

WASHINGTON, D.C. September 11, 2009



TO: NCSJ Leadership and Interested Parties

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

In Brief: Remembering September 11th, Iran Advocacy Day

Dear Friend,

It has been 8 years since terrorists launched the largest attack ever in the United States. Memorial ceremonies are being held around the country today to remember those who lost their lives. September 11, 2001 changed our country forever and forever changed how we deal with terrorism.

Yesterday, hundreds of Jewish leaders from around the country gathered in Washington, DC to press for greater efforts to prevent Iran from obtaining nuclear weapons. As one of the primary sponsors of the National Jewish Leadership Advocacy Day on Iran, it was gratifying to join so many in our community to make a united statement on such a critical issue at such a critical time. A nuclear armed Iran benefits no one. It would increase problems in an already volatile part of the world, it would endanger the security of our allies, most significantly Israel, and would harm chances to achieve peace in the Middle East.

The event's participants heard from both House Majority Leader Steny Hoyer (D-MD) and Minority Leader John Boehner (R-MD) as well as the Chairman and ranking member of the House Foreign Affairs Committee, Howard Berman (D-CA) and Ileana Ros-Lehtinen (R-FL). There were presentations made by senior administration officials and a panel of Jewish professionals that helped prepare everyone for meetings with their Members of Congress later in the day. In addition, key embassies were visited, including Russia, to stress the need for international cooperation and support for stronger measures in preventing Iran from achieving its goal. In this week's update, there are a number of stories about the Advocacy Day.

Earlier in the week, NCSJ Chairman Richard Stone and I were invited to attend a reception to welcome the Jewish New Year at the home of Vice President and Mrs. Biden. We had the opportunity to thank Vice President Biden for his long time support of Jewish concerns in the former Soviet Union.

Sincerely,



Mark B. Levin
Executive Director



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

NCSJ WEEKLY NEWS BRIEF
Washington, D.C. September 11, 2009

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#1a**Shoah memorial unveiled in Ukraine
JTA, September 8, 2009**

KIEV, Ukraine -- A memorial to victims of the Holocaust was unveiled in a Ukrainian city whose mayor shocked the Jewish community with anti-Semitic statements.

Rabbi Berl Lazar, chief rabbi of Russia, was among those who attended Monday's ceremony in Uzhgorod, Transcarpathia at the site of a mass grave. He was joined by other rabbis, representatives of the local Jewish community, survivors and other residents of Uzhgorod and journalists.

Lazar said he attended the ceremony to express his solidarity with the Jewish community of Uzhgorod, following several xenophobic and anti-Semitic statements made in August by Sergey Ratushnyak, mayor of Uzhgorod.

Prosecutors charged Ratushnyak with inciting ethnic hatred after complaints were filed by the Jewish community. The investigation was opened after Ratushnyak assailed presidential candidate Arseniy Yatsenyuk, attacking his Jewish background, and assaulted one of his campaign workers on Aug. 6.

"I understand that this is hard time for the city's Jewish community, you are shocked by the case but Jews all over the world support you now," said Lazar.

Rabbi Lazar and local rabbis refused to comment on Ratushnyak's xenophobic statements, saying that it is a political issue. Meanwhile, Rabbi Moshe Moskovich, chief rabbi of Kharkov and region, said during a news conference in Uzhgorod Monday that the Jewish community of Ukraine is annoyed with the mayor's statements, and that Jews are waiting for Ratushnyak's apology.

Rabbi Lazar also rejected an invitation from Ratushnyak to meet him receive a city award.

"It is impossible to get an award from a person who outraged not only me but Jews all over the world. It is impossible to get an award from the hands of a person who doesn't respect you," said Lazar.

Meanwhile Chief Rabbi of Ukraine Yaakov Bleich told JTA that Lazar is always welcome in Ukraine but added that "anti-Semitism is more widespread in Russia than in Ukraine."

#1b

Russia denies ship carried missiles for Iran JTA, September 8, 2009

JERUSALEM -- Russia denied that a cargo ship reportedly seized by pirates was carrying weapons bound for Iran.

Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov made the denial Tuesday after an article printed over the weekend by the Sunday Times of London, which reported that the ship called the Arctic Sea was carrying Russian-made S-300 anti-aircraft missiles. Officially, the ship was carrying \$1.7 million worth of lumber.

The ship reportedly was hijacked near Sweden on July 24 and was recovered by the Russian Navy in mid-August.

The Times report cited Russian and Israeli sources as saying the Mossad, acting with the cooperation of the Russian government, set up the hijacking to stop Iran from receiving the weapons without embarrassing Russia.

Russia had agreed to sell the sophisticated missiles to Iran several years ago, but Israeli President Shimon Peres announced Aug. 18, the day after the ship had been recovered, that Russian President Dmitry Medvedev had agreed to review the sale.

#1c

Chief Rabbi of Russia Denounces Anti-Semitism FJC, September 9 2009

UZHGOROD, Ukraine – On September 7, at the invitation of the Jewish community of Uzhgorod, Chief Rabbi of Russia Berel Lazar took part in a ceremony for the unveiling of a memorial plaque to Holocaust victims, which was erected on the site of a mass grave. At that time, Chief Rabbi Lazar also denounced anti-Semitic remarks made by Uzhgorod Mayor Sergei Ratushnyak.

“The Holocaust is not just a tragic event, but a direct consequence of the ideology that prevailed at that time. People who are now coming forward with xenophobic, anti-Semitic slogans appear to be cranks and few people take them seriously. But in fact, every word that they utter must be considered seriously and people should react appropriately. This is why today is so important, so that people learn tolerance and mutual respect, so that no seeds will be sown to give germ to hatred in the hearts of the younger generation,” commented Rabbi Lazar. “The fact that, in the twenty-first century, the head of any European town is making statements of this nature is unacceptable. If this had happened in Russia, the reaction of the federal government would be extremely tough and would be dealt with in a timely manner.”

In the evening, the former Choral Synagogue, which now hosts the Uzhgorod Philharmonia, hosted a communal dinner. While addressing the attendees, Rabbi Lazar stated, “I understand that the Jewish community of Uzhgorod is experiencing a difficult time and that you are shocked by this incident. Know that Jews around the world are supporting you at this time.”

During the course of the evening, the Chief Rabbi also said that the mayor had offered to present him with a medal as an Honorary Guest of Uzhgorod. However, Rabbi Lazar declined this award, stating, “To accept an award from a man who has offended not only me, but also Jews worldwide, is impossible. I am not able to receive an award from the hands of a man who does not respect me. I cannot accept it until such a time that I witness his regret and a change in the mayor’s position.”

#1d

**Ukrainian mayor denies honoring rabbi
JTA, September 10, 2009**

KIEV, Ukraine -- A Ukrainian mayor says reports that he wanted to honor Russia's chief rabbi are false.

Uzhgorod Mayor Sergey Ratushnyak, under fire for anti-Semitic remarks aimed at a Ukrainian presidential candidate, on Wednesday denied reports that he had intended to bestow a city honor on Rabbi Berel Lazar during his visit Monday to the western Ukraine city.

"It's total nonsense," the mayor told a local newspaper. "We gave the rabbi no medals or honors.

"The only thing we can give a rabbi is a one-way ticket," the ua-reporter.com quoted Ratushnyak as saying.

Media reports, based on the accounts of witnesses who attended Monday's ceremony unveiling a new Holocaust memorial, had said that Ratushnyak's representative announced the mayor planned to present Lazar with the city's Medal of Honor.

The mayor reportedly was not invited to the unveiling, which was held near a mass grave of more than 200 Jews murdered by the Nazis during the Holocaust.

Lazar said he attended the dedication of the new memorial to express his solidarity with the Jewish community of Uzhgorod following several xenophobic and anti-Semitic statements made by Ratushnyak in August.

Prosecutors have charged Ratushnyak with inciting ethnic hatred for allegedly assailing a volunteer for presidential candidate Arseniy Yatsenyuk, and attacking his Jewish background, calling him "an impudent little Jew."

Andrey Gloster, press secretary for the chief rabbi of Russia, told the Interfax news agency that it was "very difficult to prove that someone from the mayor's office approached Rabbi Lazar."

#1e

Russia's Putin says not yet decided on 2012 election

Reuters, September 11, 2009

NOVO-OGARYOVO, Russia -- Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin said on Friday he had not yet decided whether to run for president in 2012 when Dmitry Medvedev's current term ends.

Asked whether he would run again for president, Putin said: "My term expired and I thought Medvedev was the best person to replace me and I backed him.

"In 2012, we will think together and will take into account the realities of the time, our personal plans, the political landscape and the United Russia party and we will take the decision," Putin told academics and reporters from the Valdai discussion group at his Novo-Ogaryovo residence outside Moscow.

Putin left the Kremlin in May 2008 after eight years as president and handed over power to Medvedev, whom Putin had handpicked as his successor and backed in a presidential election.

Medvedev prompted speculation about a Putin return to the Kremlin last year when he unexpectedly proposed lengthening the presidential term to six years from four.

#2

Jewish leaders converging on D.C. for advocacy day on Iran

By Eric Fingerhut

JTA, September 9, 2009

WASHINGTON -- Top U.S. congressional leaders and an Obama administration official are scheduled to meet with Jewish leaders to discuss how to stop Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons.

Rep. Howard Berman (D-Calif.), chairman of the House of Representatives Foreign Affairs Committee, which will handle legislation dealing with Iran sanctions, and the top two GOP lawmakers in the House, Minority Leader John Boehner (R-Ohio) and Minority Whip Eric Cantor (R-Va.), will speak to and take questions Thursday from more than 300 Jewish communal leaders in Washington as part of the National Jewish Leadership Advocacy Day on Iran.

Other congressional leaders and an administration official also are expected to join the event, although their appearances were not officially confirmed as of Wednesday morning.

Most of the participants in Thursday's event also will visit Capitol Hill to lobby lawmakers to adopt sanctions legislation now before Congress, while some others will meet with officials at foreign embassies -- including Italy, India and Russia -- to drive home the importance of a united international front against the Iranian regime, organizers said.

The advocacy day is a key element in the major push to raise awareness on the Iran issue targeted at both the Jewish community and the rest of the country. It is being spearheaded by the Inter-agency Task Force on Iran, which is led by the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations, the Jewish Council for Public Affairs, United Jewish Communities and **NCSJ: Advocates on behalf of Jews in Russia, Ukraine, the Baltic States and Eurasia.**

It comes a few days after nine rabbinical and synagogue organizations representing four Jewish movements issued a joint statement calling for American Jews to "make Iran a matter of the highest urgency," and two weeks before a Sept. 24 rally in New York protesting Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's speech at the United Nations General Assembly.

Leaders of Thursday's event say they will urge the passage of Iran sanctions legislation already pending before Congress, including the Iran Refined Petroleum Sanctions Act that would place sanctions on companies helping Iran to import and produce refined petroleum. But they also stress that their message is broader than just sanctions.

“Sanctions are a vehicle,” said Mark Levin, executive director of NCSJ and coordinator of the event. But the advocacy day also will serve “to try to bring a much greater awareness of the problem.”

Levin said it also will provide “an opportunity to present a unified message to the administration” regarding “our concern about a nuclear armed Iran, and what it means for the United States and the rest of the world.”

Michael Kotzin, executive vice president of the Jewish Federation of Metropolitan Chicago, said the leaders coming to Washington will be diverse in geography and age, with lay and professional staff from federations, community relations councils and national groups from as far away as the West Coast. Some students also are expected to attend.

#3

Preparing For ‘Plan C’ On Iran

By James D. Besser

NY Jewish Week, September 9, 2009

Several hundred Jewish leaders from around the country will spill into Washington on Thursday for a “national leadership advocacy day on Iran” that many hope will spark a genuine grass-roots movement akin to the Soviet Jewry movement of the 1980s.

And while one ostensible goal of the fly-in is to press for new sanctions legislation pending in Congress, there is a broader, unspoken purpose: to ensure strong official U.S. support if Israel feels compelled to use military force to damage Iran’s nuclear program.

Beneath the surface, this week’s action is “designed to impress upon people in Washington that somebody has to deal with the problem — and that all the moves up until this point have clearly not addressed the problem in a satisfactory way,” said Shoshana Bryen, senior director for security policy at the Jewish Institute for National Security Affairs (JINSA). “The Jews aren’t coming here to ask the administration to bomb Iran, but I also don’t think they’re coming here specifically asking for sanctions, either, because we know sanctions haven’t worked. What we’re left with is that they’re preparing the ground so that no matter what happens, nobody can say they weren’t warned.”

The stepped-up Iran action by Jewish groups comes as the International Atomic Energy Agency admits that the UN monitoring group is in “stalemate” with Iran and amid reports Iran is beefing up its anti-aircraft missile program — perhaps in anticipation of an Israeli strike.

It also comes as the early September international deadline for progress on the diplomatic front passes — with Iran’s leaders saying that while they’re happy to negotiate, their nuclear program won’t be on the table.

The most specific item on Thursday’s agenda is lobbying on behalf of the Iran Petroleum Sanctions Act, but organizers stress that sanctions are just part of the overall action plan.

“In our statement of purpose, we intentionally use the word ‘measures’ instead of ‘sanctions,’ because measures can be positive as well as negative,” said Martin Raffel, senior vice president of the Jewish Council for Public Affairs (JCPA). Raffel played a major role in drafting that statement. “We want to make it clear: we’re not against engagement, diplomacy or offering incentives. If the international community can find the right combination of carrots and sticks to convince the Iranian regime to step off the perch it’s on, we will be the first to congratulate them.”

“As a community, we are taking an overall approach,” said Mark Levin, executive director of NCSJ, a group focused on Eastern European human rights. Levin is coordinating the Washington event. “Sanctions are one important mechanism. We recognize that there has to be greater support from other countries, but what is the alternative? To throw up our hands and say Iran will be a nuclear nation, with all that implies?”

The new Iran legislation, sponsored by Rep. Howard Berman (D-Calif.), the chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee, would impose sanctions on companies that are involved in exporting refined petroleum products to Iran or in expanding Iran’s domestic refining capacity.

The reasoning: Iran may be rich in petroleum reserves, but it lacks refining capacity. Berman refused to push the bill when it was introduced in the spring to “give the administration’s efforts to engage Iran every possible chance to succeed, within a reasonable time frame,” he said during a hearing on the issue.

With the international deadline for a positive response passing and no positive response from Tehran, Berman has said he’s now ready to advance the legislation.

But with Russia and China eager to do business with oil-wealthy Iran and European companies still reaping profits from their dealings with Iranian interests, Jewish leaders aren’t kidding themselves that creating airtight sanctions will be easy.

“Sanctions won’t solve the problem — but the absence of sanctions won’t either,” said David Harris, executive director of the American Jewish Committee. “If the message to Iran is that they can have their yellow cake and eat it too, then the game is over.”

While sanctions must be part of the policy palette, along with diplomacy and the prospect of negotiations, “the administration must be ready with a ‘Plan C’” if negotiations and sanctions fail to deter Iran, Harris said.

In private, many Jewish leaders believe that Plan C inevitably means some kind of military action — probably not American, since U.S. forces face a worsening and increasingly unpopular war in Afghanistan.

Israeli leaders have repeatedly hinted they might be forced to take on the job themselves — and to do that, they need American support, at best, acquiescence at the least.

So one function of the heightened activism may be to prepare the ground for whatever comes next if sanctions — as many predict — don’t work, and to ensure American support for any action Israel deems necessary.

This week’s mobilization and demonstrations scheduled for Sept. 24, when Iranian president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad is scheduled to be in New York for the opening of the UN General Assembly, also reflect the first step in an effort to make Iran advocacy a mass movement on a par with the mobilization on behalf of Soviet Jewry two decades ago.

Thursday’s Jewish fly-in is one element in “channeling the sense of growing anxiety about the Iran issue into constructive strategies,” Harris said. “It’s very much in the spirit of the Soviet Jewry movement.”

It’s probably no accident that the coordinator of this week’s fly-in is NCSJ’s Levin, who was a key organizer of the 1987 Washington rally that was the capstone to a movement that galvanized a broad swath of the Jewish community and, most experts agree, had a significant impact on U.S. policy. (The AJC’s Harris, another participant this week, was the overall coordinator of that rally).

And it’s no coincidence a joint statement by rabbinic and synagogue organizations representing all four streams of Judaism, issued last week, called for a variety of actions by communities across the country, including having synagogues post signs warning of the Iran threat and making more extensive use of rabbis to spread the message — both hallmarks of the Soviet Jewry movement.

"It is a shift in activism; we want to expand it into the grass roots as much as possible," said the JCPA's Raffel. "We want our leaders to understand there is broad support in the American public — Jewish and non-Jewish — to bring this situation to a resolution. It is time for the Jewish community, as well as others who are concerned about Iran's nuclear program, to move full force into the arena."

#4

Berman: Ready to move ahead on Iran sanctions

By Eric Fingerhut

JTA, September 10, 2009

WASHINGTON -- The chairman of the House Foreign Affairs Committee says he will move forward on Iran sanctions legislation next month "absent some compelling evidence why I should do otherwise."

U.S. Rep. Howard Berman (D-Calif.), speaking Thursday in Washington at the National Jewish Leadership Advocacy Day on Iran, told more than 300 Jewish leaders that he will mark up the Iran Refined Petroleum Sanctions Act in October and "begin the process of tightening the screws on Tehran" if Iran "does not reverse course."

The legislation would allow the sanctioning of companies that help Iran import or produce refined petroleum, which is seen as potentially having a large impact on Iran's economy because the country imports 40 percent of its refined petroleum.

Berman said the clock has "almost run out" on Iran.

"If the Iranians are going to engage in a meaningful and significant way that will spell the end of their nuclear enrichment program, we'll open a new chapter with them," he said. "But let's clarify 'meaningful' -- we're not going to be conned by an Iranian rope-a-dope, its stalling efforts. We have no intention of spending months analyzing old proposals which are offered merely to delay imposition of sanctions."

The Obama administration has signaled that it will reconsider its efforts to engage Iran on its pursuit of nuclear weapons if no progress has been made by the end of September.

In addition to Berman, Jewish community leaders heard House Majority Leader Steny Hoyer (D-Md.) and House Minority Leader John Boehner (R-Ohio) both say they also were ready to proceed with sanctions legislation. Hoyer, speaking before Berman, said he had told his colleague that "once you move it, my intention is to bring it to the floor shortly thereafter."

Also speaking were House Minority Whip Eric Cantor (R-Va.), House Foreign Affairs Committee ranking member Rep. Ileana Ros-Lehtinen (R-Fla.) and Rep. Nita Lowey (D-N.Y.)

#5

US, rights groups criticise Kazakh activist jailing

By Olga Orininskaya

Reuters, September 4, 2009

ALMATY - The United States and international human rights groups on Friday expressed concern about the jailing of a Kazakh rights activist over a road accident and colleagues denounced his trial as politically motivated.

Kazakhstan's human rights record has come under close scrutiny this year because the ex-Soviet nation will take over the rotating chairmanship of the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) in 2010.

A Kazakh court on Thursday sentenced human rights campaigner and government critic Yevgeny Zhovtis to four years in prison for violation of traffic regulations following a July accident when he fatally hit a pedestrian on a highway. He was accused of failing to make an emergency stop.

The 54-year-old said he was blinded by the lights of oncoming cars and could not have prevented the accident. There were no allegations that he was intoxicated or speeding.

"In recent days, we have expressed our concerns about this case and urged the Kazakhstani authorities to provide Mr. Zhovtis access to fair legal proceedings, consistent with Kazakhstani law," the U.S. embassy in Kazakhstan said in a statement.

"We will continue to make the same request during the appeals process."

Rights groups have called the verdict politically motivated.

"The judge's unwillingness to consider important evidence from Zhovtis' lawyer made it clear that this was really a choreographed political trial," New York-based Human Rights Watch (HRW) quoted Andrea Berg, its Central Asia researcher, as saying in a statement.

"The verdict is a terrible blow for everyone promoting human rights in Kazakhstan."

Another U.S.-based human rights group, Freedom House, has earlier called the two-day trial in the Central Asian state "a miscarriage of justice".

OSCE ROLE CHALLENGED

"We protest against this obviously unlawful and unfair sentence... and demand an urgent review of this verdict and an immediate release of Yevgeny Zhovtis," a group of human rights campaigners from Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan and Russia said in a statement.

The Kazakh opposition has on a number of occasions accused the government of using trumped-up charges to jail or silence critics of President Nursultan Nazarbayev who has run the country since 1989, a charge the government denies.

"We note that there will inevitably be intense international scrutiny placed on how the appeals process will be conducted because of Mr. Zhovtis' prominence in the international human rights community and as Kazakhstan prepares to assume the Chairmanship of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe in 2010," the U.S. embassy said.

HRW said that while Kazakhstan "has made some modest human rights improvements in the past several months, the changes fall far short of what is needed to guarantee that key rights are respected."

"We are shocked at how easy it is for the government to violate basic human rights just a few months before it will chair the OSCE," HRW's Berg said.

"Kazakhstan clearly is not ready to take on a role as important as the OSCE chairmanship."

#6

Netanyahu: 20 years after Iron Curtain collapsed, it's clear Russian-speaking aliya 'rescued the State of Israel'

**By Haviv Rettig Gur and Herb Keinon
Jerusalem Post, September 6, 2009**

The nearly one million immigrants from the former Soviet Union who have come to Israel since 1989 "rescued" the country and should be considered "one of the greatest miracles that happened to the state," Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu told the cabinet on Sunday.

He spoke at a special session devoted entirely to marking 20 years since the beginning of the massive Russian-speaking aliya.

Twenty years ago this month, Poland swore in the first non-Communist government in the Eastern bloc, as the Iron Curtain crumbled and state after state fell to the mostly peaceful wave of democratization and reform.

Netanyahu said the million olim from the FSU who have arrived since that period have "changed the face of Israeli society."

"The immigrants have integrated into the life of the country and have become a principal and important element in all aspects of life," he said.

St. Petersburg-born Immigrant Absorption Minister Sofa Landver (Israel Beiteinu) spoke at length in the meeting about the contributions of the Russian-speaking immigrants, citing the 23,000 doctors, 25,000 nurses, 108,000 engineers, 21,000 artists and 50,000 teachers Israel gained from absorbing so much of Soviet Jewry, together with the relative youth (71 percent were younger than 50) and rich education (70% possessed high school diplomas and academic training) of the olim.

Some 400,000 settled in the country's North and South, leading to the dramatic expansion and improvement of towns and infrastructure in the periphery, said Landver, who presented the figures to the cabinet together with her ministry's director-general, Lithuanian-born Dmitry Apartsev, who was part of that wave when he made aliya in January 1991.

The number of scientific studies published by Israeli universities rose by 91% since 1991, Landver said. She took the opportunity to complain about the difficulties Israel's seniority-based universities have had in absorbing the new scientists who contributed so much to the country's research output.

Science Minister Daniel Herschkowitz (Habayit Hayehudi) said the immigration wave had fundamentally changed the picture at the universities, where one of every four staff members is now a Russian-speaker, with a particularly high concentration in the exact sciences. For instance, he said, 60-70% of the math faculty at Ben-Gurion University is made up of native Russian-speakers.

The immigrants from the FSU have also had a major impact in the army, where one of every five soldiers is an immigrant, and 65% of those were native Russian speakers. Fifty percent of lone soldiers - those in the IDF without family in the country - were from Russia, he said.

Jewish Agency Chairman Natan Sharansky briefed the cabinet on optimistic figures for the continuation of FSU aliya. He said it was expected to rise by 20% in 2009 from the previous year's figure of some 3,000 immigrants, with the increase slightly higher among young Russian students and academics.

The main cause for the rise in aliya was the worldwide economic crisis, he told the cabinet. While almost one million Russian-speaking immigrants came to Israel over the last 20 years, another 600,000-700,000 went to the US and 200,000 to Germany.

Intelligence Agencies Minister Dan Meridor (Likud) praised then prime minister Yitzhak Shamir for making sure in 1989 that Washington would not declare Soviet Jews stateless refugees, an unpopular move in some circles at the time, but one that ensured that the majority of the immigrants would go to Israel, rather than to the US.

#7

**Russia's Patriarch Increasingly Becoming Major Force In Politics
By Brian Whitmore**

RFE/RL, September 6, 2009

When Patriarch Kirill visited Russia's largest shipyard in late August, he was greeted with full military honors.

As a brass band played at the Northern Shipyard in Severodvinsk, the leader of the Russian Orthodox Church strolled past a row of sailors in dress uniform, boarded a nuclear submarine, and presented the crew with an icon of the Mother of God.

He later said Russia's defense capabilities need to be bolstered by Orthodox Christian values.

"You should not be ashamed of going to church and teaching the Orthodox faith to your children," the patriarch told the Severodvinsk workers. "Then we shall have something to defend with our missiles."

Kirill's comments linking sacred Christian faith and secular nuclear might raised eyebrows, particularly among Russia's religious minorities. The event, analysts say, also served to illustrate the patriarch's growing political profile.

"Patriarch Kirill is very energetic and sees himself not only as a religious figure but also somebody who can play a role in secular affairs as well," says Boris Falikov, an associate professor of religious studies at the Russian State Humanities University in Moscow.

"Since the moment of his enthronement he has energetically engaged in church affairs, and has also sought out his own role in Russian politics."

Analysts say Kirill's relationship with Russia's secular authorities is a complex dance carried out in the context of centuries of close, but often troubled, ties -- including decades in which the church was suppressed under Soviet rule.

Falikov says Kirill is seeking to strike a difficult balance in his relations with the state as he carves out his own political role:

"He is finding a common language with the secular authorities, but at the same time understands that the church must not lose its autonomy and must not become an obedient tool of the Kremlin," Falikov says.

"But nevertheless, their interests often coincide because the church needs a lot from the state and the state is giving a lot to the church."

Soft-Power Tool

Kirill's political role was clearly on display during his recent high-profile trip to Ukraine, where he sought to unite the country's fractious Orthodox Christians who are split into parishes loyal to the Moscow Patriarchate and an autonomous Ukrainian Orthodox Church.

Many observers saw political undercurrents in Kirill's trip, which came as Moscow was engaged in a bitter struggle with the pro-Western government in Kyiv -- and came shortly after a visit to Ukraine by U.S. Vice President Joe Biden.

In a televised speech on July 28, Kirill implored Ukrainians not to sacrifice the common Orthodox Christian values they share with Russia in the pursuit of closer ties with Europe, a clear reference to Kyiv's efforts to join NATO and the European Union.

Father Ihor Yatsyv, press secretary for the head of the Ukrainian Greek-Catholic Church, Lubomyr Huzar, told RFE/RL's Russian Service that Kirill sounded like "a politician from Russia...who wants to establish a sphere of influence in Ukraine" rather than a religious leader.

"The visit was not just pastoral. It was political," Yatsyv said.

"Given Kirill's statements about two brotherly peoples that cannot be divided, one has to wonder whether he understands that Ukraine today is an independent country."

Falikov and others say Kirill had his own religious agenda in Ukraine -- uniting the Orthodox faithful -- but that this coincided with the secular interests of the Kremlin, mainly bringing Ukraine back into its sphere of influence.

"His visit to Ukraine is an example of when church politics works to the advantage of the Russian state," Falikov said.

"I don't think he allowed himself to be used as a tool [of the state], but was rather playing an autonomous role. In this case his interests as a church official overlapped with the state's interests."

In a recent commentary published in "The Moscow Times," Fyodor Lukyanov, editor of the journal "Russia In Global Affairs," called Kirill "a new public figure in Russia whose political weight and diplomatic skills surpass those of the secular authorities."

Lukyanov added that Kirill's ability to combine "tact and kind civility with a firmness of ideological positions" was an example "of the soft, nonstate power that Moscow has long been criticized for lacking."

A similar soft-power offensive will also likely be on display later this year when Kirill visits Georgia, a country that fought a bitter five-day war with Russia last summer and seeks to join NATO, but which also has a large and devout Orthodox Christian population.

There are also indications that Kirill's interests go beyond the former Soviet space.

Interfax reported on September 2 that Kirill supports the idea of helping ethnic Russians win election to legislative bodies in the European Union. After meeting with Tatiana Zhdanok, president of the European-Russian Alliance and a member of the European Parliament from Latvia, Kirill said he attaches "great importance to the cooperation of the Russian Orthodox Church and the political forces in Europe and are actively working in this direction."

Spheres Of Influence

But analysts say Kirill's political role is wider than just being a weapon in the Kremlin's soft-power arsenal.

Under a recent agreement with the ruling United Russia party, he has won the right to review and suggest changes to any legislation before the State Duma that is of particular interest to the church.

Analysts note, however, that Kirill's influence does not extend across the full range of issues before the legislature, but is very strong in a few select areas:

"Kirill has already received more from [President Dmitry] Medvedev than [his predecessor Patriarch Aleksy II] got from Putin during his whole presidency," says Nikolai Mitrokhin, a research fellow specializing in religious issues at the Center for Eastern European Studies at the University of Bremen in Germany.

"He is, nevertheless, someone who has influence over a very narrow sphere -- education, culture, spirituality -- but not more than this."

Kirill has already made it clear that he intends to use his growing influence to keep sex education out of Russia's schools.

In May, Russia ratified the European Social Charter, which calls for health education in schools, including sex education. Kirill is determined to make sure this doesn't happen when the Duma codifies the charter into Russian law.

The patriarch is also seeking to expand the teaching of Orthodox Christian culture in Russia's public schools and to have chaplains embedded with military units. Each of these initiatives is running into opposition in predominantly Muslim regions like Tatarstan.

But Kirill has also had his differences with the Kremlin.

In a recent interview with the magazine "Ekspert," Archbishop Hilarion, who heads the Moscow Patriarchate's Department of External Relations and is a close aide to Kirill, called the Soviet leader Josef Stalin "a spiritually deformed monster" who was "comparable to Hitler" and "unleashed a genocide against the people of his own country."

Mitrokhin says Hilarion and other clergy, who were products of Mikhail Gorbachev's glasnost period, have strong influence over the 62-year-old patriarch.

"The priests who are dealing with administrative issues came of age in the 1980s and 1990s. This generation, who are now 35-45 years old, are very anti-Stalinist. They were very influenced by the perestroika-era critique of the Stalin period," Mitrokhin says.

To a degree, this puts the Moscow Patriarchate at odds with some elements in the Kremlin who have been seeking to rehabilitate some elements of Stalinism as part of a new, nationalistic, Russian ideology.

Troubled History

The political influence of Russian Orthodox patriarchs has varied widely over the centuries. The church provided a key component of the ideological doctrine of "Orthodoxy, Autocracy, and Nationalism" that dominated Russia under the Romanov dynasty.

Most historians agree that the most powerful was Patriarch Filaret in the early 17th century, who was Russia's de facto ruler during the reign of his son, Tsar Mikhail I, the first monarch of the Romanov dynasty.

Mikhail was just 16 years old when he came to power following the Time of Troubles, a period of factional fighting and famine that nearly led to the collapse of the Russian state.

Other patriarchs have not fared so well when they tried to assert political authority. One example is Patriarch Nikon, who aspired to be a co-ruler with Tsar Aleksei in the mid-17th century. He was removed as patriarch and imprisoned as a simple monk in the Ferapontov Monastery in the northern Vologda region.

Tsar Peter I was mistrustful of church authorities and abolished the Moscow Patriarchate in 1721, replacing it with the Holy Governing Synod and bringing the church under greater control by secular authorities.

The Patriarchate was restored in 1917, but was again suspended by the Soviet authorities in 1925. It was reinstated for the last time in 1943 during World War II.

Most patriarchs have sought to accommodate Russia's secular rulers to varying degrees. The most notorious example is that of Patriarch Aleksey I, who was enthroned with the support of Stalin in 1945, toward the end of World War II.

Stalin had allowed the Russian Orthodox Church, which had been suppressed following the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution, to operate officially again starting in 1943, albeit under tight Soviet supervision. The move was seen as part of efforts to intensify patriotic support for the authorities during World War II and after.

The collaboration intensified under Aleksy I, whose detractors accused him of soiling the church by collaborating with the Communist authorities.

With Kirill's rising profile, there has been some speculation in the Russian media that the so-called diarchy of President Medvedev and Prime Minister Vladimir Putin might become a triumvirate.

Analysts dismiss such speculation as unrealistic, but adds that Kirill's influence is nevertheless likely to grow:

"This is not going to turn into a triumvirate," Falikov says. "But it is clear that Kirill aspires to increase the church's role not only in society but in politics as well. We can see this already in the first months of his patriarchy."

#8

Battered Russia finally detects green shoots

The country has been hit harder by recession than other Bric nations; it's vulnerable to oil and gas prices and exports

By Stuart Williams

AFP, September 6, 2009

Moscow: To the relief of its leaders, Russia is finally emerging from the worst economic crisis of the Vladimir Putin era, but the slowdown has done nothing to break its chronic dependence on hydrocarbons. Russia-which failed to implement significant economic reform during boom years over the last half decade-has been hit harder by the crisis than any other major developing economy with the possible exception of Turkey.

The depth of its slowdown has undermined the country's ambitions to be a major player in the nascent Bric group of the world's four major emerging economies it hopes will rival the West.

Fellow members Brazil, India and China are all emerging from the crisis with significantly less damage to growth rates.

"Russia's hard landing reveals the major weakness of an economic growth model based on commodity exports and massive foreign loan inflows," said Jean Michel Six, economist at Standard and Poor's. "Should economists now refer to BICs rather than Brics?" he asked.

The Russian economy shrank 9.8% in the first quarter on a 12-month basis and, according to preliminary data, by 10.9% in the second quarter.

Of major emerging economies, only Turkey fared worse in the first quarter, shrinking by 13.8%.

The crisis had dealt a major psychological blow to Russians who had grown used to high growth under the rule of its strongman president-turned-prime minister, Vladimir Putin, after the trauma of the 1998 financial crisis.

But gross domestic product (GDP) increased 7.5% in the second quarter from output in the first quarter and economists are expecting double-digit quarter-on-quarter increases as activity picks up.

Rail load data-a key indicator of Russia's non-oil economy-is showing signs of improvement over the summer while gas production from state-run giant OAO Gazprom is also recovering, according to investment bank Renaissance Capital.

Meanwhile, hikes in unemployment benefits and pensions have bolstered consumer spending while banks are showing less reluctance to lend. "Green shoots have found fertile soil and are now clearly visible," said the bank's head of fixed income research, Alexei Moissev. "However the northern spring is notoriously unstable and green shoots can be wiped out with the return of frost."

Help has also come from inflation, which in August was zero from the month earlier, its lowest such reading in four years.

Above all, Russia has been helped by a recovery in the price of crude oil, which slumped to around \$33 (Rs1,613.70) a barrel in December 2008 and is now trading at just under \$70 a barrel, still well off the 2008 peaks of \$147.

Yet the country remains dangerously vulnerable to fluctuations in the price of oil and gas, which account for at least 60% of Russia's export revenues and 20% of GDP.

Renaissance Capital said the recovery in Russia "has been largely enabled by a rebound in world commodity prices and the abundance of money globally". "If either turns, Russia will probably enter a prolonged period of stagnation."

Vedomosti, a financial news daily warned: "Our economy remains based on hydrocarbons and if the high oil price remains, the lessons of the crisis will be gratefully forgotten."

The recovery in consumer spending is also set to come at a price as government spending programmes leave a gaping hole in the budget with the deficit forecast to reach over 8% of GDP this year.

To finance the deficit, Russia has been plundering tens of billions of dollars from its reserve and national wealth funds built up during the days of high oil prices.

Standard and Poor's forecast that the reserve fund-which boasted at least \$137.1 billion in January-"is likely to be fully depleted" by 2010-11.

#9

Russia's inflation is far from dead

By Jason Bush

Reuters, September 7, 2009

MOSCOW - It's a miracle! Inflation in Russia has been vanquished. Russia's monthly inflation rate was a nice round zero in August. The good news has fuelled hopes of lower interest rates and economic recovery. But major pitfalls remain.

In reality, inflation simply took a vacation last month, because of temporary factors such as lower food prices. For 2009 as a whole, Russia is still heading for a double-digit inflation rate[] of around 10.5 percent. That's still higher than almost any other major economy. Viewed from a longer-term perspective, what's remarkable is just how ineffective Russia's counter-inflationary policy has been.

Let's not forget that Russia's central bank promised to bring inflation down into single figures every year between 2004 and 2008. And every year, it missed its target. If inflation is at last on a downward trend, you'd hardly expect otherwise, the same year that Russia's GDP is expected to slump by a colossal 8.5 percent. In the medium term, Russia's ballooning budget deficit (set to hit at least 7.5 percent of GDP next year) means the inflation outlook is still cloudy at best.

More fundamentally, Russia's poor historic record against inflation underlines shortcomings in the whole framework for monetary policy. For years, the major target for the Russian central bank has been the rouble exchange rate[], anchored against a basket of dollars and euros. It's an approach that has clearly failed to deliver either low inflation, or to stabilize the economy against a violent boom-bust cycle.

Although caused by swings in international commodity prices, the cycle has been aggravated by the inflexibility of the rouble, which means that changes in oil prices have to be absorbed by Russia's forex reserves. The result has been juddering gyrations in Russia's money supply. Just look at the figures. In both 2006 and 2007, the economy was on steroids, with Russia's main money supply indicator, M2, racing ahead by almost 50

percent per annum. Yet in the six months after September 2008, when Russians rushed to off-load their roubles, M2 slumped by a massive 17 percent. Is it any wonder that economic activity in Russia has also been bouncing up and down like a yo-yo?

Without firm targets for reducing inflation, Russia's government suffers from a typical asymmetry in incentives, tolerating rapid monetary expansion in the good years, but then snapping back once boom turns to bust. The money supply is already shooting back up as a result of the widening fiscal deficit.

The unhappy experiences of recent months explain why more and more economists are calling for Russia to scrap its currency peg altogether. Instead, they want Russia to target inflation directly, borrowing the model that is increasingly used by central banks in the developed world. In its recent Economic Survey, the OECD, for instance, called on Russia to shift gradually to an inflation-targeting regime.

To be fair to Russia's central bank, it has long promised to do so, and has already taken an important step in that direction. The rouble's band has been widened dramatically since last year, meaning that interest rates can now be set with a greater view to fighting inflation rather than maintaining a specific exchange rate. The central bank plans to float the rouble altogether in 2011.

So far, though, the new policy has yet to be seriously tested by the currency markets. And the long-term switch to inflation-targeting requires a lot more than just freeing up the exchange rate. It also requires legal and institutional reforms, which have barely begun. They include the establishment of binding inflation targets, more transparency in central bank decision-making, and greater central bank independence. Without these conditions being in place, an inflation targeting regime would carry little credibility in the markets. And it's no secret that at present, central bank policies are heavily dependent on the whims of the Kremlin.

Speaking last year, Russian finance minister Alexei Kudrin argued that, based on international experience, the switch to inflation-targeting could take up to five years. It's still far from clear whether the political will even exists to make all the necessary changes. In the meantime, Russia is gently jettisoning its exchange peg without having the machinery ready to replace it. This is not a credible foundation for monetary policy, and suggests that Russia's recent success against inflation may prove short-lived.

#10

Russia's one-factory towns struggle to survive

By Karina Ioffe

AP, September 7, 2009

YASNOGORSK, RUSSIA -- Three decades ago, the Yasnogorsk Machine-Building Factory stamped out thousands of pounds of steel and iron into parts for wagons, pumps and locomotives for Russia's mining industry.

Now two-thirds of its stamping and welding machines have been shut down. The old Soviet-era equipment is rusting, and fewer than 280 employees clock in every day - from a peak of 7,000. The factory that kept this town alive since the days of the czar is on its last breath, the victim of a global recession that has shaken Russia to the core.

Yasnogorsk is one of about 500 communities across Russia built around a single company, whose very existence hangs by a delicate thread. The challenges such "monocities" face are compounded by the legacy of the Soviet era, as well as deep-rooted Russian traditions that make it hard to start over somewhere else.

"What's happening in our town is not capitalism," said Alexander Gorbachev, a 59-year-old mechanic previously employed at the factory, who now works at a small machine shop.

To help keep food on the table, Gorbachev (unrelated to the former Soviet leader) does what millions of Russians did during earlier times of trouble: He grows his own potatoes, beets and other vegetables and sells the rest at the market. "It's like we're in medieval times again."

Russia's unemployment has risen to 8.3 percent, and industrial output declined by more than 14 percent in the first seven months of the year compared with 2008.

In Gus Khrustalny, 100 miles north of Moscow, workers at the local decorative glass factory were paid with the crystal vases they made because the company had no money.

In April, workers in a tungsten fabrication plant in the Primorye region staged a hunger strike after they weren't paid for months. And in Yasnogorsk, factory employees estimate they are collectively owed about 6 million rubles (\$200,000) in back wages.

These towns all saw their peak in the Soviet era, when a few plants would produce, say, all the Soviet Union's tires. The whole system lurched along guided by a massive bureaucracy of central planners rather than market forces.

But in 1991, after 70 years of Soviet rule, the huge, clanking structure collapsed. Some factories simply closed their doors. Others were purchased for a pittance by a generation of future young billionaires, now called oligarchs, who milked them for profits rather than investing in them.

"We've seen that all those factories that were privatized eventually went bankrupt," said Nikolai Medvedev, 55, who has worked at the Yasnogorsk plant for more than 30 years, sharpening metal parts. "The management is bad, because the owners who buy the factories don't really care about Russia. Their souls are in the West."

Many Russian industries have benefited from the privatizations, with more efficient companies that offer employees competitive wages. But others have been unprofitable for decades and are still simply limping along.

In Yasnogorsk, the factory opened in 1895 and expanded over the years in this town of 18,000 people. Along with jobs, the factory provided social services - everything from medical treatment and child care to family holidays at a local resort.

In 1991, factory owners gradually cut back on these services. In the past six years, the factory has changed owners at least twice, and recently went bankrupt for the second time.

Now children sit at home, alone, and parents worry they will turn to drugs or petty crime. Doctors and other professionals have fled the town, so residents are forced to travel close to an hour to see a pediatrician or an optometrist.

The park in the center of town, with its once-proud Romanesque Palace of Culture, is a seedy wasteland, its cultural center in shambles, its fountains broken and trash and bottles littering the paths.

Residents say their town is slowly dying.

"There is no future for my kids here," said Sergei Ovsvyanikov, a father of two and a plumber at the factory. "They will probably have to leave once they grow up."

Ovsvyanikov knows it's only a matter of time before his own job is eliminated.

He could take part in government retraining programs or look for work in Tula, a medium-sized city 40 minutes away by train. Some of his laid-off co-workers already commute daily to Moscow, three hours each way. Although he is only 35, he says he is too old and too tired to retrain, relocate or make a long journey to work every day.

"It's just too hard," he said. "If I get fired, then I'll do what I have to do. Now I'm just waiting."

Nikolai Petrov, an expert on regional issues at the Carnegie Moscow Center, said being unemployed is different for workers in Russia than in many other industrialized nations.

"In Western Europe, if you lose your job, you just move somewhere else, but in Russia that's not an option for most people," he said.

Many people who moved to Siberia and the Far East during the Soviet era, when they were paid premium wages, found themselves unable to return west to what is sometimes called "mainland" Russia after the Soviet collapse.

"Just selling your apartment in a town that is economically depressed is impossible. And even if you do manage to sell it, the money you receive is not enough to buy housing in a larger city where there might be work," Petrov said.

Economists say some monocities would be in better shape if Russia had made the massive investment needed to phase out antiquated industries and create a modern capitalist economy. Too much of Russian industry, some say, is still state-owned and managed.

Yevgeny Yasin, a former economics minister and director of the New Economics School in Moscow, said Russia's government uses protectionist and other measures to keep a strong grip on the country's privately owned industries. Company managers, he said, haven't learned how to survive in the open market. "The social mechanism must change," he said.

Management at the Yasnogorsk Machine-Building Factory, which took over from previous owners just three years ago, said it is trying hard to attract new business, even taking orders it would have rejected in the past.

"The crisis dictates its own rules," Nikolai Dupak, general director of the factory, said in a written statement. "We had big plans to diversify our production, but we didn't have time to realize them...But we have a commitment to our workers and it's our goal to make sure they get paid all they are due."

Besides the drop in orders, the factory was slapped with a fine of almost \$2 million from the regional government for what Dupak called a "bookkeeping error," which Yasnogorsk Machine-Building has not been able to pay. Officials from the region did not answer repeated requests for comment.

The federal government has helped industries limp along, with subsidies and tariffs. But many workers want Moscow to do more.

Several in Yasnogorsk said they hope Prime Minister Vladimir Putin will drop in on them, like he did on another small, economically depressed town near St. Petersburg in June. There, Putin reprimanded the owner of one shuttered factory for poor management and ordered him to sign an agreement to pay back wages.

In the meantime, patience is wearing out.

"I pay my taxes and do everything I'm supposed to," said an exasperated Ovsanikov. "But I don't feel like life is getting any better. In fact, it's getting much worse."

**#11
ORT Schools In FSU In Danger Of Collapse
By Walter Ruby
NY Jewish Week, September 8, 2009**

Kiev, Ukraine — For Yuriy Kinkov, principal of the ORT Kiev Technological Lyceum, the opening of the new academic year last week should have been a joyful opportunity to focus on everything the school has accomplished since its founding in the late 1990s.

After all, the ORT School, with 277 primary and secondary school students and filled with highly motivated teachers committed to the school's twin goals of providing students with top-of-the-line Information Technology training and a strong connection to Israel and Jewish culture, is widely considered one of the top schools in the Ukrainian capital.

Last year, ORT Lyceum students won first prizes in a raft of city and regional academic Olympiads, including in fields as diverse as English, Ukrainian language, history, physics, and in the school's signature IT fields of web design, computer graphics and computer animation.

Yet shortly after presiding over the Lyceum's observance of the traditional "First Bell" ceremony which marks the first day of classes in schools across the FSU — with enthusiastic ORT students presenting flowers to teachers and administrators, performing Israeli pop tunes and boisterous chasidic dances, and solemnly singing "Hatikvah" and the Ukrainian national anthem — Kinkov sounded a different kind of alarm. He somberly informed a group of American Jewish journalists visiting ORT schools in Kiev and Odessa in Ukraine and in Kishinev, the capital of the neighboring country of Moldova under the aegis of World ORT, that his school is facing "serious problems" as it struggles to survive amid the rigors of a worsening economic crisis that has lately consumed both Ukraine and the larger world.

"Ever since Jewish Agency abruptly cut off funding in September, 2008 for Heftziba [a program that annually provided nearly \$3 million in financial support for 44 Jewish day schools across the former Soviet Union], our teachers have felt that their livelihoods are threatened," Kinkov said. Today, [after the cuts by the Jewish Agency and subsequent ones by the Ukrainian government, which pays the teachers' base salaries], our teachers make only \$200-\$250 a month, compared to private schools in the city where they would be able to make \$1000 a month.

"Yet we are keenly aware that we can maintain the best students only if we can keep top quality teachers, and what we are now able to pay is not enough to assure that."

Nor are the drastic reductions in teachers' pay — the Jewish Agency budget cuts plus the collapse of the Ukrainian currency, the hryvnia, and the steep rise in prices for food and other essential items during the past 12 months has effectively reduced the value of teachers' salaries at ORT schools in Ukraine to about one quarter of what they were 12 months ago — the only draconian cutbacks that Kinkov has been compelled to make.

"Because of a lack of funding, we are no longer able to send school buses to pick up students who come to the school daily from distant parts of the city," he said. "That forces them to commute by public transportation, which means long and tiring trips for the children and added expenses for their parents. "Also, we can no longer provide our students with hot lunches, Kinkov added. "So far the number of students at our school has not dropped as we had feared, but has actually gone up slightly. That is because, despite all of the cuts, the ORT Lyceum continues to enjoy a reputation for academic excellence. Yet all of that is at risk if we are unable to find new sources of funding in order to pay our teachers a living wage." The extreme challenges facing the Kiev ORT Technological Lyceum are being played out in varying degrees in all of the 17 ORT day schools serving 6,000 students across Ukraine, Moldova, Russia, Belarus and other states of the former Soviet Union, as well as in additional 27 Jewish day schools under the aegis of the Or Avner (Chabad) and Shma Yisrael (mainstream Orthodox) networks.

Despite the Jewish Agency's sudden termination of Heftziba last September in an effort to close a yawning budget gap, mass closings of Jewish schools in the FSU were averted during the last academic year when the Chicago-based International Fellowship of Christians and Jews (IFCJ, an organization mainly supported by contributions by pro-Israel Evangelical churches in the U.S. which is headed by Rabbi Yechiel Eckstein) stepped in with a one-time grant of about \$1 million, and the Israeli government kicked in an additional million.

Yet as this year's school year begins, with no definitive word as to whether IFCJ, the Jewish Agency or the Israeli government will pump more money into the schools, the potentially devastating impact of the draconian cutbacks loom larger than ever. This is especially for the ORT schools, which, unlike their more religious

counterparts, receive only minimal support from wealthy locally based Jewish businessmen, often referred to as oligarchs.

Despite their own secular and sometimes, flagrantly hedonistic lifestyles, the oligarchs in Russia, Ukraine and other FSU countries make 90 percent of their charitable contributions in the Jewish field to the Chabad and Orthodox rabbis who administer the Or Avner and Shma Yisrael networks. According to one seasoned observer of the Ukrainian Jewish scene who asked not to be quoted by name, "The oligarchs live however they desire, but they figure that, just in case there is a God, their contributions will buy them some protection with the Almighty."

Last week, Natan Sharansky, the newly installed chairman of the Jewish Agency, travelled to Moscow to appeal to Russian Jewish oligarchs to increase their contributions to all three Jewish school systems, while Russian-speaking members of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's cabinet have told World ORT leaders that they understand the urgent need to succor the hard-pressed Jewish schools in the FSU. Funding for the ORT schools in the FSU comes from multiple sources, including the host governments, the Government of Israel, money raised in the U.S. Jewish community by ORT and usually funneled through Federations and United Jewish Communities and, until last year, the Jewish Agency.

For his part, World ORT Director General Robert Singer maintains that while the expressions of support by Sharansky and the Russian-speaking ministers are encouraging, the financial situation facing the ORT schools in the FSU are becoming so dire that they may find themselves beyond the point of no return by the time Israel and world Jewry manage to throw them a financial lifeline.

Speaking on Sept. 4, Singer said that if the schools don't receive increased funding from Israel within the next few weeks, bus transportation still being provided by many of the schools will be cancelled by Oct. 1, the schools will have to lay off their security personnel despite the ongoing threat of anti-Semitic attacks, no shlichim (Israeli teachers) will be able to come to the schools until the end of December, and the schools will not have the funds to pay local teachers of Hebrew, Yiddish and Jewish studies.

Even worse, Singer said, "We will lose the trust of the parents and put support by local officials at risk. Since these are state schools, the local authorities are required to approve the programs of study for our schools, and there will be serious consequences if we are no longer able to fulfill those programs. Certainly, at a time of grave economic crisis for countries like Ukraine, the authorities will certainly ask why they should continue to do their part to support these schools if Israel and world Jewry are not fulfilling their part of the bargain."

Singer said that ORT needs to come up with an additional \$2.5 million to put its 17 FSU schools on a sound footing, and explained, "Half of the budget comes from private supporters of ORT whom we believe will respond to the crisis. The other sources in the U.S. are the Federations and UJC [United Jewish Communities]. Last year the International Fellowship of Christians and Jews stepped in and saved the day. We are very grateful for that timely support, but it is clear that the task of saving these schools is ultimately up to the Jewish community. I believe the federations have to step up to the plate. Otherwise, painstaking efforts over 20 years to build a vibrant Jewish life in the FSU are likely to collapse."

A visiting observer is left with the strong impression that an unraveling of the ORT school network would seriously damage efforts to nurture Jewish identity among the majority of FSU Jews who are unaffiliated with the religious community and whose sense of Jewish identity is often shaky. Unlike the Or Avner and Shma Yisrael schools, which only take students who can prove they are halachically Jewish, the ORT schools cater to the large number of Jews of mixed backgrounds, following the same formula as the Israeli Law of Return.

Conversations with students at the ORT schools in Kiev, Odessa and Kishinev made clear that while the schools' academic excellence and focus on IT training (the ORT school in Kishinev, for example, has a ratio of 3.5 students per computer, far better than any other school in the city), their foremost attraction may be the warm Jewish atmosphere and the connection they provide to Israel and the Jewish world beyond the borders of the FSU to young people who previously knew little or nothing about their own Jewishness.

Elena and Viktoria Praisman, graduates of the Kiev ORT Lyceum spoke of how, after three years at the school, starting in the seventh grade, they decided to change their last name from their mother's Ukrainian name to their father's clearly Jewish one, something they were able to do legally after reaching adulthood. "Our parents gave us our mother's name because they thought we would do better in society with a Ukrainian-sounding family name than a Jewish one", explained Viktoria. "Yet after we came here in the seventh grade and began learning about Jewish culture and history, we became progressively more connected to and proud of our Jewish heritage.

"Eventually we decided that we wanted people to know we are Jewish, so we changed our family name to Praisman." What about the fact that they are not Jewish by halachic standards? "We feel Jewish in our hearts," said Yelena emphatically. "Yet we eventually plan to make giyyur [conversion]."

Vladimir Lektmanov, a recent graduate of the Herzl ORT Technical Lyceum in Kishinev, the capital of the tiny republic of Moldova, which is wedged between Ukraine and Romania, said that "The only connection to Jewishness I had when I was growing up was an old menorah that my grandmother kept. When I decided to enroll at the ORT School, my parents were strongly opposed. But I insisted on doing so, and quickly felt myself to be at home; part of a large Jewish family. Not only did I learn a lot about Jewishness at school, but was able to travel to Israel and to Auschwitz on the March of the Living. "

Lekhmatov is today a leader of the Betar at a nearby private university. "My knowledge level is higher than most other students at the university thanks to the excellent IT education I received at ORT," he said. "But the main thing I learned there is that I am really and truly a Jew."

**#12
For Russian Oligarchs, Charity Begins At Home
By Tamar Snyder
NY Jewish Week, September 8, 2009**

Genesis Philanthropy Group, the foundation founded by five Russian oligarchs two years ago, will be sharing more of its largesse with Russian-speaking Jews in its own backyard.

The foundation, which has made headlines with its high-profile grants meant to strengthen Jewish identity among Russian-speaking Jews primarily in America and Israel, announced a \$6 million gift to The Jewish Agency for Israel to support floundering Jewish schools and summer camps in the former Soviet Union during the next three to four years.

"This is indigenous Russian Jewish leadership, which we haven't had up to now," says Rabbi Yitz Greenberg, former president of the Steinhardt Foundation for Jewish Life and a member of the GPG Advisory Board.

In March, GPG announced a \$4.5 million grant to the Foundation for Jewish Camp and a \$10.8 million gift to Brandeis University to provide scholarships and establish the Brandeis Genesis Institute for Russian-speaking Jewry. And in April, GPG gave \$2.7 million to the Wexner Foundation. The foundation has also committed \$2.1 million for leadership development for Russian Jews in North America, with grants to the Center for Leadership Initiatives and the Jewish Immigrant Aid Society in Canada and Moishe House.

The \$6 million gift to the Jewish Agency represents Genesis Philanthropy Group's largest grant in the former Soviet Union.

"I welcome the fact that today the representatives of Russia's Jewish community are more and more involved in building Jewish institutions in Russia," Natan Sharansky, chairman of the Jewish Agency, stated in a press release dated Sept. 2.

The heads of the Genesis Philanthropy Group — longtime business partners in their mid-40s who have ties to Alfa Group, Russia's biggest private equity firm — hope that other Russian Jews will follow suit and support Jewish education and other projects in the former Soviet Union.

“We believe that it’s time for Russian Jews to start taking responsibility for their communities, not just in the former Soviet Union but in other regions of the world,” Stan Polovets, CEO and one of the five founders of Genesis Philanthropy Group, told The Jewish Week.

The latest grant doesn’t reflect a shift in priorities for the foundation, those familiar with the Genesis Philanthropy Group say, but rather the gradual maturing of Jewish organizational life within the former Soviet Union, as well as a vote of confidence in Sharansky.

“They’d like to put the lion’s share into the former Soviet Union, but they need to have projects that can sustain the investment,” says Greenberg.

According to Polovets, a quarter of GPG’s grants are directed toward work in the former Soviet Union. The largest portion, some 40 percent, has been given to U.S.-based organizations, and 35 percent has been distributed in Israel.

GPG is not an operating foundation, but rather “invests” its charitable funds in organizations that have strong management teams, transparent finances, good governance and the ability to deliver tangible results. “Unfortunately, in the former Soviet Union, there are not a lot of organizations that meet these criteria,” Polovets says.

That’s changing though. A major grant to Hillel FSU is in the works after initial talks failed, those familiar with GPG say. Genesis Philanthropy Group currently supports two Hillel Organizations in FSU — Hillel Russia and Hillel Case.

In the past year, GPG gave approximately \$15 million within the former Soviet Union. Recipients of these grants, which tend to be smaller than in the U.S., include Moscow State University’s department for Jewish studies, The Centre for Biblical and Jewish Studies at Russian State University for the Humanities, and the Adain Lo/St. Petersburg Institute for Jewish Studies. This summer, GPG supported a summer sports camp for members of the Maccabia Moscow football team, as well as 17 camps for children living in the former Soviet Union.

Unlike Lev Leviev, the Russian real estate mogul who has recently fallen on hard times and largely supports Chabad and other religious institutions in the former Soviet Union, the Genesis Philanthropy Group’s approach is much broader, Greenberg says. “They understand the culture and sociology of Russian Jews. Many have an allergy to go into a synagogue, so they approach them in their own language and their own cultural receptivity.”

In its agreement with the Jewish Agency, GPG won’t just deliver funds, but will also upgrade capacity. The foundation will conduct an evaluation of the Jewish Agency, an organization not known for its efficiency, and make recommendations for restructuring. “They believe that the [Jewish Agency] can handle this amount of money intelligently and not just waste it,” Greenberg says.

GPG is also committed to empowering Russian-speaking Jews to take on leadership roles within the Jewish community worldwide. To that end, the foundation insists that grantee organizations hire a Russian-speaking Jew in a senior role of the initiatives funded by GPG.

The Jewish communities in the former Soviet Union are “coming of age,” Greenberg says. In the first 10 years after the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991, “every serious Jew was leaving the country to go to Israel.” But that’s shifted dramatically in the last decade and a half, with a group of serious, committed Jews wanting to live a Jewish life in the former Soviet Union, Greenberg says.

This group represents a “well educated, sophisticated, urban population” that’s “quite secular,” says Misha Galperin, CEO of the Jewish Federation of Greater Washington and a member of GPG’s advisory board. “Previous efforts at engagement were quite rudimentary and often paternalistic,” he says. “It was always from the position of giving something to or for Russian Jews, as opposed to working with Russian Jews.”

Gauging GPG's impact in the way Russian Jews approach their Jewishness will take decades, but certain metrics — including the intermarriage rate, sense of Jewish identity and relationship with Israel — will be closely studied by the foundation. At the end of the day, we hope to “put the word Jewish back into ‘Russian Jews,’” Polovets says.

#13

Russia, US improve ties: Lavrov

AFP, September 8, 2009

MOSCOW – Moscow and Washington can see a marked improvement in mutual ties as past mistrust is swept aside, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov said in an article published Tuesday, pledging renewed efforts for a new nuclear arms reduction deal.

"The key to new ties between our countries is reconstruction of trust undermined in past years, and it will require joint efforts in overcoming negative legacies... Interaction, compromise, give-and-take is important here," Lavrov wrote in the Rossiyskaya Gazeta daily.

"We will honestly strive for a timely and full-fledged replacement of the START treaty, which would provide strategic security on the basis of admission that strategic aggressive and defensive weapons are irreversibly linked," Lavrov wrote.

"We know that it will require overcoming the resistance of certain forces within the United States which cannot, by inertia, imagine an equal partnership with Russia," the minister warned.

Earlier, Lavrov said that efforts to clinch a new Russian-US nuclear disarmament deal this year have advanced and negotiators will report to the two countries' leaders by the time President Dmitry Medvedev and his US counterpart, Barack Obama, meet at a G-20 summit this month.

During Obama's landmark visit to Moscow in July, he and Medvedev agreed to hammer out a new nuclear arms reduction pact to replace the 1991 Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START), preferably by the time it expires on December 5.

A declaration signed by Medvedev and Obama at their Moscow meeting fixed no deadline for agreement on a new deal and only instructed negotiators to complete the work as quickly as possible.

"The crisis of trust in our relations with the West as a whole lay in the conflict of expectations as there was no common understanding of what the end of the Cold War stood for. That is where all the misunderstanding came from," Lavrov explained.

However, as "we are wiser now" the anti-US sentiments in Russia also would give way, as "once the reasons for such an attitude vanish, so shall Russian feelings toward America change, and they already do," Lavrov said.

#14

How Obama's Russia Reset Is Playing (Part 1)

By Gregory Feifer

RFE/RL, September 8, 2009

U.S. President Barack Obama took office promising to try to mend ties with Russia, part of his strategy to overhaul foreign policy by engaging countries around the world. His pledge has caused serious concern in Eastern Europe that Washington would weaken its support in favor of better relations with Moscow. It's also raised doubts Obama's policy will get the support it needs in Western Europe, where opinion on Russia is divided. In a three-part series on U.S.-Russia relations, RFE/RL asks how the "reset" is playing on the ground and how it's affecting Europe.

PRAGUE -- The official "reset" of relations between the United States and Russia took place in July. That's when Barack Obama first traveled to Moscow to detail a policy already outlined by Vice President Joe Biden and Secretary of State Hillary Clinton.

In a speech delivered steps away from the Kremlin, the U.S. president criticized Moscow's "old assumptions," among them Russia's drive to compete with the United States by carving out an opposing sphere of influence.

"These assumptions are wrong," he said. "In 2009, a great power does not show strength by dominating or demonizing other countries. The days when empires could treat sovereign states as pieces on a chessboard are over."

But six months into his first term, it's not clear whether Obama's reset has effected any real policy change in Washington, while the Kremlin has continued ratcheting up tensions with its pro-Western neighbors.

In his speech last July, Obama singled out Georgia, the U.S. ally invaded by Russia last year in a war that sent relations with Western countries spiraling to Cold War lows.

No Trade-Offs

It was a nadir after years of deepening strain, during which Washington came to see Moscow's approach to foreign policy as a "zero-sum game," in which what's good for one country is believed to be bad for the other.

Michael McFaul, the U.S. National Security Council's senior director for Russian and Eurasian affairs, is the chief architect of Obama's Russia policy. Speaking to reporters ahead of July's summit, he said Washington had no illusions about the worldview of Russian officials.

"The United States is considered an adversary," he said. "I'm sure many would use harsher words among themselves when they talk about us. And they think that our No. 1 objective in the world is to make Russia weaker, to surround Russia, to do things that make us stronger and Russia weaker."

McFaul said the United States would begin seeking to move past the current impasse in relations through a new kind of realism. Washington, he said, would present its stand on contentious issues "very explicitly," before trying to find "ways that we can have Russia cooperate on things we define as our national interests."

Among the most divisive disagreements is Russia's furious objection over the drive by pro-Western Ukraine and Georgia to join NATO. McFaul said Washington would not "reassure or give or trade anything with the Russians" over NATO expansion.

"We are not in any way, in the name of the reset, abandoning our very close relationship with these two democracies, Ukraine and Georgia," he said.

Opening Up

Obama's Russia policy is part of a wider strategy of seeking engagement with countries from Latin America to the Middle East by showing greater respect and urging that all sides can benefit more by increasing cooperation than seeking competition.

Harvard University's Marshall Goldman says the notion of a reset has already diminished tensions between Moscow and Washington. "Obama's looking at a whole range of issues from afresh," he says. "So this may be an important turning point in world history."

Russian President Dmitry Medvedev welcomed Obama's overtures during the summit in July.

"The new administration headed by President Obama is showing its willingness to change the situation and build more effective, reliable, and ultimately more modern relations," he said. "We are ready to play our part."

On September 8, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov wrote in a newspaper article that U.S.-Russia ties had significantly improved, partly thanks to Obama's visit. "We see that the desire for confrontational policies is falling, especially in the Euro-Atlantic community," he wrote.

But Russia has recently taken a series of actions that are prompting doubts about Washington's ability to engage Moscow. In August, the Kremlin increased its military presence in Georgia's pro-Moscow breakaway regions, Abkhazia and South Ossetia, violating a European Union-brokered cease-fire.

Soon after, the Kremlin drafted legislation to make it easier to send troops abroad to "defend Russian citizens" and "prevent aggression against another state."

In Moscow, political analyst Kirill Rogov says Obama's charm offensive hasn't had any visible effect on relations. He says appeals to respect common values fall on deaf ears when it comes to authoritarian leaders such as Russia's.

"For them, politics is always played along zero-sum rules," he says. "That means the results of Obama's [reset] policy may be very disheartening, even though the idea itself may seem laudable."

Is Ukraine Georgia All Over Again?

Some see the Kremlin's latest actions as a dark signal of intent to take a stand over the next possible geostrategic battleground between Russia and the West: Ukraine.

Medvedev recently called for new leadership in Russia's pro-Western neighbor, prompting accusations the Kremlin wants to influence the outcome of a presidential election there next January -- and stirring speculation Moscow may be angling for a diplomatic or even military conflict.

Rogov says Russia's designs on the former Soviet republic don't end at objections to Ukraine's joining NATO.

"The Kremlin believes Ukraine must be made part of the Russian sphere of influence," he says. "That's how they understand it, and that's going to be a major problem in relations [with the United States]."

Rogov says the impasse between Washington and Moscow over what actions are permissible in Ukraine and other former Soviet republics threatens to derail Obama's reset policy.

But others in Moscow downplay Ukraine's importance, dismissing accusations the Kremlin's actions have been overly confrontational.

Viktor Kremenyuk of Moscow's U.S.A. and Canada Institute says Russia is only addressing the security threat it sees from possible NATO expansion. He questions the Western insistence that values, not spheres of influence, should drive foreign policy. "If we shared similar values," he says, "I don't think we could have the same problems."

"We are different," Kremenyuk continues. "And this is something like a challenge, because with these different values, can we still live together? This is the real question."

Kremenyuk says any success of Obama's reset hinges on the positive outcome of talks to reach a new nuclear arms pact by the end of the year. Both sides say they want they want to sign a deal that would replace the 1991 START agreement, which expires in December.

Most analysts agree there has yet to be a confrontation or crisis in relations that would expose a difference in the way Washington interacts with Moscow. But there are serious doubts about whether the president's trip to Moscow last July really started a process that can pull relations with Russia from the depths they reached during the Bush administration.

#15

U.S. Stance Toward Russia Again Divides Europe

By Judy Dempsey

New York Times, September 10, 2009

BERLIN — Twenty years after the fall of the Berlin Wall, new fissures are emerging between Western and Eastern Europe — this time over President Obama’s policy toward Russia, according to an international survey published Wednesday.

The survey, Transatlantic Trends, an annual poll of European and American public opinion conducted for the German Marshall Fund of the United States, found that Europeans, far from speaking with one voice on foreign policy issues, are divided over the role of the United States and how to respond to the growing assertiveness of Russia.

The report also revealed big differences among the East Europeans themselves over their attitudes on the United States and Russia.

During the closing years of the Bush administration, the trans-Atlantic relationship, including European support for the United States-led NATO military alliance, had reached a low in opinion polls. After Mr. Obama’s first half year in office, he has “nearly reversed the collapse in public support for the United States,” the report says.

About 77 percent of respondents in the European Union and Turkey supported Mr. Obama’s handling of international affairs — a quadrupling of support compared with opinions of the Bush administration.

But in Eastern Europe, more than 60 percent of respondents said they were skeptical about Mr. Obama’s foreign policy, especially regarding Russia, Iran, Afghanistan and the Middle East. And just over half of the respondents in that part of Europe said they saw the United States in a positive light, compared with 63 percent of West Europeans.

The difference among individual European Union countries is even greater. In France, President Obama’s popularity is 77 percentage points higher than President George W. Bush’s rating. Yet in Romania and Poland, Mr. Obama’s popularity over Mr. Bush is just 14 percentage points and 11 percentage points, respectively. Even more striking, only 25 percent of Central and East Europeans said they believed that relations between the United States and Europe had improved under Mr. Obama, compared with 43 percent of West Europeans.

The survey says the disparity between Eastern and Western Europe could be attributed to the fact that the Bush administration embraced Eastern Europe by encouraging NATO’s enlargement in 2004 and that it took a more aggressive stance toward Russia.

The Bush administration also proposed placing the Pentagon’s antiballistic missile shield in Poland and the Czech Republic, a move that was strongly opposed by Russia and several West European nations. It was staunchly supported by most East European countries because they saw the shield as a defense against Russia, not missiles from Iran.

The Europeans are still divided over how to deal with Russia, particularly regarding the issue of whether to further enlarge NATO — which Russia opposes — and the European Union’s growing dependence on Russia for its energy.

Yet the survey found that even those divisions are complicated. “The popular image of a Russia-phobic Central and Eastern Europe and a more Russia-friendly Western Europe was not found in Transatlantic Trends 2009 data,” the report says.

On economic issues, the report says that 43 percent of Americans supported closer economic ties with the European Union, compared with 37 percent of the population in the European bloc.

Majorities all over Europe are worried about Russia as an energy provider. But when respondents were asked if they would abandon certain Western alliance policies, like NATO enlargement, to secure energy supplies from Russia, only 28 percent of East Europeans said they would consider that, compared with 41 percent of West Europeans.

The Transatlantic Trends survey included random samples of approximately 1,000 adults in the United States and 12 European countries — Portugal, Spain, Germany, Britain, France, Turkey, the Netherlands, Romania, Italy, Poland, Bulgaria and Slovakia — from June 9 to July 1. It had a margin of sampling error of plus or minus three percentage points in each of the 13 countries surveyed.

#16

US Jewish leaders push Obama to act on Iran

By Hilary Leila Krieger

Jerusalem Post, September 10, 2009

Several hundred Jewish leaders and activists are planning to arrive here Thursday to urge top Obama administration officials and US congressmen to take action on Iran.

They are pushing for Congress to quickly pass an Iran sanctions bill sponsored by US House Foreign Affairs Committee Chairman Howard Berman and otherwise take serious economic and diplomatic steps to pressure Iran to abandon its pursuit of nuclear capabilities that threaten Israel.

"Congress is back, legislation is on the agenda, and this is September, when at some level decisions are being made in connection with Iran," Anti-Defamation League Washington Director Jess Hordes said of the planning of the event.

His organization will be joining the United Jewish Communities, the Jewish Council for Public Affairs, the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations, the National Conference of Soviet Jewry and several other groups as part of the effort.

"A government that has so little regard for human life, truth and human rights as does the current Iranian regime must not be entrusted to possess the most powerful weapons known to humankind," the event organizers said, in a statement announcing the advocacy day.

So far, the group is scheduled to hear from Berman, House Minority Leader John Boehner and House Minority Whip Eric Cantor at an open forum and then meet with an administration official before breaking up into groups to lobby individual legislators on Capitol Hill.

Berman's Iran legislation would sanction companies providing Iran with refined petroleum as well as insurance for such trade and other related measures. The legislation was originally introduced in May, along with a similar Senate bill, but Berman has held off on advancing it to give the diplomatic process time to work.

However, Berman indicated this summer that he would be looking to take action on the legislation pending the late September deadline that the Obama administration gave Iran to respond to its diplomatic overtures. At the same time, the Senate is looking to hold hearings and otherwise build momentum for its legislation.

It's not clear at this point how the Obama administration feels about the sanctions bills, though it has threatened "crippling sanctions" against Iran should diplomatic engagement fail.

The White House would not comment on whether or not it supported the proposed legislation.

Though the sponsors of Thursday's advocacy day have a wide coalition of groups working with them, some Jewish activists have taken issue with the approach.

"We urge rejecting deadlines imposed by outside parties, or deadlines that are the product of anything other than assessments by the Obama administration of the state-of-play of current diplomatic efforts," said Americans for Peace Now President Debra DeLee in a statement.

"We also believe that additional sanctions aimed squarely at the ruling regime and its members may make sense, but that the US must not make the mistake of pursuing sanctions that target the Iranian people - like the 'crippling' sanctions currently under consideration."

#17

Plot thickens over Israeli PM's secret trip

By Marius Schattner

AFP, September 10, 2009

JERUSALEM — The plot thickened on Thursday over a secret trip by Israel's prime minister, as his office admitted it had misled the public about his whereabouts but did not deny reports he had stolen away to Russia to discuss arms sales to Iran.

"The prime minister was busy with a confidential and classified activity," Benjamin Netanyahu's office said in a statement.

"Having had the best intentions, his military attache... acted to defend that activity and did this through an announcement to the media" that said he had spent the day at a security facility in Israel, it said.

But the statement did not deny media reports that Netanyahu had flown to Russia aboard a private plane on Monday to discuss Moscow's arms sales to arch-foes Syria and Iran, whose controversial nuclear drive has Israel worried.

In Moscow, the Russian authorities said that the Israeli premier had met neither his counterpart Vladimir Putin nor President Dmitry Medvedev, but did not explicitly deny the trip itself.

But the respected Kommersant daily on Thursday said a senior Kremlin source confirmed to it that Netanyahu did indeed visit the Russian capital.

The mystery around the prime minister's day-long disappearance from public view is unfolding alongside another -- that the Arctic Sea cargo ship supposedly seized by pirates and later recovered by Russia was secretly carrying S-300 anti-aircraft missile systems bound for Iran.

Russia has denied that the ship was carrying S-300s and Russian investigators have announced that their inspection of the vessel turned up only its official cargo of timber.

The Arctic Sea, a Maltese-flagged vessel with a Russian crew, was hijacked near Sweden in late July before being recovered by the Russian navy in the Atlantic Ocean several weeks later.

The hijacking in a busy European shipping lane, the huge international effort to recover the ship, and the detention of its crewmen after they returned to Russia have all fuelled speculation about a secret cargo.

Officially the ship was carrying a load of timber from Finland to Algeria, but speculation has raged that it was carrying weapons or even nuclear materials.

Israel has for years tried to convince Russia not to sell S-300 surface-to-air missile systems to Iran, which the Jewish state fears Tehran could deploy around its controversial nuclear sites.

The deployment would make it more difficult for Israel to carry out a military strike on them -- something the Jewish state has repeatedly refused to rule out amid its drive to stop Tehran's atomic programme.

Russia reportedly agreed to sell the systems to Tehran several years ago. Following an August 18 visit, Israeli President Shimon Peres said that he had secured a promise from Medvedev that Russia would review its decision.

Widely considered to be the Middle East's sole if undeclared nuclear power, Israel suspects Iran of trying to develop an atomic bomb under the guise of a civilian nuclear programme, a charge Tehran denies.

Israel considers Iran to be its arch-enemy following repeated statements by President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad that the Jewish state is doomed to be "wiped off the map."

#18

'Permanent Revolution'

By Gregory Feifer

RFE/RL, September 10, 2009

Russian President Dmitry Medvedev has roundly criticized his country for what he calls a humiliating dependence on natural resources, a "half-Soviet" social sphere, and instability in the Caucasus.

The criticism, published on the gazeta.ru website, appears in an open letter on the country's strategic challenges, addressed to the Russian people under the headline "Forward Russia!"

"Should we continue to drag into the future our primitive raw-materials economy," Medvedev writes, "endemic corruption, and inveterate habit of relying on the state, foreign countries or some all-powerful doctrine to solve our problems -- on anyone except ourselves?"

Looking back for precedents, Medvedev lauds the reforms of Peter the Great and the Soviet Union, but criticizes them for "destroying millions of lives."

"Today, for the first time in our history," he writes, "we have the chance to prove to ourselves and the world that Russia can develop democratically."

Medvedev says the government has developed a plan to advance the economy by making Russia a leader in technology, energy efficiency, and space infrastructure. For it to succeed, Medvedev writes, "Russia's political system will also be extremely open, flexible, and intrinsically complex."

Calling for a "permanent revolution," Medvedev vows Russia will become an "active and respected member of the world community of free nations." He calls on Russians to e-mail the Kremlin with suggestions.

Medvedev's letter, posted on a leading independent news website, is the latest in a series of exercises burnishing his image as a liberalizing reformer. But although exhaustive on vague, overarching goals, Medvedev fails to offer a single concrete policy change that would bring about the drastic reform he seeks.

Critics will note that Medvedev -- former President Vladimir Putin's handpicked successor, who came to power last year after Putin's eight years in office -- never hints at criticism of his mentor. Putin revived authoritarianism in Russia by cracking down on democratic institutions and the free press, and most Russians believe he retains power in his current role as prime minister.

Since Putin's ascent 10 years ago, corruption has ballooned, society has become far more closed, and the government has done virtually nothing to alleviate a deepening dependence on the oil and gas industry that fuelled Russia's decade-long economic boom.

Some will surely take Medvedev's liberal-sounding rhetoric to indicate a growing split between him and Putin. But his letter echoes many previous calls for reform by him and Putin, and others will see it as another installment of the kind of public relations exercise Russia's leaders rely on to stay in power.

#19

Russia not yet in sustainable recovery: Medvedev AFP, September 9, 2009

MOSCOW -- President Dmitry Medvedev said Wednesday it was too early for Russia to scrap stimulus measures, even if signs of recovery from the country's worst economic crisis in a decade were beginning to appear.

"These so far are just general signs of improvement, we can't speak of sustainable positive dynamics, all the more so because these signs are not as significant in scale as we'd like them to be," Medvedev said.

"So far it's necessary for us to continue anti-crisis policies," he told a government meeting in televised remarks.

Medvedev said it was important to begin thinking of exit strategies and praised efforts by the government of his mentor Prime Minister Vladimir Putin, saying its "large-scale and all-encompassing anti-crisis measures" had helped limit the damage.

"Some signs have appeared that the general slump in the economy is over and there is a shift -- let's hope -- of our economy to the revival phase," Medvedev told the meeting attended by key ministers and a smiling Putin.

"Certain positive tendencies in the sphere of industrial production, cargo turnover and transportation have appeared," Medvedev added. "It appears that a decline in investments in capital assets has slowed down."

Russia, which failed to implement significant economic reform during boom years earlier this decade, has been hit much harder by the crisis than most other developing economies.

Analysts said Russia is finally emerging from the worst economic crisis since 1998 although it will take some time for the country to return to pre-crisis rates of growth.

Medvedev reiterated the state would continue to support only "efficient owners" of business who were ready to modernize their enterprises. He noted that state loans would have to be returned.

Economic Minister Elvira Nabiullina said at the meeting her ministry raised its forecast for economic growth next year to 1.6 percent from 1.0 percent, Russian news agencies reported.

Industrial production would probably grow by 1.4 percent compared to the previous 0.8 percent forecast, she added.

The economy shrunk 10.9 percent in the second quarter from a year earlier, according to official figures.

Manufacturing in Russia fell 18.7 percent in the second quarter, compared with a 23.5 percent fall in the previous three months.

Separately, Medvedev's chief economic adviser, Arkady Dvorkovich, said that Russia's coffers this year would receive a boost from extra oil revenue he estimated at "a few hundred billion rubles."

"We are talking about a few hundred billion rubles -- precisely, within the limit of half a trillion rubles, no more, maybe a bit less," he said in news agency reports.

The estimate is based on higher-than-expected oil prices as officials raised their forecasts to 57 dollars a barrel this year, up from an earlier projection for 54 dollars, he said.

#20

Lawmakers OK Kremlin bill on military force abroad

By Vladimir Isachenkov

AP, September 9, 2009

MOSCOW - A Kremlin bill expanding the legal reasons for using military force abroad won a quick preliminary approval in the lower house of parliament Wednesday.

The motion was seen by some as a sign that the Kremlin was taking a tougher posture in relations with ex-Soviet neighbors after last year's war with Georgia.

The Kremlin-controlled State Duma voted unanimously to approve President Dmitry Medvedev's bill in the first of three required readings. It is expected to sail swiftly through two other readings in the State Duma before being rubber-stamped by the upper house.

The bill would allow the president to send troops outside the nation's border to fend off attacks on the Russian military, deter aggression against another state, protect Russian citizens, combat pirates and protect shipping.

The current legislation only envisages sending troops abroad to fight terrorists and fulfill Russia's obligations in line with international treaties. Medvedev said last month that the war with Georgia highlighted the need for the bill expanding deployment rules.

Russia said it sent forces into Georgia to protect civilians and its own military personnel from a Georgian invasion of the breakaway province of South Ossetia. Georgia countered that Russia triggered the hostilities by sending a military convoy into South Ossetia.

Viktor Zavarzin, the head of the Duma's defense affairs committee, said during Wednesday's debate that the new bill was necessary for Russia to mount a quick military response to security threats. "Modern wars will be waged quickly, so a long decision-making procedure on using military force abroad may hurt Russia's interests," he said.

The new bill has been met with unease in other ex-Soviet nations, particularly in Ukraine, whose ties with Moscow have grown increasingly tense recently.

Medvedev last month accused Ukraine's Western-leaning President Viktor Yushchenko of conducting a hostile policy toward Russia and sharply criticized him for supplying Georgia with weapons. The unusually blunt Medvedev's statement was widely seen as the Kremlin's attempt to interfere in Ukraine's presidential vote set for January.

Russia's navy is based in Ukraine's Black Sea port of Sevastopol under a lease agreement until 2017, and some observers speculated that Moscow could use frictions about the base's operations as a pretext for using force.

Outspoken ultranationalist politician Vladimir Zhirinovskiy, who serves as the Duma's deputy speaker, told the house that the new legislation should send a strong warning to other nations.

"Let people in some foreign capitals know ... that in case of any threat to our citizens the president will have to protect them wherever they are," Zhirinovskiy said. "They may wake up to see our paratroopers along with artillery and aviation in use. Nothing will go unpunished any more."

#21

Pentagon Checks Arsenal in Race for Nuclear Treaty

By Thom Shankler and Mark Landler

New York Times, September 9, 2009

WASHINGTON - With the clock ticking on a year-end deadline, President Obama is pressing ahead with a top-to-bottom review of America's nuclear weapons to see how much the arsenal can shrink, as his negotiators are racing to wrap up a major new strategic arms control treaty with Russia.

The review, in tandem with reinvigorated talks between Washington and Moscow, will help determine how much further the two nuclear superpowers will cut their arsenals after the 1991 Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty, or Start, expires Dec. 5.

The last time the Pentagon reviewed its nuclear posture, in 2001, it concluded that the American military could get by with 1,700 to 2,200 nuclear warheads at the ready, a level the Bush administration found comfortable even as it demurred over a binding treaty with Russia.

Now both sides want to go even lower. Russia is especially eager to lock in reductions, and Mr. Obama has made deep cuts a primary diplomatic goal. Their ambitions, and the impending deadline, make the Pentagon's review crucial, because it would help determine the bottom line, as well as which missiles, bombers and submarines to keep, how much to spend modernizing them and the implications of a changing world where small states, too, can acquire nuclear arms.

But not everybody is at ease with the prospect of such rapid change. Several officials involved in the effort said powerful constituencies - among arms specialists in the executive branch, Congress, the military and at the weapons laboratories - had conflicting views of how to proceed.

Although Mr. Obama has vowed that his long-term goal is eliminating nuclear weapons, there are significant disagreements about how fast and how deep reductions might be made while guaranteeing America's security in a world in which other nations maintain nuclear arsenals, others might be tempted to build them - and bomb-making knowledge can never be erased.

The shape of the arsenal also is a point of contention. Some military planners advocate building a new generation of safer and more reliable warheads, while some administration officials fear that reopening nuclear assembly lines would undermine their efforts at nonproliferation.

The arms talks must deal not only with the limit on warheads, a ceiling that might be as low as 1,500 on each side, but also with arcane counting rules, verification measures and ancillary issues like the deployment of missile defenses.

Tackling these extraordinarily complex issues at the same time on a tight schedule is an ambitious agenda, especially for an administration also trying to battle a deep economic crisis, overhaul the health care system and address global climate change.

"From a distance, it could look like, 'How do you do all that?' " said Ellen O. Tauscher, the under secretary of state for arms control and international security. "It's like the operation of a very high-end restaurant kitchen. It may look chaotic, but beautiful things come out of it."

Senior Defense Department officials said the nation's entire nuclear weapons architecture was under review, including such fundamental traditions as whether the nation still needs to maintain a triad of land-based missiles, submarine-launched missiles and bombers.

Mr. Obama laid out his vision in April, declaring in Prague that he would "reduce the role of nuclear weapons" and urge other countries to do the same, with the long-term goal of eliminating nuclear arms altogether.

Under a framework agreement signed in Moscow this summer by Mr. Obama and his Russian counterpart, Dmitri A. Medvedev, the new treaty is to reduce the ceiling on long-range nuclear warheads to 1,500 to 1,675 within seven years, down from the current limit of 2,200 by 2012, under the separate Moscow Treaty signed in 2002.

Total American warheads reached more than 32,000 in the 1960s but dropped to 10,500 just before Start was signed in 1991. This year, the Federation of American Scientists reported that the United States had already reduced its deployed strategic nuclear warheads to 2,200, more than three years ahead of the Moscow Treaty schedule.

Under the prospective new treaty, to be negotiated by December with follow-up talks to look at even deeper cuts, the total of all types of long-range delivery vehicles - land-based missiles, submarine-based missiles and bombers - would be limited to 500 to 1,100, down from the 1,600 now allowed.

“For some it is not enough of a cut, for others it is too much, too fast,” said one senior Defense Department official, who like other officials interviewed spoke on the condition of anonymity in order to describe the internal, classified discussion of the review.

Another senior Pentagon official said the calculations not only were about specific numbers but also finding the right balance: “So long as there are nuclear weapons in the world, how do we sustain a safe, secure and effective nuclear deterrent for us, and that can be extended to our allies? How do you define that?”

As Washington hammers out an arms deal with Moscow, negotiators may also glean insights from the Russians that would help answer these questions, according to another senior State Department official.

Senior officials involved in the review point out that the configuration of today’s arsenal offers Mr. Obama some flexibility, even in advance of the final negotiations. Several hundred bombers and missile silos have been removed from nuclear use or decommissioned, yet still are counted under current treaty rules.

The United States has just under 900 operational nuclear warhead platforms, meaning that Mr. Obama could easily give up significant numbers of missiles or planes in negotiations because they have already been taken out of nuclear service, officials said.

The review will look closely at the contentious question of whether the arsenal should be used to threaten retaliation in case of catastrophic attack by an adversary using nonnuclear weapons, whether chemical, biological or even overwhelming conventional forces, against the United States or an ally. Reshaping the list of targets for America’s nuclear warheads, officials said, also is under discussion.

“With the end of the cold war and the development of new conventional technologies, the traditional purposes for U.S. nuclear weapons have become increasingly less relevant,” said Daryl G. Kimball, executive director of the Arms Control Association, an independent advocacy group.

“We can and should limit the role of our nuclear weapons to a core deterrence mission,” he added, noting that deterring attacks on the United States and its allies “requires far fewer nuclear warheads and delivery systems.”

Over the decades, however, the United States consciously maintained ambiguity in public statements about its nuclear policy - when it would strike, what it would strike and in response to which actions by an adversary.

“We don’t want to box our leaders in,” said a senior Pentagon official. “They like to hedge against uncertainty. They like to have options.”

#22

Fearful of Russia, Ukrainian intellectuals plea to Obama, West

By Peter Byrne

Kyiv Post, September 10, 2009

More than two dozen Ukrainian intellectuals appealed to U.S. President Barack Obama and other Western leaders, calling for stronger security guarantees to protect Ukraine from Russia, which they allege is increasingly meddling in Ukrainian affairs.

In a letter made public on Sept. 10, they expressed fears that Russia could go so far as to use military force against Ukraine, and called upon western leaders to hold an international conference in order to provide real guarantees for Ukraine's security, as provided for by The Budapest Memorandum of Security Issues.

"The Russian leadership has consciously chosen a path to destroy existing security systems, a main aim of which is to subjugate Ukraine within the geopolitical interests of Russia. There are signs that the Kremlin is not ruling out using its arsenal and military methods. The informational war against Ukraine has reached unprecedented levels. A picture of Ukraine as the enemy is being formed within Russian society," the letter reads.

This week, Russian lawmakers adopted in the first reading a new military doctrine that sanctions use of Russia's army abroad to protect national interests. Referring to this development, the Ukrainian intellectuals said: "For the first time in many years, there are signs that the Kremlin would not rule out using forceful means to reach its foreign-political aims with respect to Ukraine."

The group cited the Budapest Memorandum on Security Assurances, signed on Dec. 5, 1994, in return for Ukraine's decision to turn over its nuclear arsenal to Russia. Citing this memorandum, the group called upon the EU, U.S., Great Britain, France and China, to "take firm and unequivocal stance to ensure the sovereignty of Ukraine."

Former Ukrainian President Leonid Kravchuk, writer Yuriy Andrukhovych and honorary dean of the Kyiv-Mohyla Academy Vyacheslav Brukhovetsky are among the well-known Ukrainians who signed the letter.

The groups's fears are shared by many Ukrainians, including President Victor Yushchenko. Ukraine's ambassador to the U.S. said the Ukrainian president hopes next week to meet with Obama in New York during a one-day UN summit on climate change.

Excerpts of the letter first appeared on the Ukrainska Pravda website on Sept. 10.

#23

Russia Says No to Iran Nuclear Sanctions

By Marc Champion and Jay Solomon

Wall Street Journal, September 11, 2009

MOSCOW -- Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov made it clear Thursday that Moscow wouldn't back any new rounds of tough sanctions against Iran in the United Nations Security Council, and he dismissed a U.S. timetable for securing progress from Iran on ending its nuclear-fuel program.

Mr. Lavrov's comments in Moscow led U.S. officials to acknowledge that new U.N. sanctions against Iran were now unlikely in the near term -- endangering a major element of President Barack Obama's high-profile strategy for diplomacy in the Middle East. "We're pretty disappointed with the Russian position so far," a senior U.S. official said.

The development also appeared a blow to hopes that the Obama administration's "reset" of relations with Russia would lead to Moscow supporting a top U.S. foreign-policy priority.

Just a day after U.S. officials warned that Iran may already have enough enriched uranium to make a bomb if processed further, Mr. Lavrov said negotiations should begin without any imposed timetable. He also said that even if Iran tried to make weapons-grade fuel it would be detected and there would be time to respond. "I do not think those sanctions will be approved by the United Nations Security Council," Mr. Lavrov said.

President Barack Obama has set a deadline of this month for progress on talks with Iran, and the U.S. and its allies planned to develop an international consensus about sanctions by the time the U.N. General Assembly concludes its meeting in New York in two weeks. But Russia wields a veto on the Security Council.

Mr. Lavrov's comments also came amid a political storm in Israel over the disclosure that Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu had secretly traveled to Moscow earlier this week. Israeli media immediately speculated he was there to lobby against Russian sales of anti-aircraft arms to Iran that would hamper any Israeli strike. A more likely subject for the trip emerged among some analysts: A proposal that Moscow host an Israeli-Palestinian peace summit to increase the credibility of talks.

Mr. Lavrov's comments Thursday, to an annual meeting of Russia experts known as the Valdai Club, was the second hit in two days to U.S. hopes of coaxing Iran to compromise on development of its nuclear program while dangling the threat of international consequences -- such as banning exports of necessities such as refined petroleum -- if it declines.

Senior U.S. officials Thursday said that Iran's proposal the day before on the nuclear issue was "insulting" to Western countries that had hoped for a diplomatic resolution. A senior official said the document, which didn't address nuclear-fuel production or a timetable for talks, appeared to indicate that Tehran wasn't prepared to engage in real talks, perhaps because of turmoil over its recent election.

The official added that Tehran seemed to be trying for a framework in which the issue of enrichment of uranium wouldn't be addressed at all. "This is clearly not going to happen," said the U.S. official.

Mr. Lavrov disagreed with the U.S. assessment, contending there was "something there to use" in the proposal Tehran sent to the U.S., Russia, China, France, Britain and Germany. He noted that Iran said in the document that it was ready for comprehensive talks on security in the region.

"They need an equal place in this regional dialogue," he said. "Iran is a partner that has never harmed Russia in any way."

The rebuffs from Tehran and Moscow appear to leave the U.S. with few options in trying to block Iran from developing a uranium stockpile, which the U.S. and European governments believe could trigger a nuclear arms race in the Middle East. Israel has hinted it might conduct airstrikes against Iran's nuclear infrastructure to prevent that.

Mr. Lavrov appeared to dismiss U.S. and Israeli warnings of urgency. If Iran tried to enrich uranium to weapons grade, he said, it would have to reconfigure its cascades of centrifuges, a move that would immediately be picked up by cameras monitored by the Vienna-based International Atomic Energy Agency. There would be time to respond, he said.

Western nuclear analysts say that if Iran can develop enough highly enriched uranium it could "break out" relatively quickly to manufacture a working weapon. Iran says it wants enriched uranium only for civilian purposes.

Mr. Lavrov said he welcomed the Obama administration's change in "style," and its willingness to listen to others -- a stark contrast, he said, to the administration of President George W. Bush. He noted that Russia since its "reset" of relations already has agreed to allow U.S. troops and military equipment to cross its territory to resupply the war effort in Afghanistan. He said Moscow had a common interest in seeing that effort succeed.

But Mr. Lavrov was skeptical about the depth of change in the U.S. approach under Mr. Obama, despite the Russian's view that a multipolar world -- in which the U.S. is just "the first among equals" -- increasingly restricts U.S. ability to impose its will globally. He added, "I don't think anyone in this room believes that any U.S. administration would forget its strategic goal: to stay No. 1."

Mr. Lavrov said even an expected U.S. move to drop plans to station a missile-defense system in Eastern Europe wouldn't be seen as a concession to Russia; such a move would merely correct a previous U.S. mistake, he said.