



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

NCSJ WEEKLY NEWS BRIEF
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#1

Staying relevant

New NCSJ president aims to publicize needs of Jews still in former Soviet Union

By Eric Fingerhut

The Washington Jewish Week, January 4, 2007

When Lesley Israel first traveled to the Soviet Union in the 1970s, she said her tour guide probably thought she and her sister-in-law were "silly girls" because they told him they wanted to skip a museum tour to go shopping.

But they didn't go shopping & they instead visited Soviet Jewish refuseniks.

Three decades later, Israel is still working to support Jews in the former Soviet Union, as the new president of NCSJ: Advocates on behalf of Jews in Russia, Ukraine, the Baltic States & Eurasia.

Israel points out that if her grandparents hadn't come to America, she might have been in the same situation as those refuseniks and never have been able to live the life she has lived here.

"But for the grace of God," she said.

Much has changed in those intervening years. She notes, for instance, that meetings no longer need to be set up with instructions like, "I'll be in red ... holding the Dostoyevsky book."

But that doesn't mean that NCSJ's mission is any less important, or that anti-Semitism has disappeared, she emphasized in a phone interview last week from her home in Royal Oak on Maryland's Eastern Shore.

"Too many people after communism asked, 'Why are you still relevant?' " she said. "My first job is to make them aware we are relevant. ... It's really important to recognize that these are not problems that have been solved."

For example, while state-sponsored anti-Semitism may not be much of a problem anymore, that doesn't mean anti-Semitism isn't a strong force. A poll this fall found that 36 percent of Ukrainians do not want to see Jews as citizens of their country.

The mission is more complicated, she noted. Instead of working and advocating for Jews in one country, there are now 15 nations. While Russia and Ukraine may have a Jewish population numbering in the hundreds of thousands, other smaller countries may have only a "handful of Jews" < but each one needs to be dealt with individually.

"Even though they're small, they're there and they need us," Israel said.

She admits that with so much focus on the Middle East these days, "it can be tough" to get Jews to pay attention to other areas of the globe. "But at the same time, people are more sensitive to the problems of the Jewish community around them."

Israel, 67, has a wealth of experience in the international arena, not just from her involvement in recent years with NCSJ (formerly known as the National Conference on Soviet Jews), but from her work with the International Foundation for Electoral Systems. She is treasurer of the organization, which provides assistance to new and developing democracies.

In fact, she traveled to the former Soviet Union in the early 1990s to teach campaign skills to Russians < everything from targeting voters to how to make political advertisements.

"All the things we do, they had no idea [how to do]," she recalled. "They had no ... background."

That election ended up being an indicator that "things hadn't changed" completely in Russia with the fall of communism, Israel recalled < it brought noted anti-Semite Vladimir Zhirinovsky to power.

NCSJ executive director Mark Levin said Israel's involvement with IFES "highlights the diversity within our leadership."

"Men and women like Lesley who are actively involved in many different organizations and interests can come together" and "NCSJ can take advantage" of their talents, he said.

Israel got involved in IFES through her career as a political consultant. That included work on congressional campaigns, as well as on a number of unsuccessful Democratic primary campaigns for president < from Hubert Humphrey to Ted Kennedy to Henry "Scoop" Jackson.

She said the campaign closest to her heart was her work with the Democratic Party to defeat white supremacist David Duke during the 1991 Louisiana gubernatorial campaign.

Israel decided to retire from political consulting about 10 years ago because the profession had become too "mean and nasty."

"It wasn't fun anymore, and the truth is I realized there were other things that mattered," she said.

Since then, she has traveled to more than a dozen countries with IFES to monitor elections and teach classes, and makes it a point to visit the Jewish communities while she's there, from the synagogue in the Democratic Republic of Congo to the Jewish community center in Kyrgyzstan.

In some cases, local residents aren't even aware of the Jews in their midst, recalling in that trip to Kyrgyzstan that her interpreter had no idea that the Jewish center existed.

Israel's prior experience with politics and diplomats throughout the world is a "pretty good training ground for NCSJ," said Harold Luks, a North Bethesda resident and former chair of the organization. (NCSJ has both a chair and a president, which Levin said allows the organization to split the multitude of duties that comes with leadership.)

"At the end of the day, the one overriding question" for NCSJ is "when do we speak out and what do we say," said Luks. "Lesley has the background to deal with both questions."

Israel is a longtime Washingtonian and still keeps an apartment in the District, but she and her husband, Fred, now live in Royal Oak on Maryland's Eastern Shore, just a few minutes' drive from St. Michaels. There, they attend Temple B'nai Israel, a 165-member congregation where Fred has served as president.

She's a former president of the JCC of Greater Washington, serving in the position in the mid-1980s, and has also been active in the Anti-Defamation League. She's now a member of the organization's national executive committee.

Israel said her Jewish activism over the years has taught her that "Jews all over the world take care of Jews all over the world," noting that even in those risky visits in the 1970s to Soviet Jews, her hosts always urged her to "come into my home and have a cup of tea."

"I realize how much group responsibility we have for one another," she said. "It's pretty awesome."

#2

Graduation Day: Will the U.S. Normalize Trade with Russia?

By Clay Risen

The New Republic, January 3, 2007

On November 2001, George W. Bush and Russian President Vladimir Putin strode down the long red carpet of the White House East Room to give a joint press conference. They were new best friends--Bush having looked inside Putin's soul--and since September 11 the two had been hashing out a new bilateral relationship: Russia would support the United States on counterterrorism, while the United States would grant Russia more leeway in its domestic affairs (read: Chechnya) and help smooth the way for its accession to the World Trade Organization (WTO). In fact, that same day, the White House released a statement supporting Russia's "graduation" from the Jackson-Vanik Amendment, which bars normal trading relations between the United States and countries lacking free markets and open emigration laws. As the two men gabbed about visiting Bush's ranch in Crawford, Texas and St. Petersburg's White Nights festival, Bush declared that "a new day in the long history of Russian-American relations" had dawned.

But that "new day" has turned to night over the past year, as the two countries have clashed over Iranian nukes, Georgian democracy, and Ukrainian reform. American policymakers warn of a new Russian imperialism abroad and a new Russian autocracy at home, while Russians bristle at what they consider American condescension and political chauvinism. "The U.S.-Russian relationship," the Carnegie Endowment's Dmitri Trenin and Mark Medish wrote recently, "has reached its lowest point since the end of the Cold War." And it's not just rhetoric: Russia is clearly backpedaling on democracy and the free market,

which in turn is leading to calls across the political spectrum for a much harder line--from the normally pro-free-trade economist Irwin Stelzer, who would bar Russia from the WTO; to John McCain, who appears to favor kicking it out of the G8; to a host of Democratic congressmen, who want to make trade relations contingent on further reforms.

In November 2006, Bush and Putin finally reached a bilateral trade deal, but its implementation hinges on Congress, which still has to lift the Jackson-Vanik restrictions early this year, something both Democrats and Republicans seem wary of doing. And because the WTO is unlikely to accept a country that has restricted trade with the world's largest economy, a failure to lift Jackson-Vanik would doom Russia's accession dreams, reinforcing anti-western factions within the Kremlin and convincing Russian politicians and the public alike that economic and political liberalization is a mistake. All of which makes the next six months a decisive moment in U.S.-Russian relations.

Senators Henry "Scoop" Jackson and Charles Vanik intended their 1974 law to punish the Soviet Union for imposing steep fees on would-be émigrés, especially Jews trying to move to Israel. Most religious and political freedom groups agree that Russia no longer violates the terms of the original amendment, but that hasn't stopped some congressional leaders from creating new, ad hoc reasons for keeping Russia bound by it. In April, Senate Majority Leader Bill Frist said that Jackson-Vanik graduation would hinge on Russian cooperation with the United States on the Iranian nuclear crisis. And while Frist will be out of office next month, he is being replaced by a host of other congressmen, including California Representative Tom Lantos, who would link graduation to a broader assessment of Russian human rights. What's more, accompanying Frist out the door will be Pennsylvania Representative Curt Weldon, one of the most vocal advocates of graduation on the Hill. As Elizabeth Stewart, a foreign policy adviser to Oregon Senator Gordon Smith, predicted at an American Enterprise Institute panel in October, "I think it is unlikely the administration will be given a free pass on Russia the next two years."

But it's the next few months that really matter. Congress will be under pressure to bring Russia's standing under Jackson-Vanik to a vote early in the next session, because Russia's WTO accession talks will begin early this year and its graduation is an informal requirement for them to succeed. If Congress votes no, or just tables the issue, the trade organization is unlikely to override what is essentially a U.S. veto and allow Russia into its fold.

In purely economic terms, this is small beer. Export-wise, Russia is not a major manufacturing or agricultural nation, so, unlike China, it does not need the WTO to break down trade barriers. In fact, its most important asset, natural resources, will always find relatively open markets by virtue of demand. And while the growing Russian market is a lucrative one for American businesses, it is dwarfed by China and other emerging nations. Rather, the real impact of WTO exclusion will be to turn Russia further away from the West, which could have serious security consequences.

While Putin's image has lost much of its luster among Americans of late because of his disdain for unfettered democracy, Russia watchers warn that he is in fact the best hope for future reforms. That's because what looks like a monolithic autocracy on the outside is actually a precarious alliance of reformers, technocrats, and the conservative siloviki (mainly security and military officials), held together by the president. As Ian Bremmer and Samuel Charap write in the current *Washington Quarterly*, "Although other institutions and the private sector are now largely irrelevant, disputes between Kremlin factions, rather than directives from the president, often determine major policy outcomes."

Putin has managed a grand economic bargain between the liberals, led by Economic Development and Trade Minister German Gref, and the siloviki: Russia will take an aggressively statist approach to natural resources but in all other areas pursue market reforms. The liberals are the weakest faction and thus make the concession for pragmatic reasons, while the siloviki, the most powerful, are for now convinced that market reforms--including WTO membership--will make Russia more powerful, even though they will also open it up to foreign investment and international transparency.

To be sure, Putin is no liberal. Neither, despite his provenance, is he a siloviki. Rather, he is marginally a technocrat, evinced by his apparent selection of that faction's leader, Gazprom chair and First Deputy Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev, as his successor. The fear among Russia watchers, then, is that a WTO failure would delegitimize the liberals and hurt Putin while elevating the anti-Western siloviki. If they gain power, then Russian intransigence could turn into Russian antipathy, or even aggression: As Bremmer and Charap note, the siloviki see NATO and the United States as active threats, talk of revanchist plans for the former Soviet republics, harbor anti-Semitic and xenophobic views, and are openly derogatory of democracy and free markets. Nor is that the worst-case scenario--a disorderly realignment could empower the extremists, who, unlike the siloviki, have no pretense of abiding by the rule of law or international agreements. In an ironic twist, then, a failure to lift the Jackson-Vanik restrictions could end up reviving the very specters it was enacted to combat.

President Bush has placed himself firmly behind Jackson-Vanik graduation and WTO accession for Russia. But he is much less enthusiastic about Putin than he was in 2001--according to The Washington Post's Jim Hoagland, he recently told his advisers that "we have lost Putin" and that his erstwhile ally "fears democracy more than anything else." This bodes ill for any hope of him expending political capital on the congressional fight, especially in an area--trade--where he has so little to begin with. It is therefore up to the new Democratic Congress to recognize the stakes in the upcoming debate. Punishing Russia may feel good in the short term. But failure to promote Russian reform will end up hurting everyone.

Clay Risen, a former assistant editor at The New Republic, is managing editor of Democracy: A Journal of Ideas.

#3
A City of Memorials Finds Itself Filling Up
By Felicity Barringer
New York Times, December 30, 2006

WASHINGTON, Dec. 29 — This supremely political city has a keen sense of history and its uses. So, not surprisingly, it also has a thing for memorials: marble, granite and otherwise. Six presidents and seven wars have monumental tributes in or near downtown Washington.

But presidents are not the only people so honored. Ground was broken for the Martin Luther King Jr. memorial on the Mall six weeks ago, and Congress has approved a monument to Francis Marion, the "Swamp Fox" of the Carolinas during the Revolutionary War. Most recently, it approved one to millions of victims of the 1932-33 Ukrainian Holodomor, or famine.

Wait. The Ukrainian famine? A monument to be built on federal land by the Ukrainian government? Whose history is this?

That question, raised in the 1990s about another foreign memorial, has since ricocheted around the National Park Service and the National Capital Planning Commission, the agencies most responsible for monitoring the conception, creation and placement of new museums and commemorative works in the federal city.

"I think there's a heightened sensitivity to where we place these memorials and museums, and whom we venerate," said the planning commission's chairman, John V. Cogbill III. "I don't know how that is going to shake out."

Mr. Cogbill was sanguine, however, about the potential for future conflict over allocations of available memorial space, saying, "We view ourselves as a world city, so I think in that respect you want to embrace something that is not indigenous to our own culture."

The language of the Commemorative Works Act of 1986, which set out procedures for the creation of memorials on federal land here, is a little less inclusive than Mr. Cogbill is. It envisions commemorative works that evoke "the memory of an individual, group, event or other significant element of American history."

In the two decades since Congress enacted that law, about 30 memorials have been approved, four of which did not conform to the provision about American history.

Two of the four honor foreign leaders. Mohandas Gandhi, the apostle of nonviolence who led the movement that freed India from British rule, strides forward in front of the Indian Embassy on Q Street N.W. Tomas G. Masaryk, the first president of Czechoslovakia, looks out over the World Bank on H Street N.W.

The other two honor victims of Communist rule. The first is a bronze replica of the "Goddess of Democracy" erected in Tiananmen Square during the Chinese student protests of 1989, is dedicated to the "victims of Communism" and will rise not far from Union Station. The latter is to the victims of the Ukrainian famine, a monument whose site and design have yet to be determined.

In 2005, John Parsons, an associate regional director of the National Park Service, advised Congress that the proposed Ukrainian memorial, which was in legislation sponsored by Representative Sander M. Levin, Democrat of Michigan, duplicated the purpose of the Victims of Communism Memorial.

"While the victims of the Ukraine famine obviously deserve recognition," Mr. Parsons testified, "we believe that creating separate memorials for individual groups would detract from the overall message of the Victims of Communism Memorial and could, potentially, create an unfortunate competition amongst various groups for limited memorial sites in our nation's capital."

There are more than 160 memorials in the city, and 75 museums, said Lisa N. MacSpadden, the spokeswoman for the National Capital Planning Commission. The inventory goes up, on average, by one memorial a year and one museum a decade, Ms. MacSpadden said.

The commission's most recent map shows 100 memorial-worthy sites remaining to commemorate all the country's history to date and all its history to come.

Statues of foreigners are, of course, nothing new: the Marquis de Lafayette looks down on the White House from a high pedestal in his eponymous park, with Thaddeus Kosciusko a stone's throw away.

Simon Bolivar, who freed much of South America from Spanish rule, looms over the intersection of 18th and E Streets N.W., and a statue of the Ukrainian poet Taras Shevchenko was unveiled by President Dwight D. Eisenhower near the eastern end of the P Street Bridge. That monument was championed by one of Mr. Levin's predecessors who also represented heavily Ukrainian areas of Michigan like Troy and Warren.

(History buffs have created Web sites memorializing Washington memorials, like one at www.kittytours.org/thatman2/index.html.)

The history of the Ukrainian famine — in which Moscow's requisitioning of the Ukrainian harvest, along with its orders to collectivize agriculture, caused the starvation of millions of people — was long caught in the disinformation and silence imposed by Stalin. Not until a few weeks ago did the Ukrainian Parliament enact a law paying tribute and providing for the creation of a memorial to the famine's victims. The law came weeks after the United States Congress voted to approve the memorial in Washington, to be paid for by the government of Ukraine.

The initial push for the memorial came from Ukrainian-Americans in Michigan, said Borys Potapenko, president of the Ukrainian Congress Committee of America.

The strongest push, in 2004 and 2005, coincided with the Orange Revolution that brought Viktor A. Yushchenko the presidency. Mr. Potapenko said in a telephone interview that he was nervous about the memorial's future in the wake of recent political developments, which have left Mr. Yushchenko to share power with his former opponent, Viktor Yanukovich, who had Moscow's support.

But Iryna Bezverkha, a spokeswoman for the Ukrainian Embassy, said embassy officials met in December with members of a Park Service advisory commission to discuss the steps to be followed to win approval for a design and site.

City planners, however, are more concerned with Congress's ability to come to terms with the physical limits of the land.

"We are starting to realize that there are a limited number of places left" for memorials, said Mr. Cogbill of the planning commission. "That means we have to start to think carefully."

#4

Ukraine - The View From The Kremlin

By Walter Parchomenko

Kyiv Post, December 27, 2006

Vladimir Putin's Orange nightmare is over. The Russian leader can now sleep soundly. Premier Viktor Yanukovych and the Party of Regions are clearly in charge in Ukraine and, in their own words, are cleaning house and restoring order.

Putin's visit to Kyiv has received increasing attention from Ukrainian and Western political observers. Prediction, in a highly dynamic political environment such as Ukraine's, is always hazardous.

Consequently, it is not surprising that much of the available commentary offers sweeping generalizations and often idle speculation about the possible results of this meeting.

Rather than add to this growing mountain of largely trivial speculation, it may be more instructive simply to highlight several key but generally inadequately grasped facts - essential background about recent Ukrainian-Russian relations.

Doing so may shed light on Putin's true intentions in visiting Kyiv and on his preferred vision for Ukraine.

FACT 1: President Putin has been and continues to be Viktor Yanukovych's most loyal foreign benefactor. He has never hidden his support for the fraud-marred premier.

His public expressions of support have been deftly adjusted since Ukraine's 2004 presidential election to meet the country's changing political landscape, but his allegiance to Yanukovych and his Party of Regions remains unswerving.

Amazingly, after blatantly fraudulent rounds of that election, Putin, like a brash schoolboy, rushed not once but twice to prematurely congratulate Yanukovych on victory.

Learning from experience, he subsequently adopted a more circumspect but no less active role in supporting Yanukovych and his Party of Regions in the 2006 parliamentary election.

Significantly, in the short period since becoming premier, Yanukovich has already met with Putin on several occasions, in Moscow and Sochi, to discuss bilateral cooperation.

FACT 2: Yanukovich and the Regions-led majority in parliament have unabashedly rushed to demonstrate their profound gratitude to Putin for his faithful support in shaping the Ukrainian political scene.

Their conspicuous haste to deliver major political dividends to their Kremlin sponsor, although tactically imprudent because it diminishes their already low credibility at home and in the West, tellingly reflects their steely determination to quickly and steadily repay their enormous political debt to Putin.

In just over 100 days, they have begun to synchronize important Ukrainian security policies with those of their northern neighbor. And in the words of ordinary citizens here in Ukraine: "They are firing Orange-leaning Cabinet ministers and delivering their heads on a platter to Vladimir Putin."

FACT 3: In Brussels last September, Yanukovich did much more than close the door on a NATO Membership Action Plan in 2006. Although only dimly perceived in the West, he also effectively placed a cross on any future Ukrainian membership in NATO.

To the great delight of the Kremlin and members of Ukraine's so-called Anti-Crisis coalition in parliament, he rested the issue squarely on a future national referendum.

It is no secret that Yanukovich's Regions party adamantly opposes Ukrainian membership in NATO and relishes today's harsh realities: Ukrainian public support for NATO today is low and declining, anti-NATO activities have increased over the past year, and the Ukrainian government's support for a NATO information campaign remains scant.

Moreover, Moscow, as in the past, stands ready to resort to active measures in Ukraine to support anti-NATO forces, should the need arise. To believe that this decidedly negative trend line on Ukrainian membership in NATO can be easily reversed is, indeed, a pernicious myth.

FACT 4: Vladimir Putin waged economic wars - gas, meat, and dairy notably, in 2005 and 2006 with the clear intention of destabilizing Ukraine's economy and Yushchenko's Orange government.

These "man-made crises," unquestionably, harmed Ukraine's economy and measurably influenced the political scene. With his man, Viktor Yanukovich, now in power, Putin no longer needs to wage economic wars.

Putin, strictly speaking, only seeks good partner relations with Yanukovich and other Moscow-loyal members of the Regions-led parliamentary coalition.

Putin's aversion to color revolutions and their leaders remains categorical. His ongoing economic war with Georgia, home of the Rose Revolution and reportedly 70 percent support for NATO membership, is compelling evidence of this fact and a stark daily reminder.

At first glance, Putin's decision to end economic wars with Ukraine and help stabilize its economy, if only to benefit Viktor Yanukovich, is welcome news. The crucial question, however, is at what price to the nation?

Putin's preferred vision for Ukraine is a mirror image of what he has accomplished in Russia during his presidency.

Translated, this means total control of the "commanding heights" by a Moscow-loyal Party of Regions with the virtual monopolization of parliament by pro-Regions forces, the consignment of any democratic opposition in parliament to the political wilderness, and judicial attacks upon any uncooperative big business.

It also means that the future of Ukraine's budding NGOs and any genuine security sector reform will be in grave jeopardy.

It must be said that in Putin's Russia a distinction is made between acceptable (government affiliated) and unacceptable (state adversaries) NGOs, while security services unarguably function as a political instrument.

To what extent do Yanukovich and Party of Regions leaders share such a vision? Disturbingly, in just over 100 days in government, they have provided much cogent evidence of their preference for Putin's authoritarian style of leadership and model of government.

Furthermore, their intent to gravitate toward a Moscow-Donetsk vector in domestic and foreign policymaking is evident almost daily.

Vladimir Putin will continue to view Ukraine through the prism of velvet revolutions and their clear and present danger to Russia's influence in the post-Soviet space.

He will struggle unceasingly to ensure the demise of the Orange Revolution and a Ukraine outside of NATO. Moreover, Putin and Party of Regions leaders will likely remain loyal partners in this struggle.

#5

Kazakhstan's Echo

Being a woman in Kazakhstan

By Salima I. Sadybekova

The Washington Times, December 29, 2006

As we in Kazakhstan celebrate the New Year, Qurban Ait (Eid al-Adha), both Catholic and Russian Orthodox Christmases and even Hanukkah, we look back at the year 2006 and see that our ties with the peoples of the world, including the Americans, have become stronger. We now know that millions of Americans became aware of Kazakhstan and the way we the Kazakhs live. While this may sound gratifying, one of the biggest reasons for this greater knowledge is the movie "Borat" by a British comedian released in November, which misrepresented my country as a country of backward misogynists.

This, of course, has nothing to do with the real Kazakhstan. While this truth sounds obvious, it seems that in America few people know of the role women play in the real Kazakhstan, or any other "stan," for that matter. What is more, this lack of knowledge may now be reinforced by a misrepresentation in "Borat." So I want to share my side of the story with the Americans because I believe there are reasons why they can benefit from knowing it.

I am a Kazakh professional woman living in today's independent and progressive Kazakhstan. Women in Kazakhstan are active in all fields and enjoy full privileges in a society that values our talents and ambitions. My own life as a Ph.D. (the first in my family) in philology and as an associate professor of foreign languages at Kyzylorda State University is a good example.

In the past, women were typically removed from Kazakh public life. Girls were not admitted to schools, women were refused medical assistance and employers preferred men.

The discrimination had its roots in the distant past and in an old view that a woman's duty was to stay at home, keep hearth, bring up kids and be a good wife. Relatives historically celebrated the birth of a son, not so much of a daughter. This was a source of great frustration for all women. Today, such a problem no

longer exists. A Kazakh woman now needs only to believe in herself and build on her high level of education in order to be able to move mountains.

Kazakhstan's independence in 1991 brought new opportunities for us. The time when women were just cooks and kept away from running the country are long gone. In our secular and dynamic Muslim country, Kazakh men have learned to value the brainpower and ambitions of their female partners.

In reality, the "Kazakh" woman is hard to define. She could be an ethnic Kazakh or come from one of more than 100 ethnic groups of our nation, including Russians, Germans, Poles, Koreans and Tartars. She could be Muslim, like myself; Christian; Jewish; or even a Buddhist. We all live and work together.

Kazakh women are involved in both running the country and running their households. It is not rare to meet Kazakh female government ministers, members of parliament, akims (mayors), professors, judges and prosecutors, and executives at leading companies, including such industries as oil, construction, retail, real estate and banking.

The role of women in Kazakh homes has also changed drastically. We share with men responsibilities for our families' well-being, and are often the breadwinners. Half of the families' budgets are often provided by women who have to balance running their affairs outside the home with taking care of their elderly parents and children. That is my daily to-do list. I think most American women understand what I mean.

Having a paying job is not only a necessity for a modern Kazakh woman, but one of the main values in her life. Many women feel happy and independent only when they do productive work. Many of our women also enjoy spending their own money on themselves in the ever increasing number of boutiques. Today, we have our own Kazakh designers and there is even a fashion week in the capital. Women wearing concealing burkhas have never been widespread in a mostly nomadic Kazakhstan, and are now a thing of a very, very distant, almost forgotten past.

A Kazakh woman understands that her career is not the main thing. Our families, homes and children still come first. I, along with many other women, believe the family is the core of our society, and it is our responsibility to bring up our children as good citizens. They will continue our work of building a better Kazakhstan. A lot will depend on their education, and we are proud that there are thousands of young Kazakh men and women who study abroad under the presidential scholarship, including hundreds in the United States.

If there is no tradition for education within a family, however, no university can help. Both at home and at my university I do my best to nurture a thirst for knowledge.

My life and the lives of many other Kazakh women show how vibrant a role we play in Kazakhstan. Many of our friends in Arvada, Colo., the twin city of Kyzylorda, already know that. I would like many more Americans to visit Kazakhstan, and see for themselves what we, the Kazakh women, can do and achieve in our country. Most American women will feel very comfortable in Kazakhstan. Come visit us in the new year. Until then, may your new year be peaceful and prosperous.

Salima I. Sadybekova is an associate professor of foreign languages at the Kyzylorda State University in Kazakhstan and is actively involved in the Arvada-Kyzylorda sister-cities program.

#6

Shadow of Kremlin over Russian revival

Editorial

Financial Times, January 2, 2007

It would be wonderful to start the year on an optimistic note about Russia but, alas, impossible. For although there are some bright developments taking place in President Vladimir Putin's Russia, they are overshadowed by those that are dark and even dangerous.

On the bright side, the two-minutes-to-midnight deal on New Year's eve between Gazprom, Russia's gas mono-poly, and the government of Belarus has averted another alarming and unnecessary gas war. On the dark side, threatening to cut off gas supplies in mid-winter to an impecunious neighbour is the behaviour of a bully.

In the end, Belarus will have to pay more than double for its gas supplies, and sell a 50 per cent stake in its transit pipeline to Gazprom. But that is a better deal than was available to either Ukraine or Georgia, countries Mr Putin regards as disloyal for aligning with Nato and the west.

Playing energy politics could be seen as merely brutal realpolitik. Mr Putin sees international relations as a zero sum game. But there is a more ominous side to what is happening in Moscow. The killing in London of Alexander Litvinenko, the former KGB officer, showed for all the world to see the growing violence of Russian public life. He blamed his death on Mr Putin and his agents. The Kremlin angrily rejected the charge. But it cannot escape responsibility for helping to foster a climate in which such killings are becoming common. Mr Litvinenko's death followed other murders in Moscow, notably that of Anna Politkovskaya, the campaigning journalist.

Mr Putin came to power promising to restore law and order after the turbulent rule of Boris Yeltsin, his predecessor. He has reasserted the Kremlin's authority over actual and potential challengers, including business oligarchs, independent media outlets and regional governors. His campaign has coincided with an oil-fuelled surge in the economy which has given renewed strength to the Kremlin and generated rising incomes for many Russians. Thanks to energy resources, Russia has recovered some of its lost pride. Even if it is no longer a global superpower, it is once again a force in world affairs. Mr Putin has emerged as Moscow's most popular leader since Stalin.

But all this has come at a painful price. The country was no liberal democracy under Mr Yeltsin but at least it was stumbling in the right direction. Under Mr Putin it has gone back a decade. There is no danger of a return to communism. But Russia is moving relentlessly towards authoritarianism. Lacking an alternative ideology, Kremlin officials are increasingly resorting to old-fashioned nationalism.

At home this brings growing pressure on non-Russian minorities, notably people from the Caucasus and central Asia. Abroad, there is increasing pressure on neighbouring states, especially those such as Georgia that dare to question Moscow's primacy.

With Mr Putin committed to securing the triumph of a chosen successor in next year's presidential elections, the pressures at home and abroad can only intensify. As the possible danger comes not from the weak liberals but from competing Russian nationalist forces, the Kremlin will reinforce itself at the ugly end of the political spectrum.

The precise course of events cannot be forecast, but it would be reasonable to expect some of the following: pressure on non-Russians living in Russia; renewed political assaults on Georgia and other troublesome ex-Soviet republics (but not war, as war is inherently unpredictable); the intimidation of Mr Putin's domestic enemies, particularly those complaining about corruption, human rights abuses or Chechnya; and financial raids on oligarchs and/or foreign investors - to please the crowds and reward loyalists. There will foreseeably be some lavish public spending.

In all this, even less attention will be paid to western complaints. That is no reason for Europe or the US to soft-pedal on criticism. But the struggle for the Kremlin succession will mean a period of internal instability and unpredictability. After all, there is no agreed system on how to manage such affairs. What a pity Mr Putin does not seem to understand that a genuine parliamentary democracy would make matters easier. Instead, he will choose his man, and his man will almost certainly win in 2008.

#7

The Putin we don't know RIA Novosti, January 2, 2007

MOSCOW. (RIA Novosti political commentator Andrei Vavra) - Russian President Vladimir Putin's online news conference consists of about one million questions asked by mail, telephone, SMS and via the Internet.

Most of the questions are serious and allow the president to speak on the key issues of life in Russia, yet there are quite a few questions that are not directly connected to politics.

Although Putin has held his high post for seven years and appears on television almost daily, he still remains an enigma, to a degree. We know his face, but can we say that we know him?

The objective of the Kremlin's PR team is to show the president in the best light. They show him talking with the people, including children, and at home with his family and pets. Everything looks fine, and we seem to have come very close to knowing the president, but for one thing.

Putin can quickly close the door into his life, thoughts, likes and dislikes. He guards his privacy against intruders, as he was probably taught to do in the KGB school. But we tend to revise the knowledge we receive at school, adjusting it to our temperament, way of thinking, views and values.

Putin added judo to his "special studies" in the KGB school. Judo is a martial art teaching you to respect your adversary.

Order and democracy

By the 1990s, Russia was ripe for reform. The wave of change that swept the country brought to the surface a new generation of politicians, businessmen and economists, as well as a great deal of opportunists. Each of them had their own formula for enrichment, which they claimed would benefit the country. The result was a rapid appearance and growth of Russian millionaires despite a persisting crisis in the economy.

Putin firmly put an end to the practice of splitting Russia into privately owned domains. Although his policy overstepped the role of the state, it was the only way to stop certain people from using state property for personal enrichment and whims.

It is one of the reasons why Russia has been accused of building a democracy that does not look like Western models and therefore cannot be regarded as a true democracy. Putin is invariably pained by these complaints.

Theories are very good, but is there a reliable formula for restoring order in a country that is being torn apart by financial and industrial groups, regional clans and outright criminals?

Putin started using India's example as an argument in discussions about universal recipes for building a democratic state.

"Your country is a major democracy," the Russian president said in Indian parliament in 2004. "You have overcome the most deeply embedded stereotypes according to which democratic principles can effectively develop only in European-type countries. India has proved that ancient systems can be modern and successfully respond to today's challenges. Your experience shows that democratic freedoms and human rights are both universal and inimitable values bearing the imprint of history, traditions and customs of the people that share them."

Skis and judo

Russia's first president Boris Yeltsin played tennis, which quickly made it a national sport. Although it had never been big at tennis before, Russia started winning leading positions in world tennis, ratings, and team and personal championships.

Putin is fond of mountain skiing, which has forced his bodyguards to learn mountain skiing too, sometimes breaking their legs in the process. But a president going down a slope with a well-trained team is a sight to behold. Hopefully, Russian mountain skiers are yet to rise to the top of the global charter. At least, ski slopes are being equipped for their training sponsored by Russian businessmen.

As to judo, we like our trim and lean president. Putin remains firm on his feet when his team turns grey and green with fatigue. He has apparently learned the trick of concentrating and using the body's hidden reserves from his judo practice.

Putin is the most physically fit and the best trained of all Russian presidents, not to mention communist party general secretaries of the Soviet era. No wonder we are proud of him.

Lyudmila, Masha, Katya and Connie

The president is married and has two daughters.

His wife Lyudmila has proposed establishing the Russian Language Center aimed at popularizing the Russian language and culture in the world.

His daughters Masha and Katya are students at St. Petersburg University.

There are several pets in the family, but Black Labrador Connie is the undeniable favorite and the star of newspaper and television reports. She often attends important international meetings. At the very least, she feels at home in the president's Novo-Ogaryovo residence outside Moscow.

This sometimes creates problems. Muslims are discouraged from keeping dogs in their homes, but what can a visiting Muslim dignitary do if Connie decides to "get acquainted" by licking his hand?

No one is perfect

The Russian president has his drawbacks. One of them is his totally illegible handwriting.

Another is his tendency to be late for official functions. On the other hand, the latter can be interpreted as perfectionism: Putin never starts a new project without completing the previous one to his liking.

His third drawback is his reluctance to fire people. However, he sometimes replaces those he had dismissed with completely unexpected candidates.

This seems to be about all I can think of for now.

#8

Belarus Yields to Russia Deal on Gas Prices Solidifies Success Of Kremlin Strategy

By Alan Cullison

Wall Street Journal, January 2, 2007

MOSCOW -- The last-minute deal that sharply raises the price of Russian natural gas to Belarus highlights the success of a Kremlin energy policy that the West has denounced as bordering on blackmail. By showing that it is willing to cut off countries that won't accept rate increases, Russia has ended an era of cheap energy supplies to former Soviet republics.

Russia's natural-gas monopoly and its largest company, OAO Gazprom, announced the agreement early yesterday, hours before the company said it would shut down supplies to Belarus. The agreement more than doubles the price of gas to Belarus, to \$100 per 1,300 cubic yards from \$47. Moscow also said it would acquire a 50% stake in the Belarus gas-transit monopoly, Beltransgaz, an asset Minsk for years has refused to surrender.

The agreement, announced as the Russian capital celebrated the New Year, also will gradually step up the price of gas for Belarus toward levels that Europe pays, near \$300, in coming years. It follows months of negotiations in which officials from Moscow threatened to cut off gas to Belarus in midwinter and officials from Minsk threatened to disrupt Russian gas supplies to Europe.

Ultimately, the Belarus side flinched and agreed to pay a touch less than the \$105 per 1,300 cubic yards the Russians were demanding. "The Belarussian side, in a difficult atmosphere on the eve of the new year, signed an agreement on unfortunate terms," Agence France-Presse quoted Belarus Prime Minister Sergei Sidorsky as saying.

The agreement caps a year of rate increases for states of the former Soviet Union that its neighbors and the West have called politically motivated.

Russia cut off gas to Ukraine last Jan. 1 when negotiations with Kiev failed, a move that was denounced by European countries, which saw their supplies flowing through Ukraine disrupted. Afterward, Vice President Dick Cheney accused Russia of using energy as an instrument of intimidation and blackmail. Europe started stockpiling gas as a hedge against future disruptions and exploring alternative suppliers.

Gazprom said it is just trying to put its relations with neighbors on a market-oriented footing and end subsidized energy supplies to the countries of the former Soviet Union. Though Russia was hurt by criticism of the Ukrainian cutoff, its eventual agreement with Kiev nearly doubled prices for gas last year and raised them to \$130 for 2007. Moscow also has sharply raised prices for Azerbaijan, Georgia and Moldova.

"The Russians put up with a lot of damage to their reputation after Ukraine, but now they have their customers in line," said Jonathan Stern, head of gas research at the Oxford Institute for Energy Studies. "Every [customer] knows Russia will not let them off the hook easily."

Until recently, Belarus had been an exception. Led by its autocratic president, Alexander Lukashenko, Belarus for years had benefited from the comparatively inexpensive supply of natural gas, a support to its state-managed economy. It is Russia's second-largest consumer of natural gas among former Soviet states, and last year, Minsk paid \$47 per 1,300 cubic yards -- roughly the price of gas for users inside Russia.

But relations between Moscow and Minsk lately have been strained: Though putative allies, each blames the other for failing to follow through on plans to unite the two countries. Moscow is ending duty-free oil shipments to Belarus, a move that is expected to cost more than \$1 billion in profits to the country's refining industry. Last week, Russian officials warned that Belarus would face a shut-off of natural-gas deliveries at 10 a.m. yesterday if it didn't agree to higher natural-gas prices. Belarus, in turn, threatened to disrupt pipelines on its territory that carry more than 20% of Gazprom's exports to Europe.

Belarus had hoped European countries would panic at the prospect of another gas cutoff and put pressure on Russia to make a quick deal with Minsk, said Chris Weafer, chief strategist at Alfa Bank in Moscow. But none wanted to do any favors for Mr. Lukashenko, widely regarded as Europe's last dictator, he said. Many had stockpiled gas supplies to last for several weeks in case of a cutoff.

Belarus "played a game of chicken with Moscow, and they saw that Moscow would not blink," said Mr. Weafer.

Mr. Weafer said Belarus has managed to soften the blow of the rate increase by agreeing to sell off a portion of Beltransgaz, thus giving Belarus nominally lower gas prices than its neighbors. But he expects Gazprom to push for total control of the transportation company in coming years.

"Russia will have control of that company by the end of the decade, that's for sure," he said. "Belarus doesn't have much choice. What are they going to do? Go without gas?"

#9

Chabad switching its FSU focus to quality of services, localization

By Lev Krichevsky

JTA, December 31, 2006

MOSCOW, Jan. 2 (JTA) — Russia's largest Jewish group has announced new targets for the upcoming year, changing its primary focus from expansion to the quality of services. Now that its previous policy of expanding the network of Jewish communities in Russia has resulted in more than 190 member communities, the Chabad-led Federation of Jewish Communities said in its end-of-the-year report that "it is now becoming more important to increase quality of activities in the existing communities."

The change in the group's approach stems from the fact that the Jewish community in Russia has matured since the end of communism and is now demanding a better quality of service, FJC Executive Director Rabbi Avraham Berkowitz said.

Unlike earlier days, today's local Jewish community in Russia "is not just a rabbi covering the town," Berkowitz said.

Local communities now have a network of Jewish life that in the larger ones includes a synagogue, a Jewish school, a kindergarten, youth activities, and social and welfare programs.

FJC did not disclose its budget, but Berkowitz said 2006 saw a 15 percent increase compared to the previous year and that the trend would continue into 2007. In 2005, FJC's budget was estimated at \$60 million, with nearly \$36 million raised in North America by the Russian group's U.S. arm.

Most of Chabad's programs continue to rely on funding from the group's few major donors in Israel and the Americas.

Only in larger cities does locally raised funding constitute sizable portions of the FJC communities' budgets. In most smaller communities, Berkowitz said, foreign funding still accounts for an average of 70 percent of the budget.

Of the federation's corps of rabbinical emissaries, or schluchim — 152 rabbis with their families in Russia and 146 in the rest of the FSU — about half are Russian born. The rest are mostly Israelis and Americans.

Now, the group says, it is time to localize as much of its operation as possible.

One example of such need is the summer camps run by the organization.

“Our summer camp network always relied on staff from the U.S.,” Berkowitz said, referring to the dozens of yeshiva students that travel every summer to the former Soviet Union to work as camp counselors.

“But there was a big disconnect” between young American yeshiva students — most of whom were born to Orthodox families — and largely assimilated and non-observant Russian kids. Over time the group has concluded “it was much better to have local staff” working at camps, Berkowitz said.

With this goal in mind, last summer FJC started a new year-round training program for local counselors.

The program now works in seven cities. Future Chabad camp counselors “are not necessarily Chabadniks,” Berkowitz explained. “They are people with various levels of observance, but they should all be devoted Jews.”

A pioneering project launched this year could significantly influence the essence of Jewish life in the region.

The project, called Stars, is a \$10 million enterprise funded by Lev Leviev, the Russian Israeli diamond mogul and federation president, and Elio Horn, a Brazilian Jewish philanthropist.

Its idea is to get Jewish college students involved in a few hours of Jewish studies a week. Participants are paid stipends that differ from city to city but generally are about \$100 a month — by local standards a substantial amount for young people.

Berkowitz said the program that started a few months ago already has some 5,000 participants across the former Soviet Union who study at Chabad-run centers five hours a week.

Students will learn for one year, and the budget is enough to operate the project for three years, Berkowitz said.

The program’s aim is not only to educate Jewish students, Berkowitz said.

“If they go through this program,” he said, “hopefully they marry each other and become part of the community.”

The federation is focused on those who are Jewish according to halachah, or Jewish law — that is, born of a Jewish mother. This exclusiveness has often become a target of criticism in a community known for a very high level of intermarriage.

Despite that, FJC is billing itself as the voice and umbrella for all Jews living in Russia, and traditionally shuns the image of a fervently Orthodox organization trying to impose its standards on Russian Jewish life.

Berkowitz said his group’s activities in the region are carried out with “Chabad enthusiasm and love for Yiddishkeit without imposing Judaism” as religion.

Not crossing the line into pushing religious observance — a charge some make against Chabad in the region — constitutes an especially challenging task in several dozen of the federation-run schools and kindergartens. The group operates more than three-quarters of some 100 Jewish day schools in the former Soviet Union.

“Ninety percent of the 15,000 kids in our schools are secular,” Berkowitz said. “But directors of religious studies are Chabadniks.”

Ideally the schools need to be delicate to avoid creating a conflict at the students' secular homes.

In part, this goal can be achieved through the group's extensive network of community centers that run a variety of programs in culture, arts and sports, and can bring participants closer to the Jewish tradition without forcing them into strict observance.

In the past several years, FJC spent millions in mostly foreign donations to build new community centers with synagogues in locations across Russia.

The new FJC Jewish community center opened Dec. 19 in the Siberian city of Krasnoyarsk. Believed to be the largest Jewish facility in Siberia, the Beit Menachem Tabacnic center includes a synagogue, kosher soup kitchen, library, education classes, sports and music facilities.

Of late, the federation has stressed grandeur in its projects, constructing impressive and costly facilities.

#10

Ukrainian gas war twelve months later

By Tatyana Stanovaya

RIA Novosti, December 31, 2006

MOSCOW. (Tatyana Stanovaya for RIA Novosti) - January 1, 2007, will be one year after the gas war between Russia and Ukraine broke out: the review of energy policies toward post-Soviet republics has allowed Russia to put its relations with almost all of them on a market-oriented basis.

Paradoxically, this to a large extent helped to overcome the Russian-Ukrainian crisis, as foreign political failures of the Orange government drastically weakened its position inside the country.

Gas supply was turned off on January 1, 2006, which came as a blow for Ukraine, European consumers and the multimillion audience witnessing the shock therapy Moscow was conducting in post-Soviet states. Russia came under a wave of criticisms and was accused of using gas as a political weapon. The crisis in Russian-Ukrainian political relations peaked. Ukraine was on the brink of parliamentary elections, in the run-up to which the U.S. had abolished the Jackson-Vanik Amendment and signed the WTO accession protocol, although Kiev had not yet adopted the necessary laws. The country became a battlefield in the geopolitical struggle between the East and the West. Moscow's stand was straightforward: why should it subsidize an economy whose geopolitical priority is NATO membership?

At that time it seemed that the crisis would last for several years, just as is the case with Georgia, whose relations with Russia have not seen a glimpse of light for a long time. However, summing up the year's results, we can already say that the West has lost another round in the geopolitical struggle for Ukraine, opening for Russia the door toward improving its relations with its neighbor.

The Orange kept losing their positions throughout the year. First the pro-presidential bloc Our Ukraine and the Yulia Tymoshenko Bloc lost the parliamentary election to Viktor Yanukovich's Party of Regions. This was followed by many months of talks on a parliamentary coalition after the constitutional reform had come into force and weakened President Viktor Yushchenko's power.

Fighting to keep control over the executive body, Yushchenko did not allow uncontrolled populist Tymoshenko to become prime minister and so missed the moment for setting up a coalition with the Regions on favorable terms. As a result, he lost everything: the Regions created a coalition with Socialists

and Communists, imposing itself on the president and starting a quick expansion inside the power structures and on such presidential prerogatives as the foreign policy.

The foreign policy is becoming increasingly evasive for the president. The prime minister is taking the initiative at talks with the West and Russia. Yanukovich is not trying to accelerate developments in the Euro-Atlantic direction, preserving the balance of interests between the Ukrainian Orange and proponents of Russia. Even the West, after handing out advanced votes of confidence, soon made it clear that Ukraine would not join the EU in the foreseeable future. As a result, pro-Western policies ceased to be the government's ideology, alleviating Moscow's irritation. Kiev's policies have become more pragmatic; it no longer rules out involvement in pro-Russian projects, such as the Common Economic Space.

Competition between the rapidly weakening Yushchenko and strengthening Yanukovich is beneficial for Russia, making its dialogue with Kiev as efficient as it can be. Yanukovich, who is in fact not a pro-Russian politician, has to get closer to Russia and look for compromises, fearing that his mistakes can be used by his political opponents. During his premiership, Russia has scored several victories, such as lifting the Transdnestr blockade and extending gas contracts on acceptable terms. Under the agreements signed after the gas war, Russia had gas transit prices fixed for the next five years, separating them from gas prices for Ukraine. This is the main outcome of that conflict. The Kremlin's strategic line now is towards decreasing its dependence on transit countries. This goal lies at the foundation of the current crisis in relations with Belarus, which has long been refusing to establish a joint venture between Gazprom and Beltransgaz.

Yanukovich made sure that his country would be buying gas at \$135 per 1,000 cu m, which is one of the lowest prices in the former Soviet Union. He received "assistance" in this issue from Turkmenistan's late president Saparmurat Niyazov, who had raised gas prices for Russia to \$100 per 1,000 cu m. Fearing to lose monopoly on gas exports to Ukraine, Russia had to agree to sell gas almost at cost price.

Russia and Ukraine are entering the New Year with their relations stabilized, as testified by Russian President Vladimir Putin's recent visit. The drastic weakening of the Orange inside the country allowed Putin to redirect his diplomatic efforts from Yushchenko to Yanukovich, simultaneously supporting the diarchy.

Yet there has been no breakthrough in Russian-Ukrainian relations and it is unlikely: patchwork peace is now beneficial for both countries, which are not interesting in escalating their differences. Stability will prevail for some time, but as soon as the conflict inside the Ukrainian government fades and one of the parties (either the Orange or the Regions) restores its domination, relations may sour once again.

Tatyana Stanovaya is an expert at the Center for Political Technologies

#11

A New Parliament, but Still All Putin?

By Steven Lee Myers

New York Times, December 31, 2006

RUSSIA heads into 2007 facing the question of whether President Vladimir V. Putin's centralization of power can ensure the smooth and more important, credible election of a new Parliament, now scheduled for December.

Elections, even in a "democracy" as managed as Russia's, have a way of surprising, as Ukraine showed after a fraudulent presidential election in 2004 led to mass protests. Mr. Putin is popular enough to ensure that whoever he supports will fare well, but corruption remains deeply rooted, as do poverty and crime and violence, any of which could be a catalyst for an electoral nyet.

The Kremlin is taking no chances. With Mr. Putin's blessing, the existing Parliament, or Duma, spent much of 2006 preparing for the elections by tightening laws. It abolished minimum turnout requirements and the option of voting "against all." New election rules also barred candidates from criticizing the authorities in office or even encouraging a vote against an opponent.

New laws against extremism have already been used to raid a political group led by the chess champion Garry Kasparov. When Mr. Kasparov led a rally of a few thousand protesters in Moscow this month, the police outnumbered them four to one.

Critics said the restrictions would stifle what opposition remains, including what's left of the Communist Party and the old liberal democrats. The Duma is already dominated by United Russia, a party with little identity except as a reflection of Mr. Putin's legislative will.

Liliya Shevtsova of the Moscow Carnegie Center said the Kremlin risked eliminating competition. "To have just one party with a constitutional majority," she said, "it starts to look like the Soviet Communist Party."

So in October, the Kremlin created an "opposition" party, cobbled from smaller parties. It is called Just Russia, and it, too, supports Mr. Putin. For the party's leader, Sergei M. Mironov, this is a familiar path. He ran in the 2004 election "against" Mr. Putin by urging voters to re-elect Mr. Putin.

With a Kremlin endorsement and coverage on state television, Just Russia could provide a foil for United Russia, and provide at least a modicum of interest to the stilted politics of Mr. Putin's second term, marked more than anything by an absence even of debate, let alone real competition.

Mr. Kasparov says the Kremlin has obscured the seeds of discontent. And they are growing, he says, especially beyond the glow of Moscow's riches.

A big question looming is who will replace Mr. Putin in 2008? The maneuvering expected in 2007 reflects a concern over whether the system he created could survive without him. "The big day is approaching," Mr. Kasparov said. "Uncertainty kills the system."

#12

Russia: Controversy Mars G8 Presidency

By Brian Whitmore

RFE, RL, December 29, 2006

December 29, 2006 -- Russia's reign as G8 president, which comes to a close on January 1, began and ended with controversy.

As it took over the post from Great Britain in January, Russia was embroiled in a nasty dispute with Ukraine over natural gas prices. The fallout led many in the West to accuse Moscow of using energy as a weapon and to question its reliability as a supplier.

And as Russia prepares to turn over the G8 leadership to Germany on New Year's, the Kremlin is battling deep suspicions about its potential role in the murder of former intelligence officer Aleksander Litvinenko and journalist Anna Politkovskaya.

Now, a new gas crisis -- this time with Belarus -- is the latest scandal to cast long shadows over what Russians hoped would be a triumphant year.

Shared Disappointment

Moscow wanted to use the G8 presidency, particularly the organization's July summit in St. Petersburg, to showcase its renewed influence in the world.

Many in the West hoped that holding such a high-profile position would motivate Russia to be a more predictable and reliable partner. But as Yevgeny Volk of the Heritage Foundation's Moscow office explains, Russia and the West were both disappointed.

"The expectations for Russia's G8 presidency were not fulfilled on either side. Russia was counting on using its G8 leadership to improve its position in the West, to improve its image and to strengthen its position as an energy power in the West. It sought to conclude agreements that would support its advantageous position on the [energy] market," Volk says.

The West was equally frustrated in its desire to gain access to Russia's energy market and in its hopes for Moscow to be more cooperative in resolving "frozen conflicts" in Transdniestar, Abkhazia, and South Ossetia.

Differing Visions

Part of the problem lies in the different ways Russia and the West -- particularly Western Europe -- view multilateral institutions like the G8.

So how then did Russia see it?

Timofei Bordachev, the director of studies at the Moscow-based Council for Foreign and Defense Policy, says Russia came to the G8 as a regional power with a regional agenda.

"The main point was the question of energy security, but unfortunately this was turned more into Russia conducting negotiations with energy consumers than an overall vision or strategy," Bordachev says.

It was the year that saw Russia's natural gas monopoly Gazprom vastly expand its assets and Russian oil companies extend their reach abroad. It was also the year that saw Moscow steadfastly refuse to sign an Energy Charter with the European Union, which would allow foreign firms greater access to the Russian market.

WTO Entry

But perhaps Russia's biggest success was winning U.S. approval in November to join the World Trade Organization. U.S. objections had been a major hurdle to Russia's long-sought membership of the organization. Russia still needs to sign agreements with several countries before joining the organization.

But perhaps the enduring legacy of Russia's G8 presidency will be symbolic.

James Nixey, the Russia and Eurasia program manager at the London-based Chatham House research institute, says the presidency wasn't just about pomp and circumstance.

"For the Russians at least, it is about showing that you are in the top eight players in the entire world, and that's very important to Russia -- to show that it still means something, to show that it is still significant, that it is still relevant," Nixey says.

#13

A New Beginning For Turkmenistan

By Nurmuhammet Hanamov

Washington Post, January 3, 2007

The writer is the founding chairman of the Republican Party of Turkmenistan in exile. Before announcing his opposition to President Saparmurad Niyazov's regime and going into exile in 2002, Hanamov served as Turkmenistan's ambassador to Turkey and Israel and chairman of Turkmenistan's State Planning Committee.

Last week Turkmenistan buried its brutal dictator, Saparmurad Niyazov. His ruthless reign spanned two decades, during which time his policies became increasingly irrational and unpredictable. The long list of Niyazov's crimes against our people includes: banning all political parties except his own and jailing his opponents; preventing thousands of "disloyal" citizens from traveling abroad; persecuting religious and ethnic minorities; outlawing opera; and shutting down regional hospitals, firing thousands of doctors and nurses. Under Niyazov, Turkmenistan became a corridor for heroin trafficking from Afghanistan to the West and gained for itself one of the highest heroin addiction rates in the world.

Above all, Niyazov was a selfish and kleptocratic despot, stashing billions in proceeds from the sale of the country's enormous natural gas resources in personal accounts in Western banks. He used this money to fuel his outlandish personality cult, building opulent palaces and golden statues of himself even as his people were deprived of basic necessities and suffer one of the world's lowest life expectancy rates. The West's indifference was striking compared with the relentless criticism by the United States and the European Union against the more benign regime of Alexander Lukashenko, president of gas-poor Belarus.

With Niyazov gone, the West has a historic second chance to help our country make a peaceful transition to democracy. Turkmenistan's interim rulers have unfortunately pledged to continue Niyazov's policies (even ordering new statues of him), and their efforts to grab power amount to a coup d'état. The former health minister -- under the de facto control of Niyazov's Presidential Guard -- has arrested the speaker of Parliament, who constitutionally is next in the line of succession. He has sealed the country's borders and, using other unconstitutional measures, has set the stage for his own unchallenged victory in presidential elections scheduled for Feb. 11.

The United States must send a clear message to Niyazov's holdouts in the "interim government" in Ashgabat: that they will not have its support unless they agree to hold free and fair elections -- ones that allow all citizens of Turkmenistan, including exiled opposition leaders and political prisoners, to take part.

We know that the United States has tried to help the people of Turkmenistan in recent years, and thanks to American educational exchange programs, there is a thriving community of bright Turkmen students and intellectuals who are living in Western countries and are ready to return and help rebuild their country. This community is largely held together by the efforts of Khudaiberdy Orazov, a former chairman of the National Bank and an accomplished and energetic leader who was forced into exile several years ago. He was unanimously nominated to be a candidate in the February presidential elections by a broad coalition of opposition groups inside and outside of Turkmenistan. According to a recent poll, Orazov's candidacy would have the support of a majority of Turkmen voters. Until Orazov and other opposition candidates are allowed to contest the February elections, the United States and the European Union must refrain from recognizing the junta in Ashgabat and freeze all personal accounts of Niyazov and his cronies abroad. We hope that members of Congress and other government officials will visit Turkmenistan soon to personally deliver that message.

We must rebuild our country, and with the help of our friends and neighbors we can do it in an open and transparent way. Priorities for a democratically elected government during the initial post-Niyazov reconstruction must be to release all political prisoners, conduct open tenders and allow Western companies to bid for a stake in developing Turkmenistan's oil and gas fields; to consider new ways of getting our gas and oil to Western markets; to restore private property that Niyazov confiscated from

Turkmen citizens; and to create a reconstruction fund using Niyazov's personal bank accounts and proceeds from the sale of oil and gas to revive the health-care and education systems.

The United States is spending billions of dollars trying to turn Afghanistan and Iraq -- both deep in the throes of civil war -- into democratic nations while all but abandoning their peaceful post-Soviet neighbors to the north. Turkmenistan is ready for a new beginning, and the West must finally step up to the plate. To do otherwise would waste a historic opportunity and allow yet another case of popular discontent with an illegitimate government to become an anti-Western lost cause.

#14

Belarus: How Hard Could Gas Price Hike Hit Economy?

By Jan Maksymiuk

RFE/RL, January 4, 2007

January 4, 2007 -- By more than doubling the price of natural gas supplies to Belarus in 2007, Moscow has stripped Minsk of a lavish and much-needed subsidy.

Cheap gas -- along with duty-free Russian crude oil refined and reexported by Belarus -- was largely responsible for the country's official two-digit economic growth during the past several years.

But on December 31, 2006, in Moscow, Belarus and Russia's state-controlled gas monopoly Gazprom signed a new deal, securing Russian gas supplies to Belarus and Russian gas transit across Belarus for 2007-2011.

Under the contract, Belarus is to pay \$100 for 1,000 cubic meters in 2007 compared with \$46.68 in the previous 2 and 1/2 years. The gas price for Belarus is to gradually increase to the European market level by 2011.

So will the gas price hike put an end to the "economic miracle" in Belarus?

Beltranshaz Sale

Since Belarus imports some 20 billion cubic meters of Russian gas per year, at first glance it doesn't look good. The country's gas bill in 2007 will be higher by some \$1 billion compared to last year.

But this financial burden will be significantly alleviated by the money Gazprom is to pay Belarus this year for its 50 percent stake in Beltranshaz, Belarus's gas pipeline operator. Gazprom agreed to pay \$2.5 billion for half ownership of Beltranshaz by equal installments during the following four years.

And, additionally, Belarus has increased the price of Russian gas transits via its territory from \$0.75 in 2006 to \$1.45 for 1,000 cubic meters per 100 kilometers for the following five years.

Belarusian independent economic expert Leanid Zlotnikau argues that the gas-price hike will not hit Belarus so hard.

"Taking into account this year, the losses of our economy will amount to \$500 million," Zlotnikau says.

"Taking into account only this and nothing more, these are not big losses, because our gross domestic product amounts to some \$32 billion-\$34 billion."

Tatsyana Manyonak, a Minsk-based journalist focusing on economic issues, also says that in 2007 the government will be able to cushion the blow.

"Now it is necessary to revise all budget figures, all investment programs. But the Belarusian government had foreseen this situation. Therefore, in late 2006 it created a Fund of National Development, into which some \$600 million had to be paid until the end of last year," Manyonak says.

Incremental Rise

But economists say in subsequent years, when the gas bill becomes much heavier, Belarus may find itself in trouble.

Another economic expert from Minsk, Leanid Zaika, estimates the new gas price could at least double inflation in Belarus in 2007: "This [price hike] may affect prices and increase the inflation rate from 5-6 percent to 12-14 percent, or even higher. All will depend on whether the new expenses will be covered entirely by economic entities."

The government has already announced that the main brunt of the gas price increase will be taken by corporate consumers, which will now have to pay \$150 per 1,000 cubic meters of gas. Their electricity and heating bills will also grow by more than 50 percent this year.

As regards individual consumers, the government predicts that an annual increase in their housing and utility payments will amount to some \$5-\$6 in 2007.

Refining Crude Oil

But Zaika says that there is a more unpleasant development in store for the Belarusian authorities than the gas price hike and the forced sale of Beltranshaz to Gazprom.

In December, the Russian government slapped a duty of \$180.7 per ton on crude oil exported to Belarus as of January. Russia claimed it was losing billions of dollars every year by allowing its firms to send duty-free oil to Belarus's two refineries in Navapolatsk and Mazyr, which then reexported refined products to Europe.

Belarus halted crude oil purchases from Russia as of this month and has proposed to split between Minsk and Moscow profits from its exports of refined Russian oil on a 50-50 basis if Moscow lifts the duty.

The proposal has most likely been rejected by Moscow because on January 3 Belarusian President Alyaksandr Lukashenka imposed a transit fee on Russian oil of \$45 per 1 ton.

If Moscow has its way regarding crude oil exports to Belarus, Zaika estimates that Belarus's losses may be much heavier than those linked to gas.

"We will be stripped of that part of the revenues that were received in the form of duties on refined oil, taxes on profit, and excises. The budget revenues will be less by some \$200 million every month at the minimum," Zaika says.

With Belarus's 2007 consolidated budget revenues projected at some \$19 billion, such a financial loss could cast doubt on the officially projected economic growth of 9 percent and inflation of 7 percent in 2007.

Searching For Options

After signing the gas deal in Moscow, Belarusian Prime Minister Syarhey Sidorski said the country will have to hunt for resources in order to maintain economic development.

But Belarus has no gas or oil or coal deposits.

To avoid paying for Russian energy supplies with strategic assets like Beltranshaz, one of Belarus's only options might be to reform the country's economy. That would mean privatization of the major industries and could mean reforming the country's collective farm system.

It could also mean tapping into the human resources that are being restricted by the country's Soviet-style political and economic management.

More economic freedom could mean more political freedom --something many Belarusians would welcome.

(RFE/RL's Belarus Service contributed to this report.)

#15

Cash-strapped FSU communities rely on young leaders' enthusiasm

By Michael J. Jordan

JTA, December 31, 2006

SAULKRASTI, Latvia, Dec. 31 (JTA) — At 27, scruffy-bearded Julij Reznikov is among the elders at a recent retreat for Baltic Jewish youth. He's also the only one who brought a child: His 3-year-old son, Baruh, bounds playfully between discussion groups. Reznikov and his wife, Diana, import and sell Israeli cosmetics from a kiosk in a Riga mall. Diana also works as a kindergarten teacher, which enables Reznikov to volunteer part-time for the Jewish community.

Occasionally he is compensated a bit for organizing events, like this retreat. But in a society where many just scrape by, how much he's paid influences how many hours he can commit.

"I'm a Zionist, and I believe Jewish youth should volunteer for the community, not do it only for money," he says. "Of course, if someone says I will pay you, I will not say no."

But decent pay is unlikely from the cash-strapped Jewish communities of Latvia, Lithuania, Estonia and elsewhere across the former Soviet Union, which count on the cheap labor of volunteers old and young, or those with a breadwinning spouse.

That puts these communities in a quandary: During decades of Soviet hostility to religious life, middle-aged Jews across the region drifted far from their Jewish identity. Few in that "missing generation" are prepared to hold positions of leadership in the Jewish community.

The young generation is different. Indeed, many young Jews in the FSU — nourished by summer camps, youth groups, Jewish schools, training as youth counselors and perhaps a birthright Israel trip — express pride in their Jewishness.

One 19-year-old Lithuanian Jew proudly notes that he walks around Vilnius, where skinheads are known to roam, with an Israel Defense Forces patch written in Hebrew sewn on his jeans.

Yet young Jews here can't afford to be just proud and active: Their community increasingly relies on them to help lead.

Cognizant of this, the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee, Hillel and others offer leadership and management training to scores of young FSU activists.

“They are the backbone of Jewish renaissance in the region,” JDC Baltics representative Andres Spokoiny says. “Much of their childhood and youth was spent in democracy, in a context in which Jewish alternatives started to exist. Therefore, these kids are in a much better position than their parents to be community leaders because they have a much more Western outlook, more community experience and more Jewish knowledge.”

But with the JDC hoping to wean communities from dependence on foreign financing — coupled with the fact that elderly members of the community are mostly impoverished and middle-aged members often disaffected — it’s the younger generation that will foot much of the bill in the future.

These youth leaders face tough decisions in the next few years: Should they stay in the region or emigrate? And if they do stay, how much time and energy can they spare for their communities?

The region’s economies are growing stronger, but immigration to Israel or the West still beckons. Opportunities here are limited, while the cost of living escalates.

Across the board, young people lament the struggle to own an apartment and car or enjoy an occasional night out.

“Everyone is searching for a better life,” Alexey Rozenberg says.

The 23-year-old from Riga is vice principal of a home for troubled teens, and he describes how one boy kicked and pummeled a girl, who then went after him with a knife.

On top of his 40-hour work week, Rozenberg gives eight to 10 hours to the community.

“It’s my commitment to my roots,” he says.

Rozenberg would like to strike a balance between work and community, but “the main question is how to survive,” he says. “You can be a super Jew, but without money you can’t make a proper Shabbat.”

Young people in the region say a desirable salary is about \$1,000 per month. That’s roughly triple the poverty level, and enables one to buy a modest two-bedroom apartment with a long mortgage.

Yet that figure still is well below what multinational corporations or international organizations offer as they snap up talented, young, multilingual individuals.

Senior community leaders concede they can’t compete with those financial incentives.

“Of course there are discussions about how to keep young professionals within our community,” says Masha Grodnikiene, 60, deputy chairwoman of the Jewish Community of Lithuania, whose husband’s business success enables her to volunteer full-time for the community.

Money isn’t the only issue, says Moni Beniosev, 28, who hails from the small Bulgarian Jewish community and helped organized the weekend event in Riga.

Some young leaders, reared in a newly democratic environment, become turned off by an establishment, grounded in the Soviet era, that’s overly bureaucratic, lacks creativity, is inflexible and zealously defends its turf.

“A young person with ambitions doesn’t want that, but to build a career in a cool place, where you can achieve something in your life,” Beniosev says.

One way to lure young adults, Beniosev says, is through events like the one near Riga. Held at a wooded, seaside resort 30 miles north of the city, some 80 Jews discussed eclectic topics such as Shabbat

traditions, Jewish views on sex and business ethics, the recent gay pride rally in Jerusalem and the dangers of totalitarian mind-control.

The intellectual stimulation gave way to games and dancing at night.

On the sidelines, some young leaders discussed the life decisions they're confronting.

Julia Lansberg, 21, from the Estonian capital of Tallinn, was a camper attending Jewish school when an older youth from the community recruited her to take a leadership role.

"Now he's left the community and I'm still active," she says.

That's an understatement: Lansberg ended up running the camp.

"The camp position was paid, but it was so little, it was more symbolic," she says.

Working toward her degree in municipal management, Lansberg is also the Estonian community's program coordinator.

"Right now I feel very connected to the community — it's my heart, my soul," she says. But "if in the future I feel the need for more money, I know it will be a very difficult decision for me."

Lansberg's former classmate from the Tallinn Jewish school, Aleksandr Zdankevitch, was hired recently by the community to work part-time as youth coordinator.

Zdankevitch also studies international relations, organizes "rave" parties and produces his own music. If the Jewish community were to offer a full-time job after graduation, he says, "It's 2,000 percent that I would say yes ... only I wouldn't be a kid anymore. They'd have to pay me like a staff member."

The equivalent of \$1,000, he agrees, would do the trick.

For others, the question is: If not me, who?

Natalja Trusova says she was bitten by the bug of Israeli dance at age 16.

"It's like a virus, as I call it," says the Vilnius resident, now 21.

She soon started a dance class for adults in the Jewish community center. After attending dance seminars, camps and training in Israel, Trusova has since established Israeli and Jewish dance classes for schoolchildren, advanced students and — her favorite — a group of about a dozen seniors.

"After teaching them I have the greatest feeling," Trusova says. "They went through the Holocaust, and in the Soviet Union, where would they have had a chance to learn Israeli dance?"

It's also a way to bring assimilated Jews closer to the community, she notes.

While friends and classmates consider immigration, "My business here isn't finished yet," Trusova says. "I want to leave a footprint in this community."

Moreover, she adds, "If I leave, there may be no more dancing."

For those starting their own families, the decisions are even more serious.

Reznikov, of Riga, has been involved with Jewish life since he was 14.

"I don't see my life outside the community," he says. His aim is to "show people that the Jewish community is like a second home."

Yet he, too, considers the possibility of emigrating.

"I want to give my son the maximum," he says. "And if I have a better chance to give that to him in another country, then I will."

#16

Bolstering U.S.-Russia ties

By Edward Lozansky

Washington Times, January 5, 2007

Edward Lozansky is president of the American University in Moscow.

The year 2007 marks the 200th anniversary of diplomatic relations between Russia and the United States. In Russia, the governmental circles and some public organizations are preparing numerous events and solemn acts for the occasion, but across the Atlantic there is little evidence of enthusiasm. Moreover, the impression is that, with the exception of President Bush and U.S. Ambassador to Moscow William Burns, Russia has absolutely no friends left among the top U.S. leadership. Things are even more disheartening when it comes to Congress. Senators or congressmen kindly disposed to Russia are as scarce as hen's teeth.

The last such romantic oddity, Curt Weldon of Pennsylvania, suffered a crushing defeat in the November election, not least because of his over-close ties with Russia. Meanwhile, only a short time — just five years ago — the very same Mr. Weldon managed to get nearly 200 members of Congress to sign a document that called on the White House to lose no more time in promoting broad cooperation with Russia in various vital areas of security, economics, business, science, education and culture. As it turned out, that was but a voice in the wilderness. Possibly the only organization to take that document seriously was the Russian Academy of Social Sciences, which made Mr. Weldon its foreign member. As pointed out above, though, for him that proved a hindrance rather than help.

The fact that Sen. Joe Biden and Rep. Tom Lantos have been appointed new international affairs committee chairmen hardly bodes well for Russia, either. Both never tire of publicizing their preference for a tougher line on Russia and for its expulsion from the Group of Eight. The only thing that still keeps the relations between the two countries from degenerating into Cold War hostilities is the mutual friendship of Presidents Bush and Putin, which persists against all odds. Yet, given that both gentlemen are to step down in 2008, it is widely believed that 2008 will be the year to inaugurate an even fiercer phase of the Cold War, with all its attendant nastiness.

The reasons for such a sad state of affairs are fairly well known; they have been repeatedly discussed in the media and among the expert community. There is hardly any point in going over them here. Let me just note that each side blames the other while being unwilling to admit its own mistakes. Meanwhile, an unbiased observer will easily see that both are at fault, and the list of recriminations in either case is perfectly logical and adequate.

As realists, we should not expect that all existing problems could be settled in the immediate future; so let us try and invite both Russia and the United States to make concessions on at least one of the key issues, considering that in this festive season it is customary to make wishes and say nice things to people.

For instance, Russia's Iran policy alarms even the most loyal of its friends in the West. Only someone who will neither hear nor see can fail to realize that Iran is doing its best to obtain nuclear weapons, and is likely to have its wish within a reasonably short time. It is enough to listen to pretty frank statements by the Iranian president and his entourage to see that we are dealing with fanatics, and fanatics armed with nuclear weapons pose a very serious threat for everyone, Russia included. Unfortunately, a closer look at Russia's policy in that part of the world suggests that it is making it easier rather than harder for Iran to join the nuclear club. Would Russia be prepared to modify its Middle East policy to prevent this from happening?

As far as the need to readjust U.S. policies is concerned, the worst irritant for Russia is NATO's eastern enlargement, in particular involving Ukraine and Georgia. If this becomes a fact, U.S.-Russian relations will be poisoned for decades to come. At the same time, in both political and purely practical terms, it would be a lot more reasonable, instead of enlarging NATO, to replace that organization with a new and, hopefully, more efficient entity that would incorporate Russia.

As everyone knows, NATO was originally devised to counter the military threat presented by the USSR and world Communism. It certainly accomplished its mission with flying colors, and many people expected it to be disbanded after the Warsaw Pact was. When it became obvious that that was not going to be the case, there was talk of Russia joining NATO. However, that accession never materialized either, for various reasons, and will hardly occur in the future. Over the last 15 years we have lived in a paradoxical situation where a mighty military structure with a vast budget had no clear-cut goals or tasks — and, moreover, no specific adversary. At the same time NATO continued expanding inexorably, and it was not till the latest conference in Riga that the adversary — international terrorism — was finally discovered.

Considering that successful struggle against terrorism is hardly possible without Russia actively taking part, it seems logical to suggest the following scenario: NATO announces its self-disbandment and simultaneous entry into another structure tentatively to be named the International Anti-Terrorist Organization (IATO) that would comprise countries recognizing its charter, goals and tasks and prepared to take part in large-scale global battle against terrorism. Ideally, it would merge or, at any rate, coordinate its actions with the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), since their goals and tasks would be very similar.

Should Russia and the United States discuss in earnest the two aforementioned issues and agree on a solution, I am confident that they could also achieve headway in other important areas.

#17

Turkmen Leader Proposes Vast Change to Lift Isolation

By Ilan Greenberg

New York Times, January 5, 2007

ALMATY, Kazakhstan, Jan. 4 Turkmenistan's acting president, Gurbanguly Berdymukhammedov, who had promised only continuity with the severely authoritarian policies of his predecessor, on Thursday proposed measures that would help lift the nation from its fortresslike isolation.

Mr. Berdymukhammedov promised a laundry list of changes affecting agriculture, social assistance programs, education and the economy. The proposals, outlined in a speech in Ashgabat, the capital, included giving students access to foreign universities including those in the United States sending doctors to Western hospitals to acquire modern skills and extending primary schooling to 10 years. Mr. Berdymukhammedov also vowed to create a culture of entrepreneurship, suggesting that he would encourage private ownership of some residences and businesses. Almost all economic activity in Turkmenistan is tied to the government.

He also promised to allow universal access to the Internet. Turkmenists are allowed almost no contact with the outside world. In recent years, even foreign newspapers and cable television from Russia were prohibited under the mercurial rule of Saparmurat Niyazov, the “president for life,” who died on Dec. 21. Simply receiving a telephone call originating in a foreign country can arouse the interest of Turkmenistan’s feared security apparatus, said Turkmenists who had spoken to journalists.

Mr. Berdymukhammedov’s public comments underscored the fluidity of the nation’s opaque politics as it prepares for a presidential election on Feb. 11, foreign analysts said.

“I think there is a much more deeply rooted struggle for power in Turkmenistan than we originally thought,” said Martha Brill Olcott, a senior associate at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace in Washington, in a telephone interview.

As acting president, Mr. Berdymukhammedov, a former deputy prime minister, was prohibited by the Constitution from seeking the presidency. But the national legislature simply changed the rules to allow him to run and then approved a slate of colorless, midlevel bureaucrats and politicians as false opposition candidates.

But Mr. Berdymukhammedov may fear that such tactics are backfiring, Dr. Olcott said, strengthening the opposition in exile and increasing the chances that his opponents will gain support from Western governments.

“Berdymukhammedov is seeking ways to appease the foreign community in order to get support for a very nondemocratic constitution modified in a very nondemocratic way, and to validate an election in which the electoral process was flawed from the beginning,” she said.

The government trumpets its policy of geopolitical neutrality, but Turkmenistan’s dependence on customers for its enormous natural gas deposits has given outside powers, especially Russia, Europe and the United States, significant influence.

But few signs of outside pressure have been seen.

The “Turkmenistan government is going to have to moderate their own political process,” Sean McCormack, the State Department spokesman, said Wednesday, when asked by reporters how the United States would respond to recent lobbying from Turkmen opposition figures for support of the country’s exiled political opposition.

In his speech, Mr. Berdymukhammedov also promised to double state pensions, student stipends and government salaries, to build resorts on the Caspian Sea and to continue Mr. Niyazov’s popular program of distributing water, salt and gasoline free.