



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

NCSJ WEEKLY NEWS BRIEF
Washington, D.C. Friday, March 31, 2006

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#1a

Holocaust memorial vandalized in Ukraine JTA Brief, March 26, 2006

A Holocaust monument was vandalized in southern Ukraine. The monument in the city of Sevastopol was smeared with black paint, swastikas and anti-Semitic graffiti. The incident took place on the night of March 22-23. Local authorities are investigating the incident.

Acts of anti-Semitic vandalism in the southern Ukraine region of Crimea have been occurring almost every month during the past year, local Jews said.

#1b

Dynamo chief plays down anti-Semitic slurs in stadium By Eli Shvidler Haaretz, March 29, 2006

MOSCOW - Last night's post-game press conference began with a dramatic statement by Hapoel Jerusalem spokesman Gidi Davidi: "We thank Dynamo Moscow for hosting us, but we also expect ULEB to take action against the racist phenomena and slurs against the Jewish people that we encountered here," Davidi said.

On hearing Davidi's remarks, Dynamo president Yevgeny Gomelski, a Jew himself, rushed to join the press conference and accused Hapoel of suffering from a persecution complex.

"We warned our fans more than once - nothing racist, nothing anti-Semitic," Gomelski said. "There is always some kind of a problem with the Israelis, and they are trying to justify a loss. We are a much better team, and that's why we won. I have coached in Israel; I know that there are hundreds of thousands of coaches there and six million prime ministers. We were simply better, and now they are looking for excuses to justify the loss."

Anti-Semitic slurs were indeed heard here and there in the arena last night, and a banner raised behind the Hapoel bench in the fourth quarter depicted a caricature of a Jew with a long nose and the words: "We will hang you, dirty."

On the game itself, Jerusalem coach Erez Edelstein had the following to say: "I feel like we missed out, but Dynamo was better. We had a great European season, and we're proud of the way that we played. We had some fantastic battles. You can't win in Moscow when they go to the line 38 times and you only 10. Dynamo is an excellent team and played better, but we could have pulled it off if we had made two or three more shots at the right time when we were making our comeback."

#1c

First Israeli MP of Azerbaijani origin to arrive in Baku soon - Arthur Lenk

By R. Abdullayev

Trend.az, March 30, 2006

First Israeli MP of Azerbaijani origin will arrive in Baku soon, Trend reports quoting Arthur Lenk, the Israeli Ambassador to Azerbaijan, as saying at a meeting with the students of the Khazar University on Thursday.

According to Lenk, Joseph Shagal was elected to the Israeli Knesset [Parliament] as a result of the 28 March 2006 parliamentary elections.

"Shagal is a mountain Jewish lived in Baku and removed to Israel after collapse of USSR. The deputy ran for the parliamentary elections from 'Israel -Our Home' Party. Earlier he worked journalist at 9th channel of the Israeli TV," Lenk stressed.

#1d

Church to Open a Rights Center

Moscow Times, March 31, 2006

The Russian Orthodox Church said Thursday that it would open a human rights center in an attempt to better reflect the values of most Russians.

"A mistake by many rights activists today is that their activities do not correspond with the opinions and values of a majority of our people," said Metropolitan Kirill, head of the foreign relations department of the Moscow Patriarchate.

Kirill, speaking at a news conference, also expressed surprise that Cardinal Walter Kasper, head of the Vatican's Council for Christian Unity, had suggested on Monday that a papal visit to Russia was looking increasingly likely. "This topic has not been considered, nor has it even been proposed," he said. He noted, however, that dialogue with the Roman Catholic Church "has intensified" since Pope Benedict XIV was elected last year.

Also, Kirill criticized a recent U.S. State Department report that criticized religious tolerance in Russia while praising Afghanistan for its religious freedom.

#2

Russian Jewish group upset after synagogue attacker sentenced

By Lev Krichevsky

JTA, March 27, 2006

MOSCOW — A leading Russian Jewish group has sharply criticized the verdict of a man found guilty of stabbing nine people in a Moscow synagogue because the court failed to call the attack a hate crime. On Monday, the Moscow City Court sentenced Alexander Koptsev, 21, to 13 years in prison for attempted murder in the January incident. But the court cleared Koptsev of a second charge, inciting ethnic or religious hatred, effectively refusing to treat his crime as an act of anti-Semitism. The defense is expected to appeal.

The verdict is more evidence of "how the judicial system in our country is not willing to fight against racial and religious intolerance," the Federation of Jewish Communities said in a statement Monday.

The group's leader echoed this statement. "I have a dubious feeling about today's sentence," Berel Lazar, one of Russia's chief rabbis said. "Yes, the sentence is severe and adequate for the gravity" of the crime. "But at the same time I'm concerned by nearly maniacal unwillingness of the courts to qualify crimes of this type as inciting ethnic and religious hatred," Lazar said in a statement.

Lazar said the verdict "leveled the educational meaning" of the sentence as court found the man guilty only of his acts, not of the motives that made him act.

Yitzhak Kogan, the rabbi of the synagogue where the incident took place, refused to comment on the verdict.

In his final word in the court last week, Koptsev was unrepentant, although he asked those whom he injured to forgive him.

He added that his victims should not have been targeted because they "are not waging war against my people, as are their" fellow Jews "who are in power" in Russia. He added that enmity against Russians is in Jewish "genes."

On Jan. 11, Koptsev stabbed nine people in the Bolshaya Bronnaya Street Synagogue in Moscow with a hunting knife before being pushed to the ground by the synagogue's rabbi and several worshippers.

Investigators have established that Koptsev was an avid reader of anti-Semitic literature, although he was not an official member of any of the neo-Nazi groups active in Moscow.

Vadim Kluvgant, the victims' lawyer, said he would appeal to reinstate the hate crime charge.

#3

Ukraine's Yushchenko hopes for "orange" coalition

By Yuri Kulikov

Reuters, March 31, 2006

KIEV - President Viktor Yushchenko, reeling from his party's poor election showing, said on Friday he hoped the parties that led Ukraine's "Orange Revolution" would clinch a deal on a coalition government within days.

His premier Yuri Yekhanurov said he would redouble efforts and planned next week to meet the president's estranged ally, ex-prime minister Yulia Tymoshenko, who wants a quick deal.

Five parties cleared the 3 percent barrier in last Sunday's election to win seats in parliament and politicians are struggling to patch together a workable coalition.

The Regions Party of Viktor Yanukovich, Yushchenko's defeated rival in the 2004 presidential poll, came first. But the combined score of "orange" liberal parties behind the 2004 revolution was higher -- though the fiery Tymoshenko's bloc badly outscored Yushchenko's Our Ukraine party.

"The president expressed confidence that in the coming days democratic political forces which defended democratic values side-by-side in the square will reach an understanding on the concept of a coalition," the president's press service said.

Yushchenko and Tymoshenko led weeks of protests in Kiev's snow-covered Independence Square in late 2004 to overturn Yanukovich's initial victory in a rigged poll and force a re-run. They were joined then by Oleksander Moroz of the Socialists, who also won seats in last Sunday's election.

Within months of taking office, orange ranks split as Yushchenko fired Tymoshenko as prime minister to end months of squabbling and mutual accusations of corruption.

ECONOMIC SLOWDOWN

Yushchenko's administration has been plagued by an economic slowdown, rising inflation and low investment.

Our Ukraine scored less than 14 percent of the vote to Tymoshenko's 22, giving her a commanding role in any attempt to reforge unity among liberals.

Tymoshenko wants her job back as premier. But during eight months in office she scared investors by trying to impose controls on markets and to review dozens of privatisations she deemed dubious.

Yushchenko this week met both Yanukovich, more sympathetic to Russia, and Tymoshenko, but he has given no indication of who might be in any future government.

More meetings were planned for next week.

"At the president's orders, I have held the first round of consultations. From Monday, we will start a new round, which will bring us closer to a final results," Yekhanurov told reporters in southern Ukraine's Crimea peninsula.

"We are speaking about a democratic coalition which is understood as being made up of the Socialists, Tymoshenko's bloc and Our Ukraine. But there are also intensive talks with the Regions Party."

And Yekhanurov did not rule out cooperation with the Communists, the last party to clear the three percent barrier.

Anatoly Matviyenko, deputy head of the presidential secretariat, said a coalition would stand for further democratic reforms, moving closer to Europe and bridging the split between nationalist western Ukraine and the Russian-speaking east.

Results from the poll have underscored the divide. The Regions Party won most of its votes in the industrial east and in Crimea, dominated by ethnic Russians, while Yushchenko and Tymoshenko got their support in the centre and the west.

"It is very important now to maintain stability and calm in Ukraine until a coalition majority and new government are formed," Yushchenko said.

#4

Ukrainian Jews happy with election, but some hope for crackdown on hate

By Vladimir Matveyev

JTA, March 27, 2006

KIEV, Ukraine — On Sunday, Larisa Krivovyaz, a Jewish woman in Kiev, spent about an hour waiting to cast her ballot in Ukraine's parliamentary elections. Krivovyaz said the voters were lining up at polling stations because "people desire change for the better."

Whether or not those changes will take place, Jewish leaders across the political spectrum agree that this week's voting was free and fair.

A free election was something Ukraine did not have as recently as the fall of 2004, when Ukrainians rallied in the streets for days to overturn the rigged presidential victory of Viktor Yanukovich. Yanukovich's rival, Viktor Yushchenko, later won a revote.

With 37 percent of Sunday's votes counted, the story was reversed. Yanukovich's pro-Russian Party of Regions, had won 27 percent of the vote and appeared likely to receive the largest share of votes.

The bloc of another ex-premier, Yulia Tymoshenko, Yushchenko's charismatic former ally, was second with 24 percent, followed by Yushchenko himself — his party, Our Ukraine, received slightly less than 17 percent.

Yuschenko's popularity was harmed by a weak economy and the slow pace of reform during his time in office.

But it seemed likely that a coalition led by Timoshenko and Yuschenko would be formed to head the government.

Two of the parties that had officials known as leaders in anti-Semitic propaganda received about one-half percent of the vote together — and a leading Jewish figure said this was good news for the community.

"I'm happy that marginal anti-Semitic parties have failed," said Vadim Rabinovich, a business tycoon and the leader of the United Jewish Community of Ukraine and the All-Ukrainian Jewish Congress.

But at least one Ukrainian Jewish leader is calling for any future government to do more to fight anti-Semitism in Ukraine.

"The insufficient struggle" against "xenophobia and anti-Semitism is the main problem that worries the Jewish community of Ukraine," said Azriel Chaikin, one of Ukraine's chief rabbis.

Yuschenko was criticized for not doing enough to stop anti-Semitism, particularly at MAUP, a Kiev-based university that regularly publishes anti-Jewish articles and organizes anti-Semitic and anti-Zionist activities.

The election will have a major impact on Ukraine's future because of constitutional changes that went into effect earlier this year: The new Parliament, known as the Rada, will be the first in post-Communist Ukraine to name the prime minister and appoint key Cabinet members — both previously prerogatives of the president.

The Orange coalition — as the union of pro-Yuschenko parties is known — is expected to continue with Yuschenko's free market and pro-Western policies.

Jewish candidates were on many slates, and according to estimates, there will be about 25-35 Jewish members in the next Rada, about the same number as in the current one.

Many cities had also municipal and mayoral elections on Sunday.

In two cities, Jewish mayors — Eduard Gurwitz in Odessa and Vladimir Salda in Kherson — were expected to win re-election.

In Israel, only about 500 Ukrainians out of nearly 54,000 eligible Ukrainian voters participated in the elections, according to Igor Timofeev, Ukraine's ambassador to Israel.

For many of Ukraine's estimated 200,000 to 300,000 Jews, many of whom are elderly, the election posed a choice between the pro-Western Orange parties, and the Party of Regions of Yanukovich, who has especially strong support in the Russian-speaking eastern provinces.

Jewish preferences mirrored those of Ukrainian citizens in general.

In western and central Ukraine, most Jewish voters are believed to have voted for Orange parties, while in eastern and southern Ukraine, they are believed to have backed Yanukovich and other opposition forces.

Jewish leaders generally agree that Jews have no reason to fear any possible coalition.

"The balance of political powers will be approximately the same. There will be no big changes," Rabinovich said.

#5

Yanukovich leads in Ukraine with all votes counted

[Final tally: Yanukovich 32%; Tymoshenko 22%; Yushchenko 14%]

Reuters, March 30, 2006

KIEV -- Viktor Yanukovich's Russia-backed Regions Party took first place in Ukraine's parliamentary election with 32.12 percent of the vote after all ballots were counted, the Central Election Commission said on Thursday.

Pro-Western firebrand Yulia Tymoshenko's bloc maintained its strong showing with 22.27 percent, while President Viktor Yushchenko's Our Ukraine party was third with 13.94 percent.

Two other parties cleared the three percent barrier to enter parliament -- the Socialist party with 5.67 percent and the Communists with 3.66 percent.

None of the five parties will have an outright majority of 226 votes in the 450-seat parliament to be able to govern alone. Under preliminary estimates, the Regions party will have 186 seats, Tymoshenko's bloc will have 129, Our Ukraine will get 81, the Socialists will have 33 and the Communists 21.

Politicians have already launched coalition talks but they are expected to be long and difficult. Parliament has 30 days to form a coalition and another 30 days to appoint the government.

#6

OSCE Concerned by Detentions in Belarus

By Marlene Smith

Voice of America, March 31, 2006

Vienna -- The Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe is expressing grave concern about the detention of opposition protesters in Belarus following controversial elections in the former Soviet Republic. The OSCE and other monitoring groups say the elections were undemocratic.

Ambassador Christian Strohal has just returned from an OSCE election observation mission in Belarus, where official result confirmed Alexander Lukaschenko as president with 83 percent of the vote.

But Ambassador Strohal says the election was marred by state oppression and election practices which fell well short of international standards.

"We have been observing, not only before, but also after the election, as you say, and have been seriously concerned about the way in which peaceful demonstrators have been treated, [people] have been arrested, have been detained, have been tried," said Strohal.

Opposition groups in Belarus say hundreds of demonstrators, including a presidential candidate were arrested, and some beaten by police.

"We have been requesting access, and we have been able to establish some contacts, and are trying to follow up on this," he added.

Belarusian authorities have announced the detained pro-opposition activists are now being given prison terms. The European Union is demanding that Belarus free the demonstrators.

The ambassador, who heads the OSCE's Warsaw-based Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights, calls civil society activists in Belarus very courageous, but says they are constantly under threat and harassment.

The U.S. and the EU have decided to impose sanctions on the Belarus government, including a travel ban on President Lukashenko who has ruled Belarus since 1994.

#7

Belarus to charge defeated candidate

By C.J. Chivers

New York Times, March 30, 2006

MOSCOW -- Prosecutors in Belarus on Wednesday said they would bring criminal charges against a defeated presidential candidate who led an anti-government march last week and that they were considering lesser charges against a second candidate who had organized a rally.

The announcement, during which prosecutors also said the police had arrested more than 500 demonstrators last week, continued the crackdown on the opposition to President Aleksandr Lukashenko.

It was also an unmistakable snub to the West.

The United States and the European Union have demanded the release of the candidate, Aleksandr Kazulin, and of demonstrators arrested last week during peaceful protests against Lukashenko's re-election, which the opposition says was a fraud.

Kazulin, who was beaten by the police and arrested on March 25 as he led a march toward a detention center where opposition members are held, faces charges of organizing group actions and hooliganism, Belarus's federal prosecutor said, according to the news agency BelaPAN. The first charge could carry a prison term of up to six years.

Kazulin received 2.2 percent of the officially tabulated vote on March 19.

In an interview with The New York Times before his arrest, he asserted that an honest count would show that he had received roughly a third of votes cast. He led the march the next day, which was attacked by members of an elite riot police unit, SOBR, which has been widely accused of human rights abuses.

Kazulin's wife, Irina, said the charges were retaliation for daring to challenge

Lukashenko's authoritarian rule.

"It is personal revenge," she said by telephone. "It is purely a political case."

She also said that her husband had been kicked and beaten and that he had a back injury that had not been examined by a doctor. The prosecutor said Aleksandr Kazulin had not filed a complaint. Neither claim could be independently verified.

Prosecutors also said they were considering charges against Aleksandr Milinkevich, who received 6.1 percent in the official vote count and who has called for peaceful acts of public assembly. The potential charge, disturbing public order, could carry a sentence of 15 days.

Milinkevich, in a telephone interview as he prepared for meetings in Poland, said that he expected to be jailed and that the announcement Wednesday was part of the mounting pressure against him.

"At first it is usually a PR action," he said. "It is only beginning."

Milinkevich added that the government's pressure was counterproductive.

"I think they would very much like me to emigrate, fearing imprisonment, but I am not going to do that," he said. "The more repression they bring against the protesters and the organizers of protests, the more protests they will have. They are losing their supporters."

The United States warned prosecutors in Belarus not to proceed with charges. David Kramer, deputy assistant secretary of state for European and Eurasian affairs, said officials involved in these cases risk personal sanctions in the West.

"We urge the prosecutor general and those who work for him to be very careful in pursuing prosecution against those who are simply expressing their political views," Kramer said by telephone. "The United States and the European Union are paying very close attention, and taking names."

The European Union is expected to discuss sanctions against Belarussian officials when foreign ministers of its 25 members meet April 10. The United States, which has its own process for applying sanctions, including bans on travel and freezing on assets, has been adding names of Belarussian officials on an almost daily basis since last week,

Kramer said.

Belarussian officials have scoffed at threats of sanctions. The prosecutor general, Pyotr Miklashevich, showed no signs of relenting at his appearance on Tuesday.

"All the organizers of the unsanctioned actions, their active participants, violators of public order, will be brought to administrative or criminal responsibility in accordance with the law," he said.

#8

Russia Raises Price of Gas for an Ally, Belarus

By C.J. Chivers

New York Times, March 31, 2006

MOSCOW -- Russia's state-controlled gas monopoly announced Thursday that it would require Belarus, an ally whose economy is subsidized by Russia, to begin paying market prices for natural gas.

The announcement, in a period of political turmoil in Belarus after a tainted presidential election on March 19, was seen by political analysts as a move by the monopoly, Gazprom, to gain control of Belarus's gas transportation system, which carries a large share of the gas that Russia exports to Europe.

It reflected the broader trend of Gazprom's consolidation of Russia's gas markets and its efforts to increase revenues. But by driving up its neighbor's fuel cost, it may put new pressures on President Aleksandr G. Lukashenko, often called Europe's last dictator.

Gazprom has been raising rates for former Soviet states that it long subsidized, including Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine, where the step was seen, at least in part, as revenge for turning away from Russia politically. Until Thursday, Belarus did not face such pressure; it has been allowed to buy Russian gas at \$47 per thousand cubic meters, a sharp contrast to European prices of more than \$230.

In a statement, Gazprom said that the European prices would be effective for Belarus next year and that Belarus should submit any proposal for an adjustment by April 30.

Sergei V. Kupriyanov, a Gazprom spokesman, suggested in televised remarks that the company was acting prudently by seeking the terms of the adjustment now, long before the current contract expires in December.

A similar contract with Ukraine expired late last year, and Gazprom's demand for a steep price increase led to a midwinter standoff with that country's government. Gazprom briefly cut off the flow to Ukraine, thus also

reducing the supply to Europe and drawing criticism from Western governments. Eventually the two sides compromised on prices and other terms.

"So that the issue of the gas prices for Belarus would not become the topic of the New Year's Eve TV programs, we proposed now, in advance, to agree on how we will work in the next year," Mr. Kupriyanov said in an appearance on the ORT television station. "The position of Gazprom is that the supplies of Russian gas should be carried out at prices corresponding to the European level."

The price demand to Belarus underscored the shifting circumstances faced by Mr. Lukashenko, whose recent re-election was denounced as a fraud by the West.

Since the end of the election campaign, he has faced the most energetic protests in his 12 years of authoritarian rule. The Belarussian authorities have been engaged in a broad crackdown, arresting hundreds of peaceful protesters and one of the defeated presidential candidates, who remains in jail.

The new open opposition has suggested that Mr. Lukashenko's hold on power may be weakening. There has also been widespread curiosity about his whereabouts and health. Mr. Lukashenko, who is typically robust and omnipresent on the state-controlled news, has appeared only once since March 20. Russian and European newspapers, as well as blogs and Web sites, have suggested that something is awry.

Pavel N. Lyogky, Mr. Lukashenko's spokesman, said Wednesday in a telephone interview that questions about the president's health "do not deserve any attention," and added, "He is more than healthy."

#9

Abramov, Vekselberg Named in U.S. Suit

By Yuriy Humber

Moscow Times, March 31, 2006

Minority investors in Ukraine's Nikopol ferroalloy plant were to file a lawsuit in U.S. federal court on Thursday accusing metals billionaires Alexander Abramov and Viktor Vekselberg, among others, of large-scale bribery and looting, a lawyer for the plaintiffs said.

The case casts the Russian businessmen as party to actions taken by Viktor Pinchuk, a Ukrainian billionaire and son-in-law of former President Leonid Kuchma, and a number of his associates, according to the complaint to be filed in U.S. District Court for the District of Massachusetts, a copy of which was obtained by The Moscow Times. Due to the nine-hour time difference, it was not possible to determine late Thursday whether the complaint had been filed.

Nikopol, majority-owned by Pinchuk, is the world's second-largest ferroalloy producer, holding 10 percent of the world market for the material used in steel manufacturing. Abramov is board chairman and a major shareholder in Evraz Group, Russia's second-largest steelmaker. Vekselberg controls a number of metal assets, including SUAL, the world's sixth-largest aluminum producer, through his Renova holding.

A spokesman for Abramov said he could not comment on the case, as he had not received any notification of the suit. Representatives of Renova declined to comment, saying Vekselberg's official spokesman was ill.

Vedomosti reported in September that Abramov and Vekselberg had agreed to pay Pinchuk \$380 million for his majority stake in Nikopol but backed out after a Ukrainian court ruled in September that a 50 percent plus one share stake in the company had to be returned to the government.

The renationalization, initiated by then-Ukrainian Prime Minister Yulia Tymoshenko and her government, was annulled after her government was ousted in September.

While Vekselberg and Abramov will not answer charges surrounding the privatizations of Nikopol, "the case alleges that they joined in the conspiracy going on at the Nikopol plant," Sergei Sokolov, a partner in Marks&Sokolov, which represents the plaintiffs, said Thursday.

The case claims U.S. jurisdiction because two of Pinchuk's associates and co-defendants, Jerry Margulis and Alexander Novack, hold U.S. green cards, while Vekselberg is an American citizen and Renova is U.S.-registered, Sokolov said.

The plaintiffs are three Cyprus-registered companies -- Athina Investments, Varkedge and Wisewood Holdings -- whose beneficiaries are named as several U.S. citizens and a Ukrainian-born Israeli citizen, Igor Kolomoisky. The U.S. citizens are not named, and Sokolov would not identify them.

The companies allege that Abramov and Vekselberg paid bribes of \$25 million and Pinchuk another \$25 million to Ukrainian government officials to block Tymoshenko's efforts to renationalize Nikopol.

Citing transcripts of telephone conversations published in the Ukrainian press, the complaint alleges that "Abramov and Vekselberg were attempting to exercise control over Nikopol, and the \$25 million payment was made as part of that effort."

During this period, the two Russian businessmen also supported and were party to the looting of the company by "diverting hundreds of millions of dollars in profits to American and other entities," which were controlled directly or indirectly by Pinchuk, Margulis and Novack, and later also by Vekselberg and Abramov, the complaint says.

The plaintiffs are seeking to recover, on behalf of Nikopol, the misappropriated profits plus triple the damages under the Racketeer Influenced and Corrupt Organizations Act, or RICO, the complaint says.

Sokolov said he rated the chances of the case succeeding as "high," even though a similar case against Evraz and another metals billionaire, Oleg Deripaska, was dismissed by a U.S. federal court on Wednesday. The court said it saw little reason for the case to be heard in the United States.

Albert Yeganyan, head of Vegal-Lex, a Moscow-based law firm that specializes in conflict cases, said all major Russian raw materials suppliers had faced some legal action in the United States at one time or another.

"Not a single RICO case against Russian raw materials companies has been won, although there have been some out-of-court settlements," he said.

"To file a case is simple. But no one has been able to prove the two vital points in such cases: the existence of a pact between those accused and it causing damages to the plaintiff," he said.

#10

[Bush on U.S.-Russia relations]

President Discusses Democracy in Iraq with Freedom House White House Office of the Press Secretary, March 29, 2006

[excerpt]

Q Our publications have confirmed that freedom is advancing overall in the world during the years of your administration. There is one big important country, however, in which freedom has declined year-by-year the last several years, and that's Russia.

THE PRESIDENT: Correct.

Q You have a big summit coming up in July with the G8 in St. Petersburg. There's been an increasing crackdown on civil society and political parties in Russia, and I'm wondering if in the time between now and

the St. Petersburg summit, what you and the administration can do to raise these issues and try to help the defenders of freedom in Russia.

THE PRESIDENT: I appreciate that. The G8 will raise the issue. That's the interesting thing about kind of meetings and moments. And I have worked very hard to convince Vladimir Putin that it's in his interest to adopt Western-style values and universal values -- rule of law, freedom of religion, the right to people to assemble, political parties, free press.

My strategy with Vladimir Putin is to be in a position where I can talk frankly to him. I've heard some say, don't go to the G8. I think that would be a mistake for the United States not to go to the G8. I remember very -- because I need to be in a position where I can sit down with him and be very frank about our concerns.

I remember meeting with the human rights groups in Russia. And I asked them what strategy should I take as the President of the United States. Should I be in a position where I can engage the President in frank discussion? Or should I publicly scold him, in which case he may turn a deaf ear? And the universal consensus for them kind of played to my own instincts, which is that I think it's important for the United States to be in a position to be able to express our concerns.

Listen, we work with Russia on a variety of issues. Nunn-Lugar is an issue where we work with Russia, for example. But I spend a lot of time with the President making it clear that he should not fear democracy on his border, nor should he fear democracy within his borders. I like to make the case to him that democracies don't war with each other. You don't need to remind him about the brutal history that the Soviet Union went through in World War II. But I do think it's illustrative to point out -- like I pointed out in the speech -- that Europe is now free, whole and at peace, and there's a reason why.

` It's what Americans have got to understand. We tend to forget. Ours is a society where things are like instant, so therefore, history almost is like so far back it doesn't count. But it counts when you really think about life lost on the continent of Africa and wonder why they're no war today. And there's a reason why there's no war today. And that's because history has proven democracies don't war with each other.

And so in my explanation to different events that are taking place to the President, I try to point to historical truths, that it's in an interest of a country like Russia to understand and welcome democracy. It's in an interest for the country to give people the freedom to express themselves.

I do spend time with him in private talking about issues like the NGO law. And as you noticed, we changed the laws -- obviously now the -- how laws get implemented matters. But I'm confident that will be a topic of discussion.

I haven't given up on Russia. I still think Russia understands that it's in her interest to be West, to work with the West, and to act in concert with the West. Nobody is saying to Russia, you must look like the United States of America. But we are saying there's just some basic institutions that ought to be adopted. And I will continue making that case.

I do think it's important for me to go to the G8 so I can make the case. One of the things that I find is that nations oftentimes approach me at these different meetings we go to and say, hey, pass the message for me, will you? We need you to pass a message, Mr. President. You're the person who can best make the case. And so I'm pretty confident in these countries' interest that I be in a position where I'm able to walk into the room with the President of Russia and him not throw me out. And, in fact, that he -- you know, we've got a relationship -- personal relationship such that there is the possibility for candid conversation....

#11

**Rice says U.S. not trying to slow Russia WTO entry
Reuters, March 30, 2006**

BERLIN - Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice on Thursday rejected Russian President Vladimir Putin's assertion that Washington was hampering Russian efforts to negotiate entry to the World Trade Organization.

"We would like to see Russia a member of the WTO but the agreement has to conform to WTO rules and it has to be something that will pass congressional scrutiny and conforms to international rules," Rice told reporters en route to Berlin.

The United States has concerns over poultry and financial services, she said. "I don't think this is an issue of impeding. I think this is an issue of negotiation and trying to get to an outcome that I think both presidents (U.S. and Russia) would like to have, which is Russia having accession to the WTO."

Rice was speaking to reporters on her way to Berlin, where the five permanent members of the U.N. Security Council plus Germany met later to discuss Iran's nuclear program.

Putin said on Wednesday that the United States was making new demands of the Russians which were a setback in the lengthy process of negotiating entry to the world trade body.

"We have received a list of questions from our American colleagues requiring additional agreement which we considered settled long ago," Putin told a Kremlin meeting with Russian business leaders.

The U.S. move "artificially pushes back the course of the negotiating process," he added.

But Russian Economy Minister German Gref said on Thursday that negotiations with the U.S. on WTO accession could be concluded within a month, Interfax news agency reported.

TENSE

"A tense negotiation process is going on. But despite this there is optimism that within a month, or maximum a month and a half, we will find a solution to all the remaining questions," Gref told reporters after a cabinet meeting in Moscow.

Russia, the largest economy outside the WTO, has been in talks to enter the 149-member trade body for 13 years but still needs to sign bilateral deals with the United States, Australia and Colombia.

Gref said U.S. President George W. Bush had sent a letter to Putin outlining 10 issues that needed to be resolved for Russia's accession to the WTO.

At talks in Geneva last week some of the questions were lifted, though five or six issues remained, including agriculture and financial services, Gref said.

"Problem number 1 remains financial services," he said.

Russian negotiators, who face a powerful domestic lobby opposed to making major concessions to gain WTO entry, are wary of opening up the country's infant financial sector to the winds of international competition.

U.S. Trade Representative Rob Portman, also reacting to Putin's remarks, said in a statement on Wednesday that the issues still to be resolved before Russia could join the WTO "are not new problems and they are not dissimilar to those issues addressed by others who have acceded to the WTO."

Gref said U.S. and Russian negotiators would have a video conference in April and that he might meet Portman for talks in April or May. (Additional reporting by Guy Faulconbridge in Moscow)

#12

Rice Floats the Idea of U.N. Sanctions on Iran, but China and Russia Reject It

By Joel Brinkley

New York Times, March 31, 2006

BERLIN — Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, meeting here on Thursday with representatives of the other four permanent members of the United Nations Security Council, raised the idea of imposing unspecified sanctions on Iran, but she received a decidedly cool reaction from China and Russia.

Her proposal came a day after the Security Council approved a statement criticizing the Iranian nuclear program that was a result of heavy compromise. Previously, she had said that sanctions were a possibility but that it was premature to discuss them.

Her proposal was described to reporters in a briefing aboard her plane by a senior State Department official, and she did not comment directly on her proposal during a news conference after the three-and-a-half-hour meeting here on Thursday.

But Dai Bingguo, China's vice minister of foreign affairs, rejected the idea of sanctions and offered a thinly veiled criticism of the war in Iraq when he said: "The Chinese side feels there has already been enough turmoil in the Middle East. We don't need any more turmoil."

The Security Council approved the statement on Wednesday after three weeks of debate. Ms. Rice and her aides praised it on Thursday, even though it was far weaker than the one the United States had originally proposed. It calls on the International Atomic Energy Agency, the nuclear monitoring arm of the United Nations, to report within 30 days on Iran's progress toward curtailing its nuclear development work. The report then goes to the Security Council, giving it an opportunity to respond.

After months of diplomacy, the United States persuaded a majority of the agency's board to report Iran to the Security Council last month.

Ms. Rice noted on Thursday that Russia had wanted to remove the language from the Security Council statement calling for a referral to the Security Council, which would have effectively returned the case to the atomic energy agency. Russia backed down from its demand, under American pressure.

As it is, Russia and China bluntly declared on Thursday that they had no interest in imposing sanctions of any sort or in taking any further action against Iran, though both countries did express concern about the nuclear program. Russian and Chinese officials said they wanted to refer the issue back to the atomic energy agency.

"Russia believes that the sole solution for this problem will be based on the work of the I.A.E.A.," said the Russian foreign minister, Sergey V. Lavrov.

American officials say Iran is unlikely to budge from its confrontational position unless it is offered "in addition to carrots some sticks," the senior official traveling with Ms. Rice said Thursday evening. "Iran needs to know there will be consequences if it continues to hold out."

But the same opposition that forced the United States to accept a weaker Security Council statement than it had wanted seems likely to make it difficult to impose sanctions or other actions against Iran to persuade it to back down.

Iran's foreign minister, Manouchehr Mottaki, speaking at a disarmament conference in Geneva on Thursday, described the Security Council action as "political maneuvering by some Western countries" and "an abuse of international mechanisms."

On her way here Wednesday night, Ms. Rice said the meeting was being held to begin discussions of "the next steps" to be taken against Iran, now that the Security Council statement had been approved. Later, after Russia's and China's public rebukes of the idea of taking further action, the senior administration official, briefing reporters, offered a different goal for the meeting, saying it had been an effort to keep together the coalition of nations opposed to Iran's nuclear program.

The official, who briefed reporters traveling with Ms. Rice under the ground rule that he not be identified by name, said several nations, presumably European countries, had supported the notion of unspecified sanctions after Ms. Rice proposed the idea. He would not name the nations.

Ms. Rice alluded to the sort of sanctions the United States would be likely to propose when, speaking to reporters on her way here, she said the United States and its allies would look at "how a strong message can be sent to the Iranian regime that it's the regime that is isolated, not the Iranian people."

The senior official said Ms. Rice was referring to the idea of imposing travel bans on senior Iranian officials and freezing their foreign bank accounts, as the United States and Europe say they intend to do with regard to Belarus.

#13

Richest Georgian Assails State Associated Press, March 31, 2006

TBILISI, Georgia -- Georgia's richest man, Badri Patarkatsishvili, unexpectedly unleashed an attack on the business policies of President Mikheil Saakashvili's government, raising the possibility that he would enter the opposition's ranks -- and risk becoming a target of a state anti-corruption campaign.

Patarkatsishvili, an erstwhile business partner of businessman Boris Berezovsky, said Wednesday that businesses had been coerced into making contributions to various state-connected funds.

One such purported fund, run by the Prosecutor General's Office, had collected 160 million lari (\$86.4 million) from Georgian businesses in what Patarkatsishvili termed a "serfs' tax."

The reaction from Saakashvili's supporters was swift. "I would like to thank Mr. Badri first of all for finally coming out of the shadows," said Giga Bokeria, a parliamentary leader. "We have seen the real leader of the opposition and its possible sponsor."

Patarkatsishvili's Imedi television has broadcast many critical stories about the Interior Ministry. One story -- about the killing of a student purportedly after an argument at a restaurant during a birthday party for Interior Minister Vano Merabishvili's wife -- prompted the resignation this month of three officers.

About 7,000 people, meanwhile, rallied Thursday in central Tbilisi to demand Merabishvili's resignation and a probe into a prison riot that killed seven inmates. The turnout fell far short of the 50,000 promised by opposition leaders.

#14

Part politics, part social mixer at Israeli mock election in Russia By Yasha Levine JTA, March 30, 2006

MOSCOW -- While Israelis went to the polls Tuesday, 500 Russian-Israeli expatriates gathered in an upscale Moscow restaurant to cast their own votes in a mock election.

The winner: the pro-Russian, hard-line Yisrael Beiteinu, with 27 seats, followed by Kadima and Labor, which each earned 26 seats in the mock vote for Israel's 120-member Knesset.

The numbers contrasted sharply with the real Israeli vote, in which Ehud Olmert's Kadima Party led with 28 seats and the Labor Party took 20. In that vote, Yisrael Beiteinu won 12 seats.

The Russian-born Israelis, accompanied by their spouses, friends and girlfriends, showed up to vote at this election-night party held to coincide with parliamentary elections in Israel. Only those with Israeli passports were allowed to cast ballots.

Cocktails in hand, the crowd applauded and cheered as Israeli election campaign spots played on a screen flanked by oversized Israeli flags. They ate, drank and chatted as the official election results came in by satellite link-up.

"I did not think that it would be possible that all these people would take part in elections just for fun," Arkady Milman, the Israeli ambassador to Moscow, told the crowd.

Israel does not have an absentee ballot system. Except for diplomatic employees and sailors, citizens who are outside the country on election day -- estimated at 340,000, about half of them in the United States -- are not able to take part in the electoral process. So the Moscow "election" was purely a symbolic gesture.

It also was a social occasion. There are believed to be 50,000 Israeli citizens living and working in Moscow, but there's no place for them to get together, said Oleg Ulyansky, organizer of the mock election.

The evening was part of a sporadic series of social mixers for Israeli-Russians that Ulyansky -- who left the Soviet Union for Israel over two decades ago -- initiated when he returned to Moscow four years ago to work as a manager for a Russian company.

"By law I cannot cast a vote, but I am a citizen of Israel and I came here to carry out my duty and exercise my right, even if it is in the form of an exit poll," said Mark Shtein, an Israeli businessman.

"If I were in Israel, I wouldn't even participate in elections," Ilya Lieberman, another Russian-born Israeli working in Moscow, said after casting his ballot. Lieberman said he came to the event just to mingle with fellow expatriates.

It was no surprise that Yisrael Beiteinu came in first in the mock election. The party, headed by Avigdor Lieberman, an immigrant from Moldova, promotes immigrant rights and is often referred to in Israel as the "Russian" party. Most of the people at the mock election party were born on Soviet soil and lived as new immigrants in Israel themselves, so Yisrael Beiteinu's issues are close to their hearts.

The under-40 crowd, gathered around the bar, voted heavily for the Green Leaf Party, which favors the legalization of marijuana. The party failed to reach the threshold required to win even one seat in the real election, but would have received 10 seats if the Knesset were formed in Moscow.

Who knows whether these 50,000 expatriates might have been able to swing the actual elections in their favor if they had flown back to Israel to vote.

They'll never know, and can comfort themselves only with the T-shirts handed out to party-goers at the end of the evening. The shirts read, "I voted in the Knesset elections in Moscow."