly concerns me is that allies on this side of the ocean will have difficulty in matching the extra effort a new U.S. administration might put into Afghanistan."

#13
Bailout To Cost Trillion Rubles
By Anatoly Medetsky
Moscow Times, November 27, 2008

The government will spend 1 trillion rubles next year from its financial safety cushion, the Reserve Fund, as a result of the global economic crisis, Finance Minister Alexei Kudrin said Wednesday.

The figure, equal to about \$36 billion, would account for about one-third of the fund's contents, which the country has been putting aside out of windfall oil and gas revenues since 2003.

Kudrin also indicated that the spending would continue at about the same pace in 2010-2011.

"We have created a serious cushion of stability and security for the budget," Kudrin told members of the Federation Council. "It will work for more than three years."

Kudrin first announced just last week that the government might dip into the Reserve Fund to cover federal and regional budget shortfalls. At the time, he said the cost would be more than 500 billion rubles.

Prime Minister Vladimir Putin since then has proposed a 4 percent cut in profit taxes and a slate of other business incentives to take effect next year to stimulate economic growth.

The introduction of these measures would mean foregoing another 550 billion rubles in revenues, the Finance Ministry said afterward.

Kudrin said the total cost of fulfilling all the obligations would be 1 trillion rubles, adding that the government should not make any further spending promises.

Speaking to the upper house of parliament before it approved the tax proposals, he put the current balance in the Reserve Fund at 3.6 trillion rubles.

President Dmitry Medvedev, on an official visit to Brazil, signed the bill into law 2 1/2 hours after the Federation Council vote, Interfax reported.

The subsidies to regional budgets will go to those heavily dependent on tax revenues from the production of oil and metals, commodities that have fallen steeply in price as a result of the global crisis, Kudrin said last week.

The decision to tap the Reserve Fund represents a significant turnaround in a short period of time, indicating just how quickly the economic outlook has worsened. As recently as Oct. 16, the Finance Ministry said it was counting on \$95 per barrel of oil next year and had no plans of dipping into the fund.

Urals, the main Russian export blend of crude, has consistently traded at a range of \$40 and \$50 a barrel over the past few weeks.

Valery Mironov, chief economist at the Development Center, a think tank, said that dipping so deeply into the Reserve Fund was not a bad idea.

"It's possible to tolerate this for one year and see what happens," he said. "Perhaps we won't spend a third of it every year."

He said that, if the fallout from the crisis does not show any sign of receding next year, the government could then look at cuts in budget spending.

The size of the outlay from the Reserve Fund might also reflect government thinking that the bigger the aid package, the faster the recovery, said Danila Levchenko, chief economist at the brokerage Otkritie.

In his presentation to the Federation Council, Kudrin also explained the rationale behind the recent rise in the Central Bank's refinancing rate, a move that ran counter to that by most of the world's central banks as they try to boost liquidity.

He said that higher rate would lead banks to raise the interest they pay to individual depositors, who he described as the main source of liquidity. To be effective, he said the rates would have to remain higher than inflation, which was already above 12 percent for the first 10 months of the year.

What's more, he said, the move discouraged banks and companies from converting rubles into dollars, easing pressure on the domestic currency.

Kudrin said he expected the Central Bank to lower the refinancing rate in the second half of next year, by which time most government officials are saying they expect the worst of the economic storm to have blown over.

#14

Aeroflot Faces a Politically Connected Rival

By Andrew E. Kramer

New York Times, November 28, 2008

Aeroflot, the national airline of the Soviet Union and now Russia, has had its rough edges, including a reputation for safety lapses and scowling flight attendants. In 1994, a pilot allowed his teenage son to fly a passenger plane, with tragic consequences. But its status as Russia's flag carrier never seemed in doubt.

In the current financial crisis, however, Aeroflot has suddenly fallen from first place among Russian state-owned airlines, at least as measured by the number of aircraft in its fleet.

A series of bankruptcies of regional airlines brought the change. One formerly large player, Kras Air, for example, ran out of money so quickly its airplanes were grounded on the runways for lack of fuel, while crowds of passengers fumed.

In response, the government of Prime Minister Vladimir V. Putin orchestrated a merger of 11 regional carriers under a state-owned conglomerate, Russian Technologies, to form Russian Airlines. It now has more than 300 aircraft, versus 149 for Aeroflot.

"They will try to create a competitor for Aeroflot," said Elena Sakhnova, a transportation analyst at VTB Bank in Moscow.

After the 11 companies were merged, Russia still retains about 100 private air carriers initially spun off from the Soviet Aeroflot in an overhaul in 1992 and referred to as "babyflots." The new reform, the most sweeping in Russian aviation since that breakup, recombines the largest babyflots into a carrier that will now compete with

the parent, which still dominates international routes and, for now, receives subsidies other Russian carriers do not.

Both Aeroflot and the new company are majority-owned by the state but appear to be backed by different factions in the government. Otherwise, Aeroflot would have seemed a natural magnet for any state-orchestrated consolidation. The company is closely associated with the out-of-favor administration of former President Boris N. Yeltsin; the chief executive, Valery Okulov, is a son-in-law of Mr. Yeltsin, and a 25 percent shareholder. The tycoon Aleksandr Y. Lebedev, who owns 30 percent of Aeroflot, has a prickly relationship with the current government.

Not surprisingly, the new company has powerful backers.

It is 50 percent owned by the city of Moscow and 50 percent by one of the heavyweights of the new blend of state and private business that emerged under Mr. Putin, Sergei V. Chemezov, a former K.G.B. colleague of Mr. Putin. The two served together in Dresden in the 1980s.

Mr. Chemezov's company, Russian Technologies, has been surging lately. Its core holding is Rosoboronexport, the multibillion-dollar arms exporting monopoly, but it has expanded into metals, automobiles and high technology.

And in a sign of the new owners' influence — and an ominous portent for Aeroflot — Yuri M. Luzhkov, the mayor of Moscow, and Mr. Chemezov have asked state regulators to halt fees of \$300 million a year paid to Aeroflot by foreign air companies for rights to fly over Russia, contending the fees provide the flag carrier an unfair advantage.

The rivalry is also personal; Mr. Lebedev, a critic of Mr. Luzhkov's management of Moscow, has run against Mr. Luzhkov for mayor.

It may be too early to write off Aeroflot, but the emergence of a state-backed competitor is a first for the airline, which was founded in 1924 and has always enjoyed insider status. It was once the largest in the world and owned virtually every civilian airplane in the Soviet Union.

So far, officials at Aeroflot have been mute about the newcomer.

Russian Technologies did not respond to written questions about its business plans. Industry analysts say it will most likely focus initially on domestic routes before challenging Aeroflot on international destinations.

The consolidation reduces airline competition domestically but may have a silver lining: Ms. Sakhnova said state control is expected to bring improved safety, easing a pervasive problem for Russian airlines.

In October, for example, at the end of a long flight from Barcelona, pilots of KD Avia, a regional Russian airline based in Kaliningrad, circled their home airport for a second landing attempt and touched down, without lowering wheels. The Boeing 737 screeched to a stop; no passengers were hurt. KD Avia is not part of the new state company.

Investigators have yet to complete their study of the accident but released a preliminary report pointing to pilot error. Igor K. Obotkov, an expert at Russia's pilots' union, said investigators were examining whether the crew, distracted by complicated air traffic instructions, had forgotten the wheels after first switching off a warning system.

"The wheels were not down, but all the passengers were safe," said Elena V. Pinkovaya, a spokeswoman for the airline. "That says something about Boeing airplanes."

#15

Russian Missile Plan Gives a New European Trade Hub an Old Identity Crisis

By Ellen Barry
New York Times, November 28, 2008

This is what passes for humor in Kaliningrad these days: Iskander missile tourism. Dipping deep into his reservoir of black humor, Vladimir N. Abramov tries out this sales pitch for his region, a cold war garrison turned European trade hub that may, once again, become a staging ground for missiles pointed west.

“Attracting tourists to see an Iskander is a creative idea,” said Mr. Abramov, a political scientist. “Especially for the Poles. When it is flying toward them, they may not be able to see it. Come to Kaliningrad! Pose next to the missile which is going to kill you.”

Somewhere behind the joke is a real question about the future of Kaliningrad. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, Moscow has devised a series of plans for this old military outpost, wedged on the Baltic Sea between Lithuania and Poland.

Former President Boris N. Yeltsin saw it as the Russian Hong Kong, a free trade zone to entice foreign investors. Mr. Yeltsin’s successor, Vladimir V. Putin, drew it closer to Moscow, planning a nuclear power plant that would export energy to Europe. As oil and gas wealth poured into Russia, more ideas emerged: Las Vegas-style gambling, for instance, and a constellation of luxury resorts.

The most recent idea arrived early this month, when President Dmitri A. Medvedev said Russia would stage short-range Iskander missiles in Kaliningrad if the United States proceeded with missile defense facilities in the Czech Republic and Poland.

The proposal is seen by many as rhetorical — a bargaining chip to use with a new American president. But if carried out, it would mark Kaliningrad’s first rearming against the West since the end of the Soviet Union, and another twist in an old identity crisis: Is it Russia’s window, open to Europe, or a turret for firing on it?

“The phrase ‘military stronghold’ was gradually forgotten here,” said Vadim Smirnov, a columnist for Kaliningradskaya Pravda, the region’s largest newspaper. “Experience shows that it was premature.”

The streetscape of Kaliningrad testifies to its peculiar status. Around the corner from generic Soviet monuments are cobblestone streets and red-roofed houses built before World War II, when it was a German city called Königsberg. Free trade policy has transformed this city into a huge duty free shop, crammed with fashionable restaurants and small businesses selling Italian handbags, French bath soaps, Polish light fixtures.

No less transformed are its people, who number around one million. Kaliningraders live more than 200 miles from the Russian border; they bring their grandchildren to Polish water parks and stock up at Ikea in Gdansk. Younger ones ski in Austria or shuttle goods to Central Europe. There is a deep vein of Russian patriotism here, as you would expect from a military town. But the pull of Europe is strong.

“We’re closer to Berlin than Moscow,” said Alexei Petrov, 39, a gym teacher who is driving a taxi between jobs.

Those links with Europe — culturally warm and economically central — have colored Kaliningraders’ reaction to Mr. Medvedev’s announcement. Lyudmila M. Anokha, the director of the Kaliningrad Zoo, found herself in an awkward position last month when she held a contest to name a new baby giraffe. One of the most popular suggestions was “Iskander,” but Ms. Anokha immediately saw the problem.

“The giraffe was delivered to us by the Berlin Zoo,” she said. “The giraffe came from the West. The Iskanders would be pointed toward the West. We at the zoo are beyond politics.”

The Iskander deployment is popular among Russians as a whole, who overwhelmingly see the American missile defense plan as a direct threat on their borders. A poll released last week by Moscow’s Public Opinion Foundation showed that 62 percent of respondents approved of the Iskander deployment if the missile defense facilities are built. Only 13 percent of them criticized the plans, with 4 percent dismissing them as “intimidation.”

The same stalwart support can be found in Kaliningrad. In 2004, when Poland and Lithuania joined the European Union, new visa and customs regulations stoked fears that Kaliningraders were being cut off behind a “blue curtain,” after the color of the union flag. Since then, those regulations have helped to deprive them of much of the freedom of movement that they enjoyed during the Yeltsin years. They already feel encircled, and the proposed missile defense site in Poland — an American base supplied with 10 interceptor missiles — stokes old passions.

“When someone threatens your country, every person must respond,” said Ms. Anokha, the zoo director. “We are not the ones unearthing the ax of war.”

In public, there has been little debate about the Iskander plan. For one thing, people here are accustomed to living near an arsenal — including nuclear-tipped missiles that were staged here during the cold war. The bigger threat, for many, was their removal: Since the 1980s, the number of troops here has been reduced to fewer than 20,000, from 320,000, according to the International Institute for Strategic Studies in London. Rumors that the Baltic Fleet might be relocated met with “horror” in Kaliningrad, according to Mr. Abramov, the political scientist.

“The presence of troops was seen as a guarantee that Russia would not abandon us,” he said. “There are hotheads in Poland and Lithuania who would like to incorporate us. The Baltic Fleet calms them down.”

In private, however, many Kaliningraders say they are nervous about how the Iskander plan would affect them. The region’s economy is dependent on foreign tourists and foreign investment, to say nothing of the freedom to travel in Europe. Solomon I. Ginzburg, a deputy in Kaliningrad’s regional Parliament, said a poll of 1,800 of his constituents showed that 37 percent of them were “categorically against” the deployment of Iskanders, whereas only 20 percent supported it.

The most visible objections have come from Vitautas V. Lopata, an opposition deputy in the Parliament. Mr. Lopata, a wealthy businessman, publishes his own newspaper because he cannot gain coverage in the Kaliningrad press, “even if I pay for it,” he said.

In his most recent issue, he wrote that with Mr. Medvedev’s announcement, “we have, with our own hands, pushed Europe away from Russia,” ignoring Kaliningrad’s economic dependence on its neighbors. He said many citizens agreed with him, but kept their comments private, because “where can they express this opinion?”

“If you deploy missile forces, investment ends, tourism ends,” he said in an interview. “You don’t go visit your neighbor if he’s drunk and he’s holding a loaded gun.”

As people rushed past rows of shops, jewel-bright in a gathering snowstorm, most confessed that the missile deployment was not on their minds. Some had not even heard of it. But here and there was passionate opposition — from a grandmother selling five beets on a sidewalk, who said she would join street protests against the deployment, or from the taxi driver, Mr. Pavlov, who exclaimed with frustration, “Nobody is threatening anyone here.”

Natalya Gorobets, 41, who works for a tour agency, seemed to draw herself up with pride at the mention of the Iskanders, which she said “demonstrate that Russia is capable of giving an answer” to the United States. At the next desk, Viktoria Nishchenko, 28, was not so sure: She was thinking about travel.

“I just don’t want to go to a consulate and be told, ‘Oh, you’re from Kaliningrad. Stay there with your weapons,’ ” she said.

#16

**Strong Reform Presence Noted at Limmud in Ukraine
World Union for Progressive Judaism, November 27, 2008**

In a sign of the growing strength of Reform Judaism within the former Soviet Union, several regional rabbis and leaders of the movement led Shacharit services, gave lectures and participated in the round tables that took place at the attendance record-setting Limmud conference in Yalta last month.

The October 27-30 conference, which included over 150 presenters and more than 170 lectures and workshops, was the second to take place in the FSU and the first in this historic port city on the Black Sea in Ukraine. Over 1,050 individuals came to study together, to teach one another and to learn all things Jewish from each other. Many of them had never met Reform rabbis before, and some had been misled about the position and role that non-Orthodox streams of Judaism are playing in Jewish life.

According to Rabbi Alexander Dukhovny, the World Union for Progressive Judaism's head rabbi in Ukraine and chair of the Eastern European Council of Progressive Rabbis, the active involvement of rabbis, lay leaders and members of Progressive FSU congregations at the Yalta Limmud was essential. "The hunger and thirst for knowledge were even higher than for food and water," he said. "Lecture auditoriums were constantly filled with participants; there was a marked shortage of seats in the workshops, and concert halls offered a variety of performances and concerts until 3 o'clock in the morning!

"Meeting our rabbis in person, attending their lectures and religious services, as well as communicating with members of Progressive congregations," Dukhovny explained, "exposed the participants to the moral and ethical ideas of Progressive Judaism to the extent that some expressed interest in establishing Progressive/Reform congregations in their respective cities."

The Reform movement was represented at the Yalta Limmud by four Progressive rabbis affiliated with the World Union: the Kyiv-based Dukhovny, Gregory Abramovich from Minsk, Leonid Bimbat from Moscow and Mikhail Kapustin from Simferopol. Leaders and members of more than 50 Progressive/Reform congregations from Belarus, Russia and Ukraine also participated. Irina Rozenfeld, a member of a Progressive congregation in Kerch, Crimea, and a rising pop star, gave a solo concert.

Rabbi Abramovich attracted many participants to his lectures with intriguing titles, such as "Jews and Pigs" and "Rabbis and Demons." Despite their names, the lectures covered serious themes such as kashrut and superstition, and were based on text study materials. Rabbi Dukhovny used a screen presentation in his session, "Judaism on the March," on the development of Judaism through the centuries and the essential role of Reform Judaism in saving Judaism and Jews from the time of the Enlightenment to the present day. Rabbi Kapustin's workshop, "Free Will and Predetermination," led to a discussion about the possibility of changing human life, predestined by God, into a mission. Rabbi Bimbat gave two lectures, "1975" and "Autumn – 4 Seasons," which together presented an innovative overview of Israeli culture, life, poetry, and singers.

Andrew Gilbert, chairman of Limmud International, himself a member of a Reform congregation in London, was among those who greeted the Limmud participants at the opening ceremony. He says that additional FSU Limmud conferences are scheduled for Moscow (April 2009), Vitebsk, Belarus (June 2009), Israel (September 2009) and Odessa, Ukraine (October 2009). A group in St. Petersburg is in the works.

#17

EU calls for deeper ties with ex-Soviet states

By Robert Wielaard

AP, November 30, 2008

The EU must significantly boost relations with Ukraine and five other ex-Soviet republics and make easing Moscow's sway over them a priority, a European Commission report says.

The report proposes to triple EU aid to Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine to euro1.5 billion by 2020. It says the EU must offer the nations free trade and economic integration because the EU has a vital interest in stability on its borders in the light of Russia's August war with Georgia.

The European Commission wants the EU to sign association agreements providing for economic aid and security and defense consultations. It is silent on future EU membership, something Ukraine desires.

The report says stepping up relations is only possible once there is "sufficient" progress toward democracy, the rule of law and human rights. This is particularly relevant for Belarus, whose authoritarian regime is shunned by the EU but has good relations with Moscow.

The report, a copy of which was obtained by The Associated Press, is to be made public Wednesday

Russia wants to influence countries with large Russian-speaking populations. The EU worries about Moscow's commitment to democracy and wants to pull Russian neighbors closer to Western Europe with promises of trade and growth hoping to secure affordable supplies of energy in the future.

The report says the EU must seek "diversification of energy routes by enabling the ex-Soviet nations to build new and better connected pipelines and oil and gas storage facilities.

The EU wants to see a gas pipeline from the Caucasus fully skirting Russia. Russia is pushing for deals under which Turkmenistan and Kazakhstan will ship their Caspian Sea gas through Russia.

The EU report warns this would make energy supplies more vulnerable.

European Commission officials hope the EU leaders will endorse the plan at a spring summit.

#18

Vlad TV: Putin hits airwaves to reassure Russians

By Fred Weir

Christian Science Monitor, December 5, 2008

Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin returned to his favorite method of interfacing with the public Thursday, taking questions for more than three hours via live television hookups around the country, on the Internet, and from a carefully screened studio audience.

It was the sixth time the former Kremlin leader has held such a marathon press conference, but the first time any prime minister – an appointed technocrat who has been expected to take a distant back seat to the president – has been handed the media catbird seat. His legendary command of detail was on display as he rattled off answers to 72 queries about matters as diverse as the economic crisis, US-Russia ties, military reform, mothers' allowances, his relations with President Dmitry Medvedev, and last summer's war with Georgia. But the appearance, broadcast on the main state TV channel, seemed to confirm the widespread belief that Mr. Putin remains Russia's real boss and not Mr. Medvedev, who is on a visit to India.

"The Russian public perceives Putin as the leader and senior president, not as just a prime minister," says Fyodor Lukyanov, editor of *Russia in Global Affairs*, a leading Moscow foreign policy journal. "Opinion polls show that people trust Putin, whom they see as a symbol of power. I don't think the public trusts Medvedev; they see him as too young, too inexperienced."

Russia's deepening economic troubles dominated the discussion. Putin fielded worried questions from workers in a greenhouse, a shipyard, and a hospital about how the crisis will affect the tenuous prosperity that was the chief legacy of his eight years in the Kremlin. Putin admitted the problems are serious, but insisted they are containable.

Russia's stock market has shed about 75 percent of its value since last May, while the ruble has slid almost 20 percent against the dollar in recent months. Inflation is way above official targets and expected to hit 13 percent for 2008.

"We have every chance of getting through this difficult period with minimal losses for the economy and, what is most important, for ordinary people," Putin said. He pledged that the government will use its massive cash reserves to cushion the impact of the global credit crunch on Russian banks and might also employ the state's muscle in a "rather large-scale way" to take over failing industries that are of importance to the national interest.

Some analysts have suggested that Putin's willingness to take center stage could be connected to his ambition to return to Russia's top job in future. "This is aimed at keeping Putin in the public eye, to support all the talk of him as 'national leader'," says Olga Kryshstanovskaya, a sociologist who studies Russia's political elite.

Putin dampened speculation that he might be seeking an early return to the Kremlin by noting that Russia's next scheduled presidential election is in 2012, and adding "I think everyone should carry out his duties in his job."

Some analysts argue that mounting popular fears over the faltering economy, compounded by official efforts to block sensitive information about layoffs and price rises, may have compelled Putin to take to the airwaves to calm the situation. "People are very concerned about the 'troubles,' as they're being called," says Masha Lipman, an expert with the Carnegie Center in Moscow. "As long as there is trust in Putin, and polls show that there is, he uses it to issue a reassuring note.

"His performance was totally in line with the official TV coverage, which is not focused on the impact of the crisis but rather on how the government is firmly in charge," she says.

The Moscow daily Nezavisimaya Gazeta reported Thursday that the Ministry of Labor has banned officials around the country from releasing information about layoffs or factory slowdowns. Last month, the Kremlin ordered prosecutors around the country to open a watch on how media outlets cover the crisis in order to root out "misinformation." Editors of several regional outlets have been called in for "conversations" with security officials about their coverage, according to the Russian Union of Journalists.

"This doesn't mean censorship, but it does represent a further limitation on our relative press freedoms," says Oleg Panfilov, director of Moscow's independent Center for Journalism in Extreme Situations. "Under the pretext of struggle against panic, they've opened an attack on all fronts. The main impact will be to compel journalists to self-censor. Fear makes journalists stop writing about certain subjects, and the list ... is already rather long."

Putin also answered questions concerning foreign affairs, an area that in the past was entirely a presidential prerogative.

Putin warned Ukraine that Russia may cut its energy supplies if it fails to pay its outstanding debts to the Russian gas monopoly Gazprom. Georgian President Mikhael Saakashvili briefly received the sharp side of Putin's tongue. On troubled US-Russian relations, Putin said he sees hopeful signs that President-elect Barack Obama will bring positive change.

"After all the tensions of the George W. Bush era, and all the damage done, the mood in the Kremlin is that the ball is now in the US court," says Mr. Lukyanov. "We'll wait and see, but we won't make the first move."