

WASHINGTON, D.C. May 1, 2009

TO: NCSJ Leadership and Interested Parties

**FROM: Richard Stone, NCSJ Chairman;
Alexander Smukler, NCSJ President;
Mark B. Levin, NCSJ Executive Director**



In Brief: Synagogue Troubles in Belarus; Russia; Ukraine

Dear Friend,

Restitution of Jewish communal property is always difficult and sometimes controversial in the former Soviet Union. Few countries in the region have adequate legal frameworks to deal with this issue, and even fewer governments want to address the issue at all.

Unfortunately, the Belarus Jewish community is confronting such a situation today. The small town of Luban is tearing down a former synagogue of great significance, with plans to replace it with a supermarket. The synagogue was once home to a thriving Jewish community that all but disappeared during the Holocaust. The regional government believes it has no obligation to preserve this building because it is not on the Belarus national historic register of protected sites.

The Belarus Jewish community has protested, but to no avail. I spoke with one of the community leaders earlier today, who will visit Luban and try to get government officials to change their decision. The community's concern is not only about this building, but other former Jewish sites also not on the government's protected list. We will keep you informed of any new developments, including our outreach to the Belarus Embassy in Washington, D.C. There is an AP story in this week's update that further explains the situation.

Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov is traveling to Washington and New York next week for a series of meetings with U.S. government officials. During his visit, he will discuss the upcoming July meeting between the U.S. and Russian presidents in Moscow. In addition, while in New York, he will participate in an UN Security Council special session on the Middle East.

One of the more unfortunate results of the global economic crisis is the worldwide growth of extremism and xenophobia. Russia is experiencing a dramatic climb in extremist behavior. Human rights groups and the Russian government agree on few issues, but this is one of them. Please read the article about the Russian government's reaction to this problem, and note the unusual source blamed for the increase in extremist behavior.

It appears that the dispute between Ukraine and Russia on the cost of natural gas consumed in Ukraine is over. Given the state of its economy this can only be considered good news for both the Ukrainian government and its citizens. There has been a significant decrease in the amount of energy being used in Ukraine and Russia's apparent willingness to alleviate some of the cost should help the struggling country.

Lastly, I want to remind everyone that NCSJ's next Board of Governors meeting, on Tuesday, June 9 from 10:00 a.m. to 1:00 p.m., at our offices in Washington. We will focus on the upcoming summit and current conditions that affect the Jewish communities of the former Soviet Union.

Sincerely,

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

Mark B. Levin
Executive Director



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

NCSJ WEEKLY NEWS BRIEF
Washington, D.C. May 1, 2009

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#1a

Jewish Ukrainian journalist honored JTA, April 27, 2009

KIEV, Ukraine -- A Jewish Ukrainian journalist received a national honor.

Sergey Tyhyi, editor in chief of the Ukrainian newspaper Gazeta Po-Kievsky, was given the title Honored Journalist of Ukraine on April 23.

A decree signed by Ukrainian President Victor Yushchenko recognized Tyhyi for his "prominent personal contribution to the development of journalism, defending of democracy and freedom of speech, high level of professionalism and on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of the Ukrainian National Association of Journalists."

#1b

Russia has one of world's highest rates of xenophobia - rights campaigners April 28, 2009, Interfax

According to human rights campaigners, Russia occupies "leading positions" in the world as regards the growing level of xenophobia in society and the number of activists of radical nationalist organizations.

"We have very strong xenophobia. Its level in Russia is one of the highest in the world," Galina Kozhevnikova, deputy director of the Sova analytical centre, told Interfax on Tuesday (28 April).

According to her, public opinion polls show that more than half of people in Russia support the slogan "Russia for Russians" and are in favour of job restrictions on ethnic grounds.

"Even in countries where ultranationalists win elections, they do not enjoy the support of more than 50 per cent of voters. We have a very high level of xenophobia in society which ensures support for ultranationalist organizations," Kozhevnikova said.

According to her, as a result of attacks on the grounds of xenophobia and ethnic intolerance, 23 people have been killed and 98 injured since the beginning of 2008. "Mainly these were people of Central Asian origin," Kozhevnikova said.

She said that, according to human rights campaigners, there are about 70,000 skinheads in Russia. "This is a whole skinhead subculture. Not all of them, though, are disposed to commit murders," Kozhevnikova said.

Besides, according to her, apart from skinheads, there are ultra-right-wing nationalist organizations and groupings in Russia, and the number of their supporters is impossible to tell.

Sova is one of the leading nongovernmental centres in Russia which focuses on monitoring xenophobia and extremism on ethnic grounds.

#1c

Russia has nearly 10,000 extremists, most are students – official Interfax, April 29, 2009

YEKATERINBURG - There are more than 200 extremist organizations in Russia, with almost 10,000 members. These are the data cited by Russia's deputy prosecutor general Viktor Grin. These groups consist mainly of young men aged between 16 and 25, all of them students at higher-education institutions and vocational schools, he said at an anti-extremism conference in Yekaterinburg on Wednesday.

The Army of the People's Will, the National-Socialist Society, the Movement against Illegal Immigration, the Slavic Union of Northern Brotherhood are the most influential of these groups, the Prosecutor General's Office says.

One of the factors facilitating the spread of extremist views are the emissaries from various foreign religious organizations which openly operate in Russia, the Prosecutor General's Office says. "As practice has shown, our education system is the most vulnerable element in our flawed legislation," Grin said.

For a long time, the Tatarstan government invited teachers from Turkey to teach at a local religious school. They were trying to instill on their students the supremacy of all things Turkish while downplaying Russia's role. "These teachers did not speak Russian, so lessons were taught either in Turkish or in English. Turkish teachers were deported after prosecutors had to intervene," said the deputy prosecutor.

#1d

Fascism growing, lawmaker tells Ukrainian president JTA, April 28, 2009

KIEV, Ukraine -- A Jewish Ukrainian lawmaker urged President Victor Yuschenko to pay attention to the rapid growth of fascism in Ukrainian society.

Aleksandr Feldman made his case Monday in an open letter to Yuschenko, according to the lawmaker's press service. Feldman also is the president of the Ukrainian Jewish Committee and the Association of Ethnic and Cultural nongovernmental organizations of Ukraine.

In addition to the ultra-right Svoboda Party victory at the regional council election in the western region of Ternopol, Feldman noted during the last month the advertising company SS Galychyna Division in the western city of Lvov called on regional council deputies to dismantle monuments to Soviet soldiers-liberators; a brawl between an ultra-right nationalist and anti-fascist, pro-Russian youth organizations in Odessa resulted in the murder of a nationalist activist; an attempt to distribute anti-Semitic leaflets in the central region of Cherkassy during Passover; and the vandalism of a Holocaust monument in southern Ukraine.

Ethnic and cultural communities in Ukraine, human rights and anti-fascist organizations, and World War II veterans groups are alarmed not only by the rising neo-fascist mood in Ukraine but also the inadequacy of the response by Ukrainian authorities, the statement says.

Feldman asked Yuschenko to consider how to counteract the manifestations of fascism and national chauvinism at the next meeting of the National Security and Defense Council of Ukraine.

#1e

Russia's Membership of WTO Will Help Repeal Jackson-Vanik Amendment - Beyrle Interfax, April 29, 2009

MOSCOW. April 29 - Washington will actively facilitate Russia's accession to the World Trade Organization (WTO), Ambassador to Russia John Beyrle said.

The United States is convinced that Russia's membership of the World Trade Organization is in U.S. national interests, Beyrle said in Moscow on Wednesday.

Russia will hopefully join the WTO in the near future, Beyrle said. The U.S. believes that this process is nearing completion and is doing all it can to help Russia, he said.

Beyrle said he was confident that Russia's membership of the WTO would create an environment for intensifying Russian-American economic cooperation, and, among other things, will help repeal the Jackson-Vanik amendment and conclude an agreement on investment.

After Russia joins the WTO, the Jackson-Vanik amendment is cancelled and an investment agreement is signed, Russian-U.S. economic relations would start expanding at a rapid pace, the U.S. ambassador also said.

The volume of trade between Russia and the United States was too small, Beyrle argued.

Trade between them stands at about \$26 billion, and the volume of mutual investment at about \$20 billion, he said. This trade figure is even below the monthly volume of trade between the U.S. and Mexico, Beyrle added.

This is not normal, he said. The volume of Russian-U.S. trade can and must increase, Beyrle said.

#1f

Russian foreign minister to visit USA, attend UNSC session in May Interfax, April 29, 2009

Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov will visit the USA on 6-8 May, the Russian Foreign Ministry's official representative Andrey Nesterenko has said.

"At present, quite a busy schedule has been arranged for S. Lavrov's visit to the USA," A. Nesterenko said at a news conference in Moscow on Wednesday (29 April).

He said it was planned that in Washington S. Lavrov would hold talks with US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and meetings with the leadership of the Congress as well as deliver speeches to American political experts and public circles at the Carnegie Foundation.

A. Nesterenko said that after that the Russian foreign minister would take part in two important events in New York - a special session of the UN Security Council at the level of ministers on the Middle East settlement issues and a session of the Quartet of international mediators in the Middle East settlement.

When asked to clarify the point, A. Nesterenko responded that the Russian foreign minister would take part in the work of the UN Security Council's special session on the Middle East on 11 May.

"This is the minister's (S. Lavrov's) first visit to the USA since the new administration took office, and we hope that during the full-fledged meetings it will be possible to hold comprehensive discussions on the current state of affairs in Russian-American relations and on tasks ahead," A. Nesterenko said.

The Russian Foreign Ministry's official representative noted that following the first meeting of the Russian and US presidents in London on 1 April, which was a foundation-laying meeting, the negotiating teams from both sides were given specific instructions and a work schedule was outlined for practical aspects of interaction between Moscow and Washington in both bilateral and multilateral formats.

A. Nesterenko recalled that two joint statements were adopted in London: on the general framework of Russian-American relations and on negotiations on the further reduction of strategic offensive arms.

"In this connection, in our view the main objective of the Russian foreign minister's May visit to the USA is to strengthen the positive dynamics of a system reset in Russian-American relations set in motion in London, to make a detailed inventory of the results of the work that has been done on the presidents' instructions, and to define sectors with respect to which we need to step up our efforts in order to ensure success of the US president's upcoming visit to Russia in July," A. Nesterenko said.

He also stressed that during the Russian foreign minister's visit to the USA discussions would be held on a wide range of international problems on which Russia and the USA traditionally cooperate, primarily on issues of countering proliferation of weapons of mass destruction and promoting Afghan settlement.

#2

Belarus destroys synagogue of renowned rabbi

By Yuras Karmanau

AP, April 25, 2009

LUBAN, Belarus — The roof has been removed and the windows stripped of their frames and glass. Piece by piece, workers are tearing down the former synagogue where a renowned rabbi served before fleeing the Soviet Union for New York in 1936.

Moshe Feinstein, considered one of the most influential Orthodox rabbis in the United States until his death in 1986, was the last rabbi to serve at the synagogue in this once predominantly Jewish town.

After his departure, the synagogue in Luban was taken over by Young Pioneers for the training of future communists. Within five years, most of the Jews were gone too, as almost the entire Jewish population was rounded up and shot by the invading Nazis in World War II.

The synagogue's role in town history was only publicly recognized again in 1996, when a memorial plaque in English, Belarusian and Hebrew was put up on the building, which by then housed a medical clinic.

The local government now plans to build a supermarket at the site, which is on the main square of the town, located 85 miles (140 kilometers) south of Minsk, the capital.

The regional government says it has no obligation to save the synagogue, which is not included on a list of buildings considered to have historical or cultural value.

"The exterior of the building is not in line with that of a Jewish temple, so there is no point in restoring it," said the director of the town's museum, Natalya Sinyak.

Belarusian Jewish organizations have protested the destruction of synagogue, but the objections have been ignored.

"Instead of expressing pride in the prominent figures who were born on this land, their memory is being destroyed," said Yakov Basin, vice president of a national Jewish organization.

As the demolition began, the memorial plaque was moved to a nearby building, where it was attached with two crooked, rusty nails.

"The synagogue was the only reminder left of the Jews," said Arkady Gelfand, a 70-year-old teacher who is one of five Jews remaining in the town of 11,000.

No mention is made of Jews even at the Soviet-era memorial where 785 Jews were shot in November 1941 when the Luban Ghetto was liquidated. The victims are referred to only as "peaceful citizens."

Gelfand, whose parents and grandparents worshipped under Feinstein, remembers how he wept with happiness when the plaque was put up on the former synagogue in a ceremony attended by representatives of the Israeli Embassy.

"Even so we remain a persecuted people," said Gelfand.

The Belarusian government denies the existence of anti-Semitism, even as it allows the destruction of Jewish cemeteries and refuses to preserve monuments to the country's rich Jewish history.

Only about 25,000 Jews now live in Belarus, a country of 10 million people squeezed between Poland and Russia. Before the war, more than half of the urban population was Jewish, and Yiddish was a state language.

As many as three presidents and four prime ministers of Israel — including Menachem Begin, Yitzak Shamir, Golda Meir and Ariel Sharon — were born in Belarus.

The two-story wooden synagogue in Luban was built at the end of the 19th century and became the center of spiritual life for the town's Jews, who at the time comprised 95 percent of the population. Even in 1939, the population was still 60 percent Jewish.

Feinstein began his tenure as rabbi in 1920 when he was only 25. For years he resisted pressure from the Soviet government as he continued to promote and preserve Jewish customs in the newly atheistic state.

But in 1936, as dictator Josef Stalin tightened his grip, Feinstein was told to leave the country or face arrest. His brother, who stayed, was arrested and died the following year in a Siberian labor camp.

#3
Medvedev's Moscow Spring
Putin's successor as president seemed like a smooth-talking yes man. That's changing now.
By Owen Matthews and Anna Nemtsova
Newsweek, May 4, 2009

In the year since he was sworn in as Russia's president, Dmitry Medvedev has displayed great prowess at smiling, nodding and sounding liberal—but that's been it. Despite his public praise of freedom as "an absolute value" and his denunciation of Russia's culture of "legal nihilism," there has been little sign until now of any actual departure from the hardline policies of his mentor and predecessor, Vladimir Putin. Dissidents have continued to be harassed, government-connected businessmen continue to prosper at the expense of outsiders and Putin's fiercest adversaries—particularly the jailed oligarch Mikhail Khodorkovsky and his associates—face ongoing legal troubles. Real power has remained solidly in the grasp of Prime Minister Putin and his inner circle, while the president has appeared to be little more than their fresh-faced, sweet-talking puppet.

But lately some of Medvedev's detractors are starting to think they may have underestimated him. The president has begun publicly overturning some of Putin's key policies, rolling back repressive legislation and paying attention to the government's critics rather than trying to silence them. "We all want to believe that our ruler is generous, fair and kind," says journalist and human-rights activist Svetlana Sorokina. "Now we're seeing the first signs that he is."

Medvedev's liberalized approach has had little visible effect on the country's hard-nosed foreign policy. So far, Putin seems firmly in charge there. But inside Russia, many activists say they're floored by the recent thaw, after a decade of being frozen out. "We could never dream of being included in a presidential council," says Kirill Kabanov, head of the privately run National Anti-Corruption Committee. "President Medvedev not only listens to us, but he makes decisions based on the reports we prepare for him."

Others aren't so sure. Opinions were particularly divided last week, when a Moscow court unexpectedly ordered the early release of Svetlana Bakhmina, a mother of three and former lawyer for Khodorkovsky's Yukos oil company, after five years in prison on charges of tax evasion. Medvedev has always insisted that the courts are kept entirely free from political interference, but no one takes that assertion seriously. "Nothing in our country happens without confirmation from above, especially on something as political as the Yukos case," says Sorokina. Some saw last week's ruling as evidence that Medvedev was finally making good on his promises of reform. Bakhmina's defenders have always argued that she's only a victim of the campaign against Khodorkovsky. But others, pointing out that the state's attorneys endorsed her release, suggest that she may have agreed to testify against her old boss, whose trial on new charges is currently in progress.

Nevertheless, there's a change in the air. The first sign of it came early this year, when the president blocked a draconian treason law, drafted under Putin, that would have criminalized many forms of dissent. Medvedev's decision followed the issuance of a report slamming the bill as a license for political repression. Elena Lukyanova, one of the legal experts who authored the report, says the legislation was meant to benefit the siloviki—the hardline nationalist faction of Putin's inner circle. Many of them are former members of the secret police, like Putin. "They needed a legal method to get rid of independent-thinking people," says Lukyanova, who happens to belong to Khodorkovsky's defense team. (The oligarch's supporters contend that his prosecution for alleged tax evasion was politically motivated, so it's only logical that his name keeps popping up in any discussion of reforms.)

Medvedev is trying a different approach: invite the activists to the Kremlin. Two weeks ago he met with representatives from 36 of Russia's leading nongovernmental organizations—groups that Putin had practically tried to eradicate with strict registration laws. Medvedev's guests included the head of Memorial, a human-rights group whose offices had been brutally raided last year by police who confiscated the group's files on Russian ultranationalists. The president said he regretted that Putin-era laws had been taken as meaning "all NGOs are enemies of the state." On the contrary, Medvedev said, their work is "essential for the health of our society." He asked them for reports on government corruption and legal reform, and Kabanov's National Anti-Corruption Committee submitted a whole list of recent cases in which government-connected businessmen took over companies that had been bankrupted by allegedly false tax claims.

The new tolerance goes far beyond the rights groups. State-controlled television has also undergone a marked liberalization. There's been a revival of televised political satire, and in February, Channel One gave serious airtime to Aleksandr Shokhin, head of the influential Russian Businessmen's Union, as he denounced the new charges against

Khodorkovsky as a complete sham. Russia's progressives remain cautious. "It is too early to talk about freedom of speech yet," says former deputy prime minister Boris Nemtsov. "But there are positive signs, maybe of a political spring." He's currently running for mayor of Sochi, the south Russian city that will hold the 2014 Winter Olympics. Two of the leading opposition candidates were bounced from the ballot on technicalities, and others who remain in the race, like Nemtsov, complain of too little TV coverage for their campaigns. But at least it's a genuine political contest, in contrast to most Russian elections in recent years.

Despite the apparent differences between the presidencies of Putin and his handpicked successor, there are few signs of any real disagreement between the two men, personally or politically. "Medvedev came from Putin's state apparatus—he is a reformer, not a revolutionary," says Alexei Makarkin, deputy director of the Center for Political Technologies, a Moscow think tank. "Like Russian historical reformers, he is part of the old machine." Some people say the very idea of Medvedev challenging Putin is no more than wishful thinking. "All we see is just a change of style," says Alexei Venediktov, the director of Echo Moskvy, Russia's leading liberal radio station. "The president does not make a single decision without consulting with the prime minister first."

Putin loyalists say much the same. "Russia's state institutions, created by Putin, are stable and powerful," says Mikhail Leontyev, anchor of the prominent political talk show "Odnako." "There are not two branches of power, only one." He points out that Medvedev has replaced only about one sixth of Putin's appointees and holdovers with his own people.

Nevertheless, Medvedev's approach could transform Russia—if it succeeds. That's a big if. The president has decreed that all senior bureaucrats must publicly disclose their incomes and business interests and those of their immediate families. But his war on corruption in high places is by definition an attack on some of the very men he has relied on as his chief power base. "Russia's bureaucrats just laugh at Medvedev's income-declaration law," says Gennady Gudkov, a former KGB general on the Duma's Security Committee. "This is not a real struggle, but an imitation of struggle. There is no one to check these Potemkin declarations." With Russia's federal budget slashed by a third and inflation and unemployment rising, Russians want action, not just noble words.

One major test will be the Khodorkovsky trial's outcome. "Authorities, observe your own laws," the oligarch says. The slogan dates back to Soviet-era dissidents, and Medvedev has made it his main theme. Russians will be watching how the court handles the Putin adversary's case in comparison with other ongoing trials involving defendants who are better connected.

The risk is that even if Medvedev's reform efforts are genuine, they could come to nothing. Some old-school members of Putin's circle—especially those who personally benefited from the breakup of Khodorkovsky's Yukos oil company—could try to derail Medvedev's liberal agenda. One fairly simple way would be to reignite last summer's war with Georgia. And if Medvedev's anticorruption drive finally brings some sticky-fingered bureaucrats to justice, few of them are likely to be from the inner circle. For all the skepticism, however, many liberals are cautiously optimistic. As they see it, even if spring isn't quite here yet, at least the ice has started to break.

#4

Idealism Amid the Cynicism of Russian Politics Winning Candidate From Ruling Party Renounces Fraudulent Victory By Philip P. Pan Washington Post, April 27, 2009

ST. PETERSBURG -- In a country where complaints of vote-rigging are common -- and commonly ignored -- Anton Chumachenko's stands out: The authorities say he won an election, but he insists he lost.

A first-time candidate for office and a member of Vladimir Putin's ruling United Russia party, Chumachenko won a seat on a local legislative council in St. Petersburg last month. Three weeks later, he publicly renounced his own victory, expressing disgust that votes had been falsified in his favor.

"I don't need this kind of victory!" the recent college graduate wrote in an open letter to residents. "I don't want to begin my political career with a cynical mockery of rights, laws and morality."

Chumachenko's stand took authorities by surprise and caused an uproar, challenging the nation's crooked electoral system in a way no member of the opposition could. But it also stunned the government's critics, many of whom could hardly believe that a young man who came of age in Putin's Russia might choose idealism over the cynicism that pervades politics here today.

Chumachenko, a mid-level manager in a local hotel firm, seemed like a reliable United Russia man when he began campaigning for a seat on the municipal council of St. Petersburg's Morskoy district. He had been a member of the party since 2006, when he joined its fiercely pro-Kremlin youth wing, the Young Guard, and he was running on a ticket with four other United Russia candidates.

In a recent interview, he exhibited that youthful mix of earnestness and ambition so familiar in official Washington. The skinny 23-year-old with thick, arched eyebrows, a dark two-button suit and a degree in public relations said it was a "childhood dream" to seek office, adding that he hoped to fix roads, organize street patrols to fight crime and make St. Petersburg a more attractive tourist destination.

As for his selection of a political party, Chumachenko said he didn't have much choice. "I understood that only this political party would give me the power and opportunities to change things," he said. "If I worked with any other party, it would be just words, and I think it's better to do something than just criticize."

A Work in Progress

As president and now as prime minister, Putin has worked to weaken Russia's opposition parties while concentrating power in United Russia, whose members hold the vast majority of the nation's elected posts, including more than two-thirds of the seats in parliament.

But the ruling party established in 2001 remains a work in progress. It has struggled in particular to contain infighting in municipal elections, one of the few remaining venues for open political competition in Russia.

In St. Petersburg, for example, Chumachenko's ticket was backed by a prominent city legislator, while its main competition in the March 1 election was another United Russia team endorsed by the Morskoy district chief. There was also a slate of opposition and independent candidates campaigning against government plans to build a highway and port in the neighborhood, which lies on an island in the Neva River.

The hotly contested race produced a high turnout, exceeding 35 percent of the voters in some areas, compared with about 10 percent in past years. Each slate of candidates sent observers to the polling stations to watch as residents cast ballots and election workers counted them.

At the end of the night, after the observers called in results, Chumachenko added the figures and realized he had lost, placing sixth in a race in which the top five vote-getters won seats. The four others on his United Russia ticket prevailed, along with one of the opposition candidates, Boris Vishnevsky, a leader of the pro-democracy Yabloko party.

But the next morning, the election commission announced different results. Chumachenko suddenly gained 80 votes, edging out Vishnevsky by two votes.

Vishnevsky filed a court challenge. Chumachenko kept silent, unsure what to do. "For me, it was like, what's up? What happened?" he recalled. "We thought maybe it was a misprint."

Chumachenko said that he never considered accepting the falsified votes, but that he worried he might be punished if he objected. After the official results were published March 16, he consulted with the other United Russia candidates on his ticket. They agreed to back him if he spoke out. Four days later, he released his letter without notifying party superiors in advance, he said.

"I am sincerely convinced that my colleagues in the party will support my position and make all efforts to make sure that the rule of law prevails," he wrote. "The party's strength lies not in exaggerated percentages of support, but in its ability to stand up for the truth."

Chumachenko also pointed out problems in a neighboring precinct where the vote count had changed overnight and knocked out two independent candidates.

'Emotional' but 'Noble'

The letter caught the government off guard. An election official, Alexei Gromov, responded that someone had probably faked it and forged Chumachenko's signature. But prosecutors were shamed into opening an investigation, and a United Russia spokesman eventually issued a statement calling Chumachenko's action "emotional" but "noble."

The opposition was also surprised, reacting at first with suspicion. Some suggested Chumachenko was simply trying to boost his own profile. Others wondered whether he was following orders and playing a role in a feud between local politicians, or in a scheme to improve United Russia's image.

Tatiana Krinitskaya, 71, one of the independent candidates in the nearby precinct who was cheated out of a council seat, said she was astonished when Chumachenko showed up and asked her to help distribute copies of his letter, in part because he had belittled her during the campaign as too old for office.

"People said it was a public relations move, or maybe there's a struggle," said Krinitskaya, an environmentalist who has been fighting the development project planned for the island. "But if he really did this on his own, I would be proud of him."

Others said Chumachenko's actions were more important than his motives.

"It's the first time I can remember that someone who stood to gain from election fraud has spoken out," said Vishnevsky, 43, a veteran activist who has run in more than 25 elections and won a Moscow legislative race in 1990 after Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev's political reforms.

"Elections have become less and less fair since then," he said, noting that most of Yabloko's candidates were barred from the ballot here last month. "If these kind of things happened back then, the Communist Party would still be in power."

Grigory Golosov, a politics scholar who runs a program that trains election observers in St. Petersburg, said the Morskoy race was unusual only because the cheating was so thoroughly exposed.

He said the Kremlin evaluates local officials partly on their performance in elections, and it sets goals that "everyone knows can't be reached without fraud." At the same time, he said, the government has passed new laws toughening penalties against vote tampering.

"It means they want the fraud to be done professionally and not be so blatant," Golosov said. In St. Petersburg, where United Russia won 77 percent of the vote -- the goal was 70 percent -- and in the Morskoy district, in particular, the problem was that "they didn't do the fraud well," he added.

Chumachenko said he had heard complaints about election fraud but never expected votes to be falsified so brazenly. He also said he is disappointed the authorities limited media coverage of the case.

But he said he remained loyal to United Russia and hoped his stand would encourage others in the party to come forward. "It's a big organization with a lot of members, and I can't speak for all of them," he said. "But I believe the position of the party is to uphold the law and the rights of voters."

Chumachenko has provided evidence to the court and urged it to transfer his mandate to Vishnevsky. A ruling is pending. Meanwhile, prosecutors have sought to examine the original ballots. Election officials say they were damaged when a water pipe burst, an explanation that has been used before in Russia to stall investigations into election irregularities.

"We have very smart pipes," Chumachenko said with a grin. "They know exactly where to leak."

#5

Russia May Seek Loans From World Bank, Kudrin Says

By Paul Abelsky

Bloomberg, April 27, 2009

Russia may seek billions of dollars in loans from the World Bank to help cover its budget deficit, said Finance Minister Alexei Kudrin, who visited Washington over the past three days to meet officials from the bank and the International Monetary Fund.

"Since Russia is facing a budget deficit, which will be substantial in the next three years, no less than 3 percent, we are ready to consider borrowing funds from the World Bank to finance some of our projects," Kudrin said in an interview broadcast on state television channel Vesti today. He said the government may seek "billions of dollars" in the coming years.

The government expects revenue to plunge 30 percent this year as the economy enters its first recession in a decade. The budget deficit may be wider than the official estimate of 7.4 percent of gross domestic product, Kudrin said on April 24.

Russia may also seek to raise \$5 billion next year in the government's first international bond sale since the 1998 default, Arkady Dvorkovich, President Dmitry Medvedev's top economic adviser, said on April 14. Banks and pension funds may be the chief buyers of the bonds, according to Kudrin.

"It's too early to speak about the market and about pricing," Kudrin said on Vesti. "It depends on how we cope with this difficult year before the future bond issue."

Loans from the World Bank are a "realistic" option as the cost of borrowing on the market remains high, said Elina Ribakova, Citigroup Inc.'s chief economist in Moscow.

"Arranging loans from the World Banks would be cheaper than raising money from investors," Ribakova said. Russia may sell as much as \$10 billion in bonds, according to Citigroup.

The scale of the program will depend on the negotiating process and any strings the lender may attach, Ribakova said. Details of the planned borrowing may be made public when a World Bank mission visits Moscow in May or early June, she said.

#6

The Kremlin's Sochi Project

By Nikolai Petrov

Moscow Times, April 28, 2009

The mayoral campaign in Sochi was full of surprises. Of course, it was not a "full-fledged political battle," as President Dmitry Medvedev described it, but it was a significant improvement compared to mayoral races of recent years. Usually, the main challenge to the ruling party's candidate -- most often the incumbent -- is either from the Communist Party or United Russia itself or a loyal candidate from the business community.

In the Sochi race, however, the main contender was opposition leader Boris Nemtsov. His challenge was aimed not only at the local administration but also directly at the Kremlin. Contrary to the expectations of most observers, myself included, the Kremlin accepted the challenge.

Russia's election laws would have made it a simple matter to disqualify any undesirable candidate by citing a technical violation of the registration procedure. This is not difficult to pull off when the authorities control the electoral commission, law enforcement agencies and the courts. This means that the top Kremlin leaders approved of Nemtsov's candidacy, particularly when you consider that the Sochi Olympic Games are Prime Minister Vladimir Putin's precious pet project.

A couple of weeks ago, candidates began dropping out of the race one by one. Some pulled out by their own accord and others, like wealthy businessman Alexander Lebedev, were disqualified by the election committee. It seemed that the ground was being prepared for Nemtsov's removal as well.

But Nemtsov never got the ax. Instead, the authorities initiated an informational blockade against Nemtsov, denying him the opportunity to meet voters in the venues of his choice and preventing him from advertising in the media while coverage of acting Mayor Anatoly Pakhomov dominated local television and newspapers. Pakhomov was portrayed less as a candidate and more as a successful, tireless leader, not unlike the way Dmitry Medvedev was portrayed during the presidential election campaign a year ago.

The election was preceded by an intriguing series of liberal gestures from the Kremlin, including Medvedev's interview with the editor-in-chief of Novaya Gazeta, his meeting with human rights advocates in the Kremlin and the early release of former Yukos lawyer Svetlana Bakhmina from jail.

The Sochi election has become the focus of both national and international attention. Without a doubt, it is the most prominent election since the presidential vote in 2008.

In the end, the Sochi vote will be indicative of where the Kremlin goes from here. On one hand, it wants to demonstrate a more liberal approach to domestic politics, and on the other hand, it wants to emphasize how much it controls by showing how easily its candidate can win against the most powerful challenger that the opposition has to offer.

The Kremlin's favored candidate was victorious despite the strong protest vote. The economic crisis and noisy conflicts between the administration and residents over the government's heavy-handed, often illegal methods used to push

through Olympic projects surely played a role in the election, but what is important is that on election day there were more voters who supported the Kremlin's policies toward Sochi than those who opposed them.

Lessons learned from the Sochi election will be useful to both the Kremlin and the opposition during the next round of elections in autumn. By that time, the mood of social protest in the regions will have reached the high temperatures we are now seeing in Sochi.

#7
Russian journalists face violence, intimidation
Sergei Protazanov's killing in March was the latest in a series of violent attacks targeting journalists.
By Fred Weir
Christian Science Monitor, April 28, 2009

Khimki, Russia - The road to Moscow's main international airport passes through Khimki, and all that most people ever see of it are rows of gray Soviet-era apartment blocks and a giant new shopping mall featuring Russia's first IKEA furniture shop.

But local civil society activists say what you don't see from the main highway is the fear that has been stalking this grim industrial suburb.

"The situation in Khimki is not normal; this is a kind of military dictatorship," says Yevgeniya Chirikova, a member of In Defense of Khimki Forest, a local environmental group. "Journalists and public figures are constantly being threatened. It's as if our local authorities cannot accept any different way of thinking."

Over the past year there has been a series of violent attacks on independent journalists here, culminating in the controversial death in late March of newspaper designer Sergei Protazanov, who had been preparing an issue of the oppositionist *Grazhdanskoye Soglasie* devoted to electoral fraud in Khimki's March 1 mayoral contest. That election was won by the candidate of the pro-Kremlin United Russia Party.

Mikhail Beketov, editor of another local paper and a stern critic of district authorities, is still lying in a coma after being beaten viciously by unknown assailants in November. Mr. Beketov's lawyer, Stanislav Markelov, was gunned down in central Moscow in January, with another journalist, Anastasia Baburova. She was a freelancer with the crusading Moscow weekly, *Novaya Gazeta*.

Many experts warn that the crisis in Khimki is not so much an anomaly as it is a lightning flash that illuminates a much wider pattern of human rights abuses and deteriorating personal safety for dissenters in many regions across Russia. They claim that the Kremlin winks at local crackdowns, thus creating license for regional officials who increasingly resort to illicit police actions or private thugs to settle scores.

"The number of attacks on oppositionists, journalists, and critical politicians is growing" across the country, says Yevgeny Ikhlov, an expert with the Russian movement called For Human Rights, a Moscow-based grass-roots monitoring group. "It isn't necessarily always the authorities who are to blame, but they create an atmosphere in which all kinds of [vigilante] groups – who think their duty is to defend the regime – feel free to act."

The New York-based Committee to Protect Journalists lists 16 journalists murdered in Russia over the past decade for doing their jobs. Every single case has gone unsolved. That may be just the tip of the iceberg, says Tatiana Lokshina, Moscow head of the global monitoring group Human Rights Watch.

"The situation in Russia has been deteriorating for several years," she says. "It is becoming catastrophic." She points to the case of Lev Ponomarev, head of the Movement for Human Rights, who was beaten viciously by a group of hooded thugs in front of his Moscow apartment on March 31.

Police reported that he was a victim of "hooliganism," a minor crime that is often cited by Russian officials to characterize violent assaults on civil society activists.

"People are being killed. People are being attacked," says Ms. Lokshina. "In most of these cases there is no effective investigation carried out by authorities, and our questions to the prosecutor's office go unanswered. The human rights climate in Russia today is absolutely outrageous."

Mr. Protazanov was found lying in a Khimki street on March 29, and died the next day at home after doctors discharged him from the hospital. Local police say he died of "accidental poisoning," and reports surfaced in the state-controlled media that he had been a drug and alcohol abuser.

But his editor, Anatoly Yurov, says the poisoning claim is "rubbish" and that Protazanov was beaten by thugs and left for dead.

Mr. Yurov has some direct experience in this regard: He has been attacked three times, one of them a knife assault last year that left him with 10 stab wounds.

"We had three independent newspapers here in Khimki," he says. "One, Grazhdansky Forum, closed down. Another was Khim-khinskaya Pravda, whose editor – Beketov – is still in hospital, and the paper doesn't come out. All three staff members of our paper, Grazhdanskoye Soglasie, have been attacked at different times. So, what do you think is going on here?"

He blames local authorities, who had been the target of intense criticism from all three papers.

"They do not like it when somebody says something against them. One of their elections slogans was: 'If you're not with us, you're against us,'" he says.

Though local situations are different in far-flung regions across Russia, the toll of intimidated, injured, and dead journalists is on the rise, says Sergei Sokolov, deputy editor of Novaya Gazeta, who has spent much of the past two years supervising his paper's investigation into the high-profile murder of its investigative reporter, Anna Politkovskaya.

"If a journalist starts looking into corruption, sooner or later he runs afoul of local authorities, who are connected with the police," editor Yurov continues.

"Most of the attacks [on journalists] remain unpunished," he says, "and for this you have to blame the authorities. There is a general environment of impunity for officials in this country."

#8

The Mother of All Deals

By Amitai Etzioni

Moscow Times, April 29, 2009

I arrived in Moscow from Washington highly optimistic, a day after the vigorous, historic handshake between Presidents Dmitry Medvedev and Barack Obama in London on April 1. I left -- after visits with officials and colleagues -- more than a bit concerned. My optimism was not based on cheerful gestures such as pushing reset buttons, although such tone-setting steps have their place. I believed that a major deal between the two countries could be made, based not on identical or even complementary interests of Russia and the United States, but on profound differences in saliency.

Allow me to explain. When Party A has some things that Party B deeply desires but Party A does not care much about, and Party B has some things Party A keenly wants but Party B is not much invested in, a mother of all deals is plausible. The fact that this notion has some legs became clear when the Obama administration, which is far from invested in building a missile defense system in Poland and the Czech Republic while Russia is rather troubled by it, offered, in effect, to trade it in. That is, to exchange it for Russia's help in encouraging Iran to give up on its nuclear arms program. As the United States sees it, an Iran with nuclear bombs would gravely endanger the United States and U.S. allies -- not just Israel, but also Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Jordan. Iran's nuclear program is highly important for the United States, but at the same time Russia also is not interested in having a nuclear-armed Iran on its southern border, to put it mildly.

In addition, it seemed that another exchange could be built into the mother of all deals: The Obama administration's interest in expanding the membership of NATO in the foreseeable future is quite apparent, but this issue matters a great deal to Russia. At the same time, the United States is very interested in accelerating the Nunn-Lugar programs that aim to neutralize fissile material from which terrorists can make nuclear bombs, and further improve the security of tactical nuclear arms. These are matters that Russia has little reason to oppose. Voila, the conditions of a major deal seem to be in place.

Why did I leave Moscow less optimistic than when I arrived? Both sides seem to have decided to pile on a large number of additional items, some of which have a rather different profile of needs and interests than those mentioned above, including items that gravely concern both sides -- especially the quantity and quality of nuclear arms to be maintained. In addition, Russia seems keenly interested in changes in trade and economic policy, such as the additional opening of U.S.

markets to Russian products and membership in the World Trade Organization, an issue that is particularly difficult to deal with currently, given the recent tendency to increase rather than lower national barriers to trade. Half a dozen additional items have been raised, ranging from the incentives that Russia apparently provided to Kyrgyzstan that led it to close a major supply line for American troops in Afghanistan to helping Russia secure its "territorial integrity."

The escalation of ambitions and expectations are by no means one-sided. Obama's trademark is thinking big and moving on many fronts at once. Up to a point, one cannot help but admire such a drive, not just to remake the United States internally, but also to build a new global architecture. A partnership with Russia is a key element in this new model. But such ambitions become problematic when they pay little mind to matters of relative importance and respective pace.

Thus, it is rather obvious that the more items that are thrown into the mix, the more complex the negotiations will become and the less likely they are to succeed, especially as they involve items of similar rather than different weight. Even more detrimental is the fact that some of these processes and policies have internal clocks that run at very different speeds.

This is especially true when one considers Iran's nuclear program, which may well cross a red line within a year, while matters of trade or even those concerning the conflict in Afghanistan have a significantly longer trajectory. It would be much better to focus first on those items that have hard and short deadlines rather than mixing them up with those that do not. Finally, all items that require action by the U.S. Senate -- such as approving treaties or changing Jackson-Vanik and other laws -- must be assumed to face a slow journey, even with the Democratic majority.

I have not lost faith in the dawning of a new era in U.S.-Russian relations. I am especially encouraged to find mountains of goodwill (mixed with some residue of feelings of distrust). I just hope that matters that need to be and can be settled in short order will not be undermined by those that cannot and those that must be allowed time to be worked out.

Amitai Etzioni is professor of international relations at George Washington University. This comment appeared in Vedomosti.

#9

Kudrin's Anti-Crisis Plan

By Ariel Cohen

Moscow Times, April 29, 2009

Finance Minister Alexei Kudrin got a surprise gift on his recent visit to Washington -- a subpoena. The paper was served to him on April 24 as he entered the Peterson Institute for International Economics to deliver a speech. RTVi television, which belongs to former oligarch Vladimir Gusinsky, caught the action on film.

The subpoena came from U.S. law firms representing shareholders of bankrupt Yukos. Later, Russian government sources said the U.S. District Court for the District of Columbia had summoned Kudrin to give evidence in the trial of former Yukos CEO Mikhail Khodorkovsky. None of this seemed to fluster Kudrin, who proceeded to deliver his Peterson Institute speech before an audience that included former World Bank chief James Wolfensohn, financier George Soros and scores of government experts and analysts.

Speaking of the global economy, Kudrin noted that the International Monetary Fund and other economists now tout crisis management practices, such as bailing out failing companies or injecting liquidity, that raise a lot of questions. "IMF violates recommendations they gave Russia in the early 1990s [not to bail out or inject liquidity]," he observed with a dose of irony. "Now, developed countries violate their own recommendations."

For now, Russia is sticking to conventional wisdom -- trying to stimulate the economy by cutting corporate income tax from 24 percent to 20 percent and speeding up annual amortization rates from 10 percent to 30 percent. Despite these measures, though, credit in Russia continues to shrink, the financial sector has yet to stabilize and currency reserves might not be adequate to weather the crisis.

Kudrin characterized the rate of economic decline as worse than expected. Gross domestic product contracted 9.5 percent in the first quarter, rather than the expected 7.5 percent. Industrial output fell by 14.3 percent, investment dropped by 15 percent and construction declined by 19 percent.

Russia's bad-loan problem continues to grow. When international methodology is used (counting all late loans as bad), Kudrin said the amount of bad loans is 8 percent. If the banks reach the 10 percent mark, he said, the Finance Ministry would provide additional credits to maintain liquidity. The Finance Ministry has earmarked \$28 billion for VTB and Sberbank.

The state will also double support for small businesses and cut taxes for this sector by 50 percent. Overall, Kudrin said, the tax burden will drop to 2 percent of GDP. But that may create some tensions since the state also wants to increase pensions and provide targeted support to automotive, aerospace and shipbuilding sectors and export subsidies. With the budget revenues falling by 30 percent, the government may re-examine support of federal road building, education and defense, he said.

Kudrin also explained what he meant when he said Russia may not see the beneficial economic conditions of the last decade for another 20 or 50 years. "I did not say, as some communist press accused me, that the current crisis will last 50 years. ... Instead, I focused on three factors: one, the highest oil prices in history; two, the longest rise of oil prices; and three, the high rate of growth of oil production in Russia of up to 10 percent a year." These favorable circumstances may not return for many years, he noted.

As for foreign policy, Kudrin said Russia demands that the United States treat it as a peer in the global arena, presumably disregarding its economic dire straits. The IMF talks on the new supranational currency (international drawing rights) did not get very far. "We already meet a cool attitude and even resistance [to reform plans] of the international financial architecture that would provide more power to developing economies such as Russia and China."

Kudrin suggested that Russia was ready to invest some of its \$385 billion reserves in the IMF drawing rights. But, he noted, Moscow needs reassurance that the drawing rights would be sufficiently liquid.

It may take years before the IMF is ready to launch drawing rights. Meanwhile, Kudrin will continue working to get Russia into the World Trade Organization -- and to stay one step ahead of those pesky court marshals.

Ariel Cohen is senior research fellow in Russian and Eurasian Studies and International Energy Security at The Heritage Foundation. This comment appeared in business new europe's Russian daily.

#10

Ukraine PM says gas tension with Russia easing AFP, April 29, 2009

Ukrainian Prime Minister Yulia Tymoshenko on Wednesday said Kiev and Moscow had put behind them disputes over their vital energy trade, after cut-offs in January affected a swathe of EU states.

Meeting Prime Minister Vladimir Putin in Moscow, Tymoshenko said: "It is good that our cooperation is being fine-tuned.... It's good that the times when a certain confrontation was felt are becoming a thing of the past."

"The system of gas supplies in Ukraine has fully stabilized," she said.

Putin was also upbeat, saying as the two continued their talks: "What very much pleases me is that cooperation between certain rather sensitive and important industries and enterprises is not being destroyed but deepened."

The talks in Moscow were overshadowed by tensions between Russia and the European Union over the EU's growing role in Ukraine's energy transit system -- a key route for supplies of Russian gas to Europe.

In January relations between Moscow and Kiev plummeted to such a low that supplies via Ukraine were cut off, leaving a string of European countries temporarily without gas in the middle of winter.

Putin and Tymoshenko were initially due to meet in early April but Russia postponed the visit after Kiev and the EU signed a deal on gas infrastructure cooperation that left Russia feeling sidelined.

On Wednesday Tymoshenko sounded hopeful that a new dispute involving threatened financial sanctions by Russian gas giant Gazprom would be resolved.

Ukrainian officials said earlier that Gazprom was threatening to demand one billion dollars (750 million euros) in sanctions because Ukraine had been consuming Russian gas at below the agreed amount. Ukraine has sharply reduced its gas consumption due to the economic crisis.

Referring to the fines, Tymoshenko said: "We are finding understanding."

Her visit comes as European Union Energy Commissioner Andris Piebalgs is also due in Moscow for talks on the bloc's gas trade with Russia.

A Russian newspaper reported earlier that Tymoshenko would present a plan to Moscow aimed at allaying Russian worries about the EU's growing role in Ukraine's gas transit system, notably the EU's insistence on greater transparency and access for other players.

The proposed plan involves efforts to build a new pipeline in Ukraine and to restore another pipeline, bringing an increase in capacity of 30 billion cubic metres annually, the Kommersant daily said, quoting an aide to Tymoshenko.

Her visit comes amid energy tensions not only between Russia and Ukraine, but also between Moscow and the EU following the January gas crisis.

Piebalgs was due to meet the energy ministers of Russia and the Czech Republic, current holder of the EU presidency, after President Dmitry Medvedev put forward a new blueprint for restructuring energy relations with the bloc.

Kommersant reported that Piebalgs was likely to bear bad news for Russia, essentially deflecting Medvedev's proposals because they would reinforce Moscow's dominance of European gas supply.

#11

Russia and Ukraine Settle Natural Gas Dispute

By Andrew E. Kramer

New York Times, April 30, 2009

MOSCOW — Gazprom, the Russian natural gas monopoly, will waive a \$2 billion fine it could have imposed on Ukraine for purchasing less gas than required by contract, the Russian prime minister, Vladimir V. Putin, said Wednesday.

The announcement, after a meeting with Mr. Putin's Ukrainian counterpart, Yulia V. Tymoshenko, seemed to resolve the latest disagreement over the terms of Russian natural gas supplies to Ukraine.

At issue was a contract signed in January that obliged Ukraine to purchase more gas than the country's rapidly declining economy required.

Representatives of the two countries also discussed a role for Russia in operating the pipelines that cross Ukraine and carry about 80 percent of the Russian natural gas exported to Europe. While not formally linked, the two matters were discussed at the same meeting.

Ukraine has resisted any Russian role in the pipeline operations, and the Ukrainian government recently angered Russia by signing an agreement with the European Union to help maintain the system.

On Wednesday, though, Ms. Tymoshenko said Ukraine would welcome a role for Russian companies, too, Agence France-Presse reported.

"We have invited Russia as one of the main partners to modernize the Ukrainian gas transportation system," Ms. Tymoshenko said. "I think that such modernization can be conducted jointly."

Mr. Putin reiterated a Russian position that the pipeline network should be operated by an international consortium that would include Russian, Ukrainian and Western European partners, though there was no indication Ukraine had agreed to this more sweeping suggestion.

"I still don't understand what can give rise to any doubts here," Mr. Putin said of his proposal, according to the Russian news agency Interfax. "This is completely in tune with the interests of all potential participants."

Ukraine's rapidly contracting economy is now consuming far less natural gas than was anticipated as recently as January, when Ms. Tymoshenko negotiated a supply contract with Mr. Putin, ending a gas shutoff that left parts of Europe without heat.

Demand from industrial customers in Ukraine, for example, was down 50 percent in the first three months of this year compared with last year, according to Naftogaz, the Ukrainian state energy company.

#12
Taking Charge Of Russian Jewish Congress
By Walter Ruby
NY Jewish Week, April 29, 2009

Yury Kanner, a Moscow-based businessman recently selected to be president of the Russian Jewish Congress (RJC), was in New York last week meeting with leaders of the World Jewish Congress-American Section. Kanner, 53, a former assistant director of a Siberian kolkhoz (collective farm) during Soviet times, will be officially inaugurated as RJC president on May 14, succeeding his mentor, Moshe Kantor. He sat down with The Jewish Week and laid out his agenda for the RJC.

Q: What are your priorities as president of the Russian Jewish Congress?

A: We want to create a self-governing Jewish community like those in Europe or America, which raises the money it needs to carry out its various functions. I want to make sure that everything is transparent in terms of how money is spent, which was not always the case in the past. We have now moved beyond the era when a few oligarchs ran everything in Jewish communal life, so I am working to involve the next level of Jewish businessman as lay leaders in the RJC. I want them not only to make a monthly financial contribution, but also to devote their time and energy to building the Jewish community.

You are known to be focused on memorializing so-called "mini-Babi-Yars," forgotten Holocaust sites throughout the FSU? Why is this so important for you?

It's very personal with me. I grew up in a small town in the Ukraine and when I was 5 my grandfather came home with a sack of human bones. There had been dynamiting at a nearby quarry, and the blast showered all around bones from a mass grave of Jews murdered by the Nazis. I want to identify and memorialize the forgotten places of mass burial of Jews in the villages, fields and swamps of the former FSU so that the millions shot and buried there can finally rest in dignity.

It has been said that Jews thrive in democratic countries, but suffer under dictatorial regimes. What is the situation of Jews in Russia today under a regime that appears ever-more authoritarian?

Actually, Jews suffer less under strong empires than during times of transition from authoritarian regimes to less repressive ones, such as in the early years of the 20th century when the worst pogroms took place as the Tsarist regime was weakening. As for the present situation, there is no governmental anti-Semitism in Russia today. Jews are represented in Parliament and government. In contrast to many countries in Europe, there was no upsurge of anti-Semitism in Russia during the war in Gaza earlier this year.

How can American Jews be of support to the Russian Jewish community?

Our two communities need to speak candidly, listen to each other's concerns and work together to find answers to our common problems. Joining together to memorialize the killing fields around the FSU and the millions of Jews killed there, is one cause that we can certainly unite around.

#13
Russia's NGOs: strangled by red tape
By Olga Gnezdilova
OpenDemocracy.net, April 29, 2009

Official paranoia about spy mania, orange revolutions and terrorist threats is such that Russia's post-communist NGO sector faces surreal bureaucratic ordeals in order to survive, according to Olga Gnezdilova, a lawyer from Voronezh.

On 18 April 2006 the "new law on non-commercial organisations" came into force. This involved significant changes to the activities of non-government organisations (NGOs).

The amendments to the law went through parliament in 2006 in an atmosphere fraught with suspicion. Outright accusations were flying around that human rights advocates were hand in glove with foreign intelligence and top politicians made speeches about the need to fight terrorism and orange revolutions.

Since then, despite NGOs having been under intense scrutiny, not a single terrorist or extremist group has been uncovered, unless you count Tyumen's Lesbian, Bisexual, Gay and Transgender organisation "Rainbow House". They were refused registration for "undermining the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Russia by reducing its population".

Although no terrorists have been found, NGOs have been having serious difficulties in setting up and registering. It became much harder to make changes to an NGO's charter, or to register a new address or director. Directors started being liable for criminal proceedings. The authorities have started searching their offices. NGOs have also been forced to pay tax on their funds, as the government has reduced from 101 to 12 the list of international organisations entitled to receive money without having to pay a 24% tax on profits. The media have meanwhile kept on discrediting NGOs and accusing them of extremism.

In May 2008, there was a glimmer of hope that the situation might change. On 12 May President Dmitri Medvedev removed the registration and monitoring of NGOs from the Federal Registration Service (FRS) and transferred it to the Justice Ministry and its regional branches. Many took this to be the president's way of trying to resolve the standoff between the organisations. This had been going on ever since the changes to NGO legislation were introduced, when the FRS was granted unprecedented monitoring rights.

But the hopes vested in President Medvedev were soon dashed. The Justice Ministry turned out to wield exactly the same powers as the FRS. Indeed, in many regions it was the same people doing the monitoring.

Death by bureaucracy

Organisations are still finding it hard to register. The Justice Ministry has a chart of its "Key Performance Indicators" on its official website. This chart contains a quota for the number of voluntary and religious organisations which will be denied registration in 2008-9. That figure is 1,400.

The procedure for registering changes of director and address is also laid down by law, and they may not be granted at all. This procedure often drags on for several months and paralyses the work of the NGO. For instance, on 8 May 2008 the Voronezh Regional FRS refused to register a new director of the organisation "Free University", which is engaged in further education. However, the letter only arrived on 26 May. The refusal was appealed at the FRS and the complaint was upheld. Voronezh officials continued refusing to register the new director until September 2008, which meant no one could sign any of the necessary documents and the organisation was unable to operate.

In recent years communications from the Justice Ministry regional branches have come to read like reports of socialist competitions. For the success of a regional branch is clearly being measured by how many organisations have been inspected or prosecuted. In 2008, for example, the Nizhny Novgorod regional branch of the Justice Ministry issued 2,541 warnings related to infringements of the law. There were 961 warnings to voluntary organisations, 311 to religious organisations, 1246 to NGOs and 23 to regional branches of political parties - an increase of 452% over 2007 figures.

NGOs receiving funding from abroad continue to attract the special attention of the registration bodies. On 29 April FRS representatives in the Republic of Chuvashia announced that this year there would be compulsory checks to ensure that funds received had been spent as originally intended. There are 5 such organisations in Chuvashia at present.

The chart on the Justice Ministry website shows that the number of warnings, reports of breaking the law, notifications or orders to cease operations planned for 2008 was 10,000. The same plan indicates that not one appeal by an NGO will be upheld by a court.

NGOs still have to submit duplicate reports to the tax authorities and the Justice Ministry. In 2008 there were attempts to develop new simplified report forms, but these have yet to be approved.

As of 1 January 2009, according to the State Registration Gazette, 219,802 Russian NGOs had been struck off the register for various reasons. Over 44,000 of these were as a result of applications to the court (usually by the FRS regional branches or the Justice Ministry) to have an organisation declared non-operational.

Most are struck off for failure to submit accounts, which is one of the 2006 amendments. But courts often do not investigate if an organisation has actually ceased operations. They may strike an NGO off the register simply for failing to submit accounts.

Writs issued by the Justice Ministry branch in the Nizhny Novgorod region in 2008 show that decisions were taken to close down 332 NGOs. The same office intends to initiate further closures of more than 130 NGOs.

A case was brought against Voronezh's Consumer Protection NGO requiring it to prove over an 18 month period that it was operational. The organisation had to submit to the court over 40 pages from the local press about its operations, as well as certificates from the city and regional authorities. This they did. None the less, the FRS representative, Natalia Urazova, still insisted on pursuing the court case. It was a "matter of principle" for the regional FRS, she maintained. However, the court came to no conclusion and the case was closed on the grounds that the body monitoring the NGO had changed in May 2008.

Fantastical redefinitions

Recently there has been a move to close down NGOs engaged in outreach activities, such as seminars, training etc. The problem was discussed in April at a joint meeting of the Public Chamber Committee on the development of civil society and the FRS Community Council. Members of the Chamber discussed a change that has been slipped through which distinguishes between 'outreach' and 'educational activity'. Educational activity must have an approved programme, an exam and a diploma. It also has to have a licence, which is very difficult to arrange. Seminars and training, on the other hand, do not require the NGO to have a licence.

Data from the Public Chamber show that education and academic research are the main areas of activity for almost half of all NGOs (46%). Thus, broadening the definition of educational activity so that more NGOs will need a licence threatens the existence of half the organisations.

Spy Mania

Since 2006 the work of NGOs has been dogged by "spy mania". On 13 March the head of the Voronezh Regional FRS, Inna Demidova, organised a press conference in Voronezh. One of the topics was the "Illegal Financing of NGOs by Western Intelligence Agencies". When journalists tried to find out how many Voronezh organisations were illegally financed by Western secret services, and which ones, Demidova gave no reply. She merely complained that several unscrupulous NGOs did not submit their accounts on time or failed to do them at all. The media were not present at the press conference, but they noted this as the key issue.

In April the head of the Russian FSB, Nikolai Patrushev, announced at a meeting of the National Anti-terrorist Committee that "individual foreign NGOs provide information support to terrorists". Although he did not give any specific facts, he was undoubtedly sending a signal to government officials who work with NGOs.

Many NGOs had great hopes of working with the Justice Ministry. But the civil sector does not have a hope of being able to develop unless there is significant change. This cannot happen unless the laws governing the authorities monitoring the sector are amended. Leading politicians are going to have to re-assess their attitude to NGOs before this can take place. Until then, these organisations will struggle to survive.

Olga Gnezdilova is a lawyer in Voronezh, Russia. She is legal counsel for the Voronezh/Black Earth inter-regional Human Rights Group.

#14

Keeping the Nuclear Balance Balanced

By Yevgeny Kozhokin

Moscow Times, April 30, 2009

The United States has always focused on improving its nuclear weapons as a key component of its military strategy. Even during the late 1980s and early 1990s, when the Soviet Union was deep in crisis and conducted a political course amenable to Washington, the U.S. leadership increased its advantage over Moscow in terms of nuclear strength. Under the 1991 U.S. national security strategy, the modernization of its land-based intercontinental ballistic missiles, strategic bombers and nuclear missile-equipped submarines has vital significance for enforcing deterrence in the 21st century.

After the Soviet collapse, the United States and Russia declared a strategic partnership and signed the NATO-Russia Founding Act of May 1997. Nonetheless, Washington still maintained that its U.S. nuclear arsenal in Europe -- about 400 warheads scattered in six NATO countries -- was needed since Russia's military potential would remain an unknown for a long time to come. In real political terms, Russia's nuclear capabilities were viewed as a threat, even as the number of its warheads decreased.

During the past 10 years, U.S.-led wars in Yugoslavia and Iraq, in addition to some key scientific breakthroughs in defense technology, set the stage for a new phase in U.S. military policy.

At the same time, the United States continued to modernize and strengthen its nuclear potential. As part of this modernization, the United States started building a limited missile defense system. This process started during the administration of President Bill Clinton and, for all intents and purposes, bypassed the 1972 Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty that the United States signed with the Soviet Union. The United States' missile defense strategy was officially declared in December 2001, when then-President George W. Bush informed Russia of the U.S. withdrawal from the ABM Treaty.

Bush and his Cabinet members made it clear that arms control treaties would be useful only to the extent that they served the national interests of the United States. Neoconservatives were intent on maximizing security for the United States without regard to the negative reactions from other global powers.

The withdrawal from the ABM Treaty has laid the groundwork for the United States to develop a global missile defense system that may fully undercut China's nuclear-deterrence capabilities and significantly undercut Russia's. U.S. military strength clearly surpasses that of every other country, and to make it even stronger it is attempting to create a global missile defense system that could effectively make the United States impregnable -- not only to a first strike but to a counterstrike as well.

The United States' adamant refusal to ratify the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty underscores its desire to develop a new generation of nuclear weapons. Although the United States has observed the moratorium on underground tests, it has been able to effectively achieve the same goals through highly advanced computer simulation of nuclear tests. The U.S. National Nuclear Security Agency commissioned a supercomputer this year that is capable of carrying out 20 quadrillion operations per second -- by far the fastest in the world.

At the same time, the United States is planning to develop a huge missile defense system to be deployed on both land and ships across the globe. The U.S. missile defense technology has proven to be very effective in a series of tests since 2005. In 27 missile launches, interceptors shot down 26 of them.

In fall 2008, the Pentagon and White House planned the budget for the next financial year. With the support of Democrats in both houses of Congress, a 3 percent increase in military spending for 2009 was approved. Nevertheless, President Barack Obama will be looking for ways to cut military costs, and there is a chance that in tandem with new U.S.-Russian disarmament initiatives, Washington might reconsider its strategy for deploying a global missile defense system.

At present, the Obama administration is thoroughly evaluating the effectiveness, costs and benefits of its plans to expand missile defense systems -- both in Poland and the Czech Republic and beyond. During this evaluation process, Washington will be negotiating with Moscow and at the same time using all of its reconnaissance tools available to determine the exact strength of Russia's nuclear forces and what will be required, in terms of missile defense, to undermine them.

When speaking about missile defense, the difference between an offensive and defensive weapons system becomes blurred. The danger of shifting the strategic balance of power was reflected in a joint declaration made by President Dmitry Medvedev and Obama on April 1.

It is clear that difficult negotiations are required to settle the thorny issues on the U.S.-Russian agenda. Every country in the world has an interest in seeing these negotiations result in a firm commitment by the United States to preserve the global balance of power.

Yevgeny Kozhokin is a professor at Moscow State University and a member of the presidium of the Council for Foreign and Defense Policy.

#15
Russia takes control of rebel borders with Georgia
By Oleg Shchedrov
Reuters, April 30, 2009

MOSCOW - Russia took formal control over the de-facto borders of Georgia's rebel regions on Thursday a week before NATO military exercises in Georgia that President Dmitry Medvedev said amounted to a challenge from the West.

Medvedev signed pacts giving Russia direct control over the borders of the tiny rebel regions of South Ossetia and Abkhazia, which were both recognized by Moscow as independent states after a brief war between Russia and Georgia last year.

Russia has sharply criticized NATO military exercises that are due to begin on May 6 in Georgia, a crucial transit route for Caspian Sea oil and gas to Europe.

"The planned NATO exercises are provocative, no matter how hard our Western partners try to persuade us of the opposite," Medvedev said after signing the security pacts.

"Those who are taking these decisions will carry full responsibility for any negative consequences," he said.

Under the security deals, Russia gets formal control over the regions' borders for at least five years and the regions will have no jurisdiction over the Russian border guard posts.

Tensions over Georgia have been running high since Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili's failed bid to retake the pro-Moscow breakaway region of South Ossetia in August.

Russia repelled the attack but provoked international condemnation for driving its troops further into Georgian territory and then recognizing South Ossetia and Abkhazia as independent states.

SPY SCANDAL

The war soured Russia's relations with the West and disagreements over Georgia could become a sticking point in efforts to improve ties with U.S. President Barack Obama.

A NATO diplomat told Reuters on Thursday that the alliance has ordered the expulsion of two Russian diplomats over a spy scandal in which an Estonian official was jailed for passing secrets to Moscow.

"Two Russian diplomats have been told they are not welcome here," the diplomat said, speaking on condition of anonymity. The pair were attached to the Russian mission to NATO.

NATO ordered the diplomats out on Wednesday, the same day the alliance resumed formal talks with Russia at ambassadorial level, eight months after contacts were suspended over Russia's war with Georgia.

NATO says it does not understand why Moscow is upset by the long-planned military exercises involving 1,300 troops from 19 countries from May 6 to June 1.

Russia says the war games encourage Saakashvili to rearm and Moscow has complained that Georgia is massing troops at its de-facto borders with Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Georgia has also accused Russia of gathering forces close to the borders.

NATO says the exercises, to be held 20 km (12 miles) east of the capital Tbilisi, will be based on a fictitious U.N.-mandated, NATO-led crisis response operation and will not involve heavy weaponry.

#16

FSU Professionals Give and Receive During Visit to US World Union for Progressive Judaism, April 30, 2009

Five professionals working with the Progressive Jewish movements in the former Soviet Union recently traveled to Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, and to the San Francisco Bay area in order to become better acquainted with Reform congregations in the US – and to better acquaint the members of these congregations with the fact that Reform Judaism is flourishing in the FSU thanks to almost two decades of non-stop efforts by the World Union.

The five mission participants were Irina Belskaya, education coordinator for the movement in Belarus; Alexander Haydar, executive director of the movement in Ukraine; Rabbi Mikhail Kapustin, spiritual leader of the Progressive congregation in Simferopol and responsible for all congregations in the Crimea; Alla Mittelman, programming director for Congregation Shaarei Shalom in St. Petersburg; and Evgenia Rozental, executive director of the World Union's Moscow office and director of fundraising within the FSU. They were joined by Alex Kagan, the World Union's Jerusalem-based director for the FSU.

The organizers of the Pittsburgh segment of the mission were Anne Molloy, a vice-chair of the World Union's executive board and chairwoman of its FSU Committee; Henry Posner; Michael Steiner, donor development director at the United Jewish Federation of Pittsburgh; and Sue Linzer, senior manager of overseas operations at the Federation. Organizing the Bay area segment were Linda Levenson of Congregation Shir Hadash in Los Gatos, and Cherie Half of Congregation

Beth Am in Los Altos Hills, both of whom are local advocates on behalf of the World Union's FSU programs and members of its North American Council.

During the intensive two-week mission, the delegation visited Reform and other Jewish congregations and institutions, and met with officials from local Jewish federations. They also raised funds for ongoing Progressive projects in the FSU, especially the summer and winter camp programs of Netzer Olami, the World Union's international Zionist youth movement.

Despite budget cuts virtually across the board due to the economic downturn, the delegation's presentation to the funding committee of Pittsburgh's Jewish Federation led to a decision to maintain existing support levels for the World Union's Moscow-based Institute for Modern Jewish Studies, which trains community workers for Progressive communities throughout the FSU. The delegation also spent time there undergoing donor development training with Steiner, who traveled to Moscow last year to lead a seminar on local fund-raising (see WUPJnews #334). Mission participants got a chance to test their fund-raising skills by taking part in the Federation's annual Fund Fest and telethon.

While in the Bay area, members of the delegation participated in the URJ's Pacific Central West Regional Biennial/Kallah. Several members remained to make a presentation on Shabbat, while others fanned out to area congregations for presentations of their own. The group also visited and made presentations at Stanford University's Hillel, Palo Alto's Kehillah High Jewish day school, and the city's newly-constructed Jewish Community Center. Members were also interviewed by Jewish newspapers in San Francisco and San Jose.