



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

NCSJ WEEKLY NEWS BRIEF

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#1

Appointment of monitor adds teeth to the fight against anti-Semitism

**By Ron Kampeas
JTA, May 17, 2006**

WASHINGTON, May 17 (JTA) -- The U.S. State Department just added a set of teeth to its fledgling office monitoring anti-Semitism. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice on Wednesday named Gregg Rickman, a dogged investigator who has tracked the Swiss banks' role in the Holocaust, as the first special envoy for monitoring and combating anti-Semitism.

Jewish leaders unanimously agreed that the appointment would push the office monitoring anti-Semitism, in existence barely 18 months, to the department's front burner.

"It creates a strong point person that will be able to coordinate all the different parts of our government that deal with anti-Semitism," said Mark Levin, executive director of NCSJ, a group that advocates for Jews in the former Soviet Union and that lobbied for the position. "Without continued U.S. leadership, I'm not sure how much attention will be paid by our friends in Europe and elsewhere to anti-Semitism."

Congressional legislation sponsored by Rep. Tom Lantos (D-Calif.) and Sen. George Voinovich (R-Ohio) created the office in late 2004 over the objection of State Department mandarins, who said it would just create an extra layer of bureaucracy and was unnecessary because the issue already was being addressed in the department's human rights monitoring.

So far the office, under the direction of Edward O'Donnell, special envoy for Holocaust issues, has produced just one report, in January 2005. Insiders said O'Donnell already was overworked in his capacity encouraging the rightful distribution of Holocaust assets, and the office sorely needed its own "boss."

Rickman's principal qualification for the job is his stint as a director on the Senate Banking Committee in the mid-1990s under the chairmanship of former Sen. Alfonse D'Amato (R-N.Y.), when it uncovered Swiss banks' role in hiding Nazi loot and keeping Jewish survivors from accessing their pre-Holocaust accounts. Rickman, who is Jewish, wrote an account of the investigation called "Swiss Banks and Jewish Souls."

"Gregg Rickman, working with Sen. D'Amato, is almost single-handedly the one who uncovered the corruption and the immorality of the Swiss banks," said William Daroff, vice president for public policy of the United Jewish Communities, the umbrella body of North American Jewish federations, and director of its Washington office.

Shai Franklin, executive director of the World Jewish Congress' American section, said Rickman understood all sides of the system.

"He's very familiar with how Capitol Hill works and he knows the Jewish community and he knows the Europeans, having opened up a lot of the channels in the Swiss gold issue," he said.

Together with NCSJ, Daroff led the effort for legislation creating the anti-Semitism office when he was congressional liaison for the Republican Jewish Coalition.

Rickman, who also was staff director for former Sen. Peter Fitzgerald (R-Ill.), succeeded Daroff at the RJC in 2004. The group reveled in the appointment of one of its own.

"It is very exciting to have an RJC alum serving in such an important position," said Matt Brooks, the group's executive director.

Rickman, 42, recently returned to the Hill, where he has directed the U.S. House of Representatives subcommittee investigating the "oil for food" scandal implicating U.N. officials and others in receiving kickbacks from Saddam Hussein during the years Iraq was under sanction.

That kind of doggedness will serve him well in his new capacity, according to representatives of groups that liaise between Washington and small, vulnerable Jewish communities overseas.

"Putting someone in there who has the know-how and connections to do the job right at least gives the issue a fair shot," said Rabbi Levi Shemtov, who directs the Chabad-Lubavitch office in Washington.

Some Jewish groups had advocated for a scholar and someone with a less partisan background, but Rickman was the better choice, said Abraham Foxman, national director of the Anti-Defamation League.

"You don't need a scholar, you need a pragmatic civil servant who will be there, be articulate and be a liaison," he said.

Rickman's appointment will go a long way toward reassuring Jewish groups who were angered by the Bush administration's initial resistance to the Lantos-Voinovich legislation.

"We're very appreciative of the president and Secretary Rice making this appointment," said Nathan Diament, who directs the Orthodox Union's Washington office. "It's consistent with the work they've done to combat anti-Semitism throughout the Bush administration."

Rickman, who will be sworn in Monday, will not simply monitor anti-Semitism; he will inject the issue into every bilateral or multilateral arrangement where it's applicable.

Malcolm Hoenlein, executive vice chairman of the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations, cited as an example efforts to get the 55-member Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe to encourage member nations to counter anti-Semitism.

"At a time when we're trying to get some governments to act through the OSCE, it'll be a full-time job," Hoenlein said. "We'll have someone who will privately and publicly express our concerns."

Daroff said Rickman's assignment will be twofold: dealing with official anti-Semitism and encouraging nations to combat anti-Semitism in their societies.

"This post empowers foreign policy and diplomacy," he said. "He can have a tremendous impact on combating anti-Semitism."

#2a

Putin wants Hamas/Israel talks

JTA Brief, May 15, 2006

Vladimir Putin urged Israel to open talks with the Hamas-led Palestinian government. The Russian president made the comments after a meeting Monday with Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas in the Russian resort town of Sochi.

The meeting focused on Russia's financial aid to the cash-strapped Palestinian Authority.

After Hamas won Palestinian elections in January, the United States and Europe halted direct funding to the Palestinian Authority, citing Hamas' involvement in terrorism and the group's refusal to recognize Israel, but Russia opposes this policy.

#2b

Ukrainian rabbis want safety for Jews

JTA Brief, May 18, 2006

Ukrainian rabbis called on authorities to ensure the safety of the country's Jews and adopt legislation against anti-Semitism. "We are trying to calm down Jews in our communities. We are trying to lower the level of anxiety," rabbis said in a statement after a rabbinical meeting in Kiev. "Unfortunately we do not see any adequate or unequivocal response toward manifestations of xenophobia from the Ukrainian authorities."

The resolution was adopted Monday by a conference of 40 Chabad rabbis working in Ukraine.

In recent months, Ukraine has seen a rising tide of anti-Semitic incidents, including attacks on individual Jews and acts of vandalism against Jewish institutions.

#2c

Kiev mayor blasts anti-Semites

JTA Brief, May 19, 2006

Kiev's new mayor said he would combat anti-Semitism in the Ukrainian capital. Leonid Chernovetsky made the statement at an Israeli Independence Day reception before members of the Jewish community and diplomats. The new mayor said "everybody who offends Jews" should be prosecuted. "All those who hurt Jews are doomed," the mayor said, adding that those who refer to Jews in derogatory terms are "the rubbish of the Ukrainian people."

Kiev has seen a number of attacks against Jewish individuals and institutions in recent years, and a private university in the city, MAUP, has become a center of xenophobia and anti-Semitic propaganda.

#2d

Ukraine gets Hebrew Internet site JTA Brief, May 19, 2006

Kiev's Brodsky synagogue launched a Hebrew-language Web site with news from Ukrainian Jewish communities and information on Jewish holidays. The founders of www.chabadua.org believe there are enough Hebrew readers in Ukraine, and that the site will contribute to the development of Jewish media in the former Soviet republic.

#2e

New exam date in Ukraine JTA Brief, May 19, 2006

Ukraine's Education Ministry agreed to reschedule a key state exam for Jewish high school students because it coincides with Shavuot. Students at Ukraine's public and private Jewish schools will be allowed to take their Ukrainian language graduation test on a different date than other students. The decision followed a request from Rabbi Azriel Chaikin, one of Ukraine's chief rabbis.

#3

Russians, Busy Making Shrouds, Are Asked to Make Babies By C. J. Chivers New York Times, May 14, 2006

PRESIDENT VLADIMIR V. PUTIN drew from the Soviet past on Wednesday when he championed the role of motherhood in preventing Russia from becoming a state short of citizens.

Russia's population is shrinking, and demographers warn that it is within a generation of plummeting. If the most pessimistic models hold, the decline could make the country a vast, underpopulated state within four or five decades, a country with too few healthy people for a competitive work force or a capable army.

Russian life, for the peasantry and the proletariat alike, has always been unforgiving. And in a speech reminiscent of Soviet pledges of the state helping the masses so that the masses might help the state, Mr. Putin chose the familiar Soviet solution of encouraging stalwart reproduction, telling his obedient Parliament to enact programs of financial incentives to women to have more children.

The Kremlin-friendly news media here, a place that often feels like the land of the family with a single child, crowed in approval. The president had spoken: Here is the money, he had essentially said; Russian mothers, fulfill your role.

Beneath the enthusiasm was a question Mr. Putin did not address. Will cash incentives work? The data would say: Not quite.

There is little doubt that for Russia to be a power through the 21st century its demographic trends must be reversed. There also seems to be no question that Russian mothers, short of feats of fertility unseen in the industrialized world, cannot save Russia alone.

"You have to do this in a variety of ways," said Dr. Murray Feshbach, a demographer who studies the Russian population and its health.

The problems can be found in the numbers. Russia has roughly 143 million people, and the population drops an average of 700,000 each year, largely because of the wide gap between the number of those born and the number who die. More babies will help. But as the population shrinks, Dr. Feshbach said, it risks an accelerating collapse that fertility itself cannot reverse.

This is in part because the low birthrate is more than two decades old, and the number of women ages 20 to 29, the most fecund segment of the population, has already fallen to 12 million, he said. In the next several years, women that age will fall to eight million or fewer a small contingent to bear the next generation.

And as analysts at the World Bank and the United Nations have pointed out, the threat to the population is not just low birthrates but high death rates.

The Russian people are deeply unhealthy, so much so that there is no demographic group in the industrial world as ailing and prone to fatal injury as the Russian male, whose average age at death is about 59. Abysmal mortality trends separate Russia from other industrial nations that offer incentives to stimulate population growth, including Japan and Australia.

Moreover, pernicious infections have entered the population since Soviet times, making the country a growing reservoir of people recently infected with tuberculosis, H.I.V. and hepatitis C.

Many of these infections have not yet turned into high rates of disease, but public health authorities say that as the incubation periods run their course over the next several years, their effects on national health will be evident.

Tuberculosis is already at epidemic levels, and an expected surge in AIDS cases and hepatitis complications could, by the most dire models, kill more than half a million people a year in a generation or two.

There are signs that Russia is waking to the problems. Last month, the Kremlin pushed through a roughly twentyfold increase in its paltry financing for AIDS prevention, diagnosis and treatment a sign of an understanding of the severity of the problem, said Dmitry Rechnov, a deputy director of AIDS Foundation East West, a private organization here.

"If we keep on this track, there can be a number of positive developments," he said.

Still, the Kremlin's attention to public health has been uneven, and expected increases in mortality related to infectious disease would push up a death rate already driven above norms in industrial nations by high rates of heart disease, cancer, alcoholism, accidents, violence and suicide.

The potential consequences are clear. In a report released last year, the World Bank warned that if Russia did not adopt comprehensive public health programs, it risked a shrinking work force, destabilized families, strains on national security and a drain on the gross domestic product.

And not everyone agrees that cash incentives, which are not part of a comprehensive health program, will even achieve what the Kremlin hopes more healthy and productive children.

If Mr. Putin's proposals pass, as they almost certainly will, then next year mothers will receive bonuses worth about \$9,000 for giving birth, as well as a graduating scale of monthly cash allowances for infants and subsidies for day care.

Many women said in interviews that they welcomed the plans. With low salaries, tiny, crowded apartments and rising costs of living, they at last saw a president offering relief, however small. Let the baby boom begin, one said.

"Many women will start having children," said Katya Druzhchenko, 19, a student who hopes to have three. "Right now if you think about the economic situation for young women, it is just totally impossible."

But Dr. Ivan Safranchuk, a middle-class father of two and director of the Moscow office of the World Security Institute, an international think tank, said money-for-motherhood incentives would not work.

Russian parents, he said, opt for few children not just because of financial worries but because infrastructure parks, schools, hospitals, entertainment centers, transportation is strained. He pointed to surging rates of car ownership to make a point.

"The message of the president, that people cannot afford kids, is not true," he said. "Look at the rate of new cars in the country, especially of imported cars. All of these people can afford to give birth to kids, but they do not."

This is also because attitudes have become unwelcome to child-rearing, he said. "When you go to a restaurant or a social setting, the whole social infrastructure is unfriendly to your kids."

Dr. Safranchuk suggested that Russia ought not offer cash incentives, but tax breaks. There are no child deductions on personal income taxes, except a small one for education costs.

Rather than create a well-raised new generation, he said, the subsidies could encourage the poorest and least-educated women to have children, while having little influence on the family decisions in the middle class. Mr. Putin, he said, "has created a system which converts oil and gas into money; now he is creating a system that converts money into nothing, or that converts money into problems."

Mr. Putin did not go as far as past Kremlin leaders, like Stalin, who encouraged women to repopulate a nation thinned by repression and war by offering Medals of Maternal Glory to mothers who brought forth seven, eight or nine children. The medals bore the words Mother-Heroine.

Even were Mr. Putin to do so, the numbers suggest, without shifts in attitudes and widespread improvements, the traffic at maternity wards will remain slower than the Russians' rush to the grave.

#4

6 Weeks After Ukrainian Vote, It's Unclear Who Won

By Steven Lee Myers

New York Times, May 13, 2006

KIEV, Ukraine, May 12 The politicians trying to reunite the political parties that were swept to power in Ukraine a year and a half ago have drawn up a list of the issues that divide them. They include the World Trade Organization, membership in NATO, privatization of state properties and the volatile issue of whether to allow sales of agricultural land.

The most divisive issue, though, is the most important of the moment: Who will be Ukraine's new and newly empowered prime minister?

Six weeks after parliamentary elections produced no outright winners, no one can say for certain. The issue has stirred a new round of recriminations among those who joined President Viktor A. Yushchenko in leading the popular protests that overturned a fraudulent election in 2004 and cleared the way for his presidency.

"They want a compromise with the past, the Kuchma era," said Hryhory M. Nemyrya, a newly elected member of Parliament, referring to the scandal-tarred presidency of Leonid D. Kuchma, whose chosen successor, Mr. Yushchenko, ultimately defeated him in what became known as the Orange Revolution.

The leading candidate for prime minister is the head of Mr. Nemyrya's party, Yulia V. Tymoshenko, the erstwhile ally of the president who insists that her bloc's showing in the election ahead of Mr. Yushchenko's party, Our Ukraine makes her the rightful candidate among the so-called orange coalition.

In an interview with a Polish newspaper, published Friday, Mr. Yushchenko said he did not preclude that possibility. But at least some of his supporters strongly oppose Ms. Tymoshenko, arguing that she would prove as divisive as she was when she served as his first prime minister for eight months last year until tumultuous economic policies, political infighting and dueling accusations of corruption prompted him to dismiss her.

Even as they hold talks to reunite last year's orange coalition to form a governing majority, Mr. Yushchenko's supporters have raised the possibility of compromise candidates.

"There are others on the bench," said Anatoly K. Kinakh, a leader of Our Ukraine and Mr. Yushchenko's national security adviser, declining to identify them. Mr. Kinakh resigned his security post on Friday to take a seat in Parliament, presumably as part of the positioning to form a coalition government.

Some, including the acting prime minister, Yuri I. Yekhanurov, have suggested the possibility of a broader coalition government that could include the party led by Mr. Yushchenko's vanquished presidential rival, Viktor F. Yanukovich, which led all parties in the parliamentary election with 31 percent of the votes.

"For eight months we had an orange coalition, but it fell apart because many of its members were united only by their opposition to Kuchma," Mr. Yushchenko's spokeswoman, Irina B. Gerashchenko, said. "What the president wants is a stable coalition."

The result has been an impasse that threatens to undermine Mr. Yushchenko's political standing further, even as he faces a stalling economy, accusations of overly cozy associations with big business and a new confrontation with Russia over the price of natural gas.

In January the confrontation over gas resulted in a doubling of the price Ukraine pays Russia. A compromise, which increased prices for Ukrainian households by 30 percent as of May 1, allows Russia's gas monopoly to raise them again as soon as July 1.

The deal has been unpopular here, in part because of the higher prices and in part because of questions surrounding the ownership of an opaque trading company, RosUkrEnerg, which now has a monopoly on supplying the gas to Ukraine.

The controversy over the deal deepened late last month with the disclosure that the partial owners included a prominent Ukrainian businessman, Dmitry Firtash. Mr. Yushchenko, who initially denied any Ukrainian involvement, met with Mr. Firtash "on several occasions," Ms. Gerashchenko said.

Ms. Tymoshenko has led the opposition to the gas deal, calling it a threat to Ukraine's national security. On Thursday the controversy claimed a new victim, when Oleksiy Ivchenko, who negotiated the deal as the head of Ukraine's state gas company, resigned to take a seat in Parliament as part of Mr. Yushchenko's Our Ukraine bloc.

The new Parliament with increased powers, including the ability to appoint the prime minister and other cabinet ministers is not expected to convene until the end of May. Based on the electoral results, Ms. Tymoshenko's bloc will have 129 of the 450 seats, compared with 81 for Our Ukraine. With the Socialist Party's 33 seats, a reunited coalition could control a slight majority.

Mr. Yanukovich's Party of Regions won the largest number of seats, with 186, while the Communists won 21.

The uncertainty over a coalition has raised the possibility that none will be formed. That would allow Mr. Yushchenko to dissolve the Parliament at its inception and call new elections, plunging Ukraine into new political turmoil.

"He is losing public support," Mikhail B. Pogrebinsky, director of the Kiev Center for Political and Conflict Studies, said in an interview. "No smooth movement can restore trust in him. He must make a decisive step. And he is not prepared for it."

Others in Mr. Yushchenko's camp said that jockeying aside, the political leaders who led the Orange Revolution would ultimately reunite in some form. Roman P. Bezsmertny, another leader of Our Ukraine, said the immediate goal was to agree on the policies that bind them and then deal with who would be chosen as prime minister to carry them out. That is why lists of areas of agreement, and disagreement, are being drafted.

Mr. Yushchenko's spokeswoman, Ms. Gerashchenko, described the process as something akin to restoring a marriage broken by betrayal. "It is like trying to rebuild a family," she said. "And it is difficult to rebuild a family if both sides cannot realize why one side walked out and slammed the door."

#5

Cheney, Putin Can't Get Beyond Cold War Talk

By Nina L. Khrushcheva

Moscow Times, May 17, 2006

It is good to hear -- although not surprising -- that President Vladimir Putin does not believe we are returning to the Cold War. His comments to reporters in Sochi over the weekend seem to be a response to U.S. Vice President Dick Cheney's remark in Vilnius, Lithuania, on May 4 that "none of us believes that Russia is fated to become an enemy."

Both Cheney and Putin appear to be saying, "We are annoyed that each of our countries is putting itself first and not being what the other wants it to be. But this is not a war. This is a political game while we deal with the issues that we are really preoccupied with: terrorism, nuclear threats, security and energy."

It is highly unlikely that a Cold War could happen again. First, Russia is not important enough in the grand scheme of things to have a war with. The United States and Russia could bicker over, say, Ukraine or Georgia, but such disagreements are not enough to cause an all-encompassing fight. Besides, there are other much more pressing and real threats, like terrorism, for both countries to worry about.

Also, there are no geopolitical conditions for a Cold War. There is no longer a world ideological divide in which one ideology wants to take over the other. In fact, both Russia and the United States today have the same ideology -- a mixture of democracy and capitalism.

However, there is some annoyance in Moscow and Washington, and the language of the Cold War creeps into the rhetoric of senior officials on both sides. Cheney, a true Cold Warrior going back all the way to Richard Nixon, is warped by suspicion and doesn't believe that the former communist giant can really change. Putin, who doesn't implement democracy the way the United States expects him to, is thus not only a suspect but also a confirmation of Cheney's suspicions.

For his part, Putin, although too young to be a true Cold Warrior, does believe that the Soviet Union was a great state and wants the same kind of recognition for Russia. The Soviet Union may have had its problems, but international respect -- fear, actually -- was unquestionable.

While officials may have their annoyances, they recognize that Russia and the United States have plenty of common interests, including energy strategy and nuclear talks with Iran and North Korea.

But as long as the United States and Russia remain unclear about whether they are friends or foes, the Cold War rhetoric will continue. Let's face it, we all need an enemy, and while Osama bin Laden and Shamil Basayev are at large, terrorism is too amorphous a cause.

#6

Central Asia Emerges As Strategic Battleground

By Frederick Kempe

Wall Street Journal, May 16, 2006

Central Asia, site of the 19th-century "Great Game" for supremacy between the British Empire and czarist Russia, is emerging with its oil and gas riches as the first strategic battleground of the "Multipolar Era" among the U.S., China and Moscow.

The Cold War ended in 1990, and the dominance of the U.S. since then is fast eroding. Now a globally rising China, an oil-intoxicated Russia and the U.S. are locking horns in a struggle for resources and influence in Central Asia, a region that regained its global strategic importance after its five states gained independence from the Soviet Union in 1991.

Dick Cheney got plenty of press for his recent Russia-bashing speech in independent Lithuania, a former Soviet state. Yet of greater note was the vice president's less-ballyhooed next stop in Central Asia's Kazakhstan, where he signaled a U.S. policy shift beyond rhetoric to actions aimed at countering what he called Russian President Vladimir Putin's use of oil and gas as "tools of intimidation or blackmail, either by supply manipulation or attempts to monopolize transportation."

Former oilman Mr. Cheney befriended Kazakhstan's Nursultan Nazarbayev and solidified his support for energy cooperation, including agreement in principle for a new pipeline across the Caspian Sea that would cut out the Kremlin. That in turn would help break Moscow's near-stranglehold on gas exports out of landlocked Central Asia to Europe. The trip followed a White House visit from Azerbaijani leader Ilham Aliyev, who is participating in energy projects of like motivation in the neighboring Caucasus.

Ultimately, the "New Great Game" for an Iraq-distracted U.S. is less about winning and more about avoiding being marginalized by an ambitious China and resurgent Russia. "We're losing now but it doesn't have to stay that way," says Zeyno Baran of the Hudson Institute, who keeps score on her frequent travels to the region and meetings with its leaders. "Cheney's trip was a bold move. The U.S. is now there at the highest levels and has decided not to let China and Russia monopolize the game."

The White House's embrace of Mr. Nazarbayev and Mr. Aliyev also marks its return in the region to realpolitik from the democratic missionary work which had estranged some Central Asian leaders. Mr. Nazarbayev suppresses opponents and employs resource wealth to enrich his family. But at the same time he has transformed his country from a dumping ground for Soviet political prisoners and nuclear waste to an economy with 10% average annual growth for the past five years, and where far-reaching reforms have brought real development. He has balanced Russia's influence by pursuing energy deals with China and the West.

Mr. Putin speaks of U.S. hypocrisy in criticizing Russia as anti-democratic while backing such authoritarians. But Bush administration officials, who still give lip service to the notion that the region's long-term stability can only come from democratic change, have decided the stakes have grown too high to be slave to principle. Russia and China for months have been winning ground from the U.S. by reassuring Central Asia's leaders that they can help them resist the contagion of Western-backed democratic revolutions in Ukraine, Georgia and Kyrgyzstan.

What's up for grabs is access to vast energy resources at a time of tight supply and the use of military bases within easy reach of Iran and poised between China and Russia. Growing Islamic extremist undercurrents complicate matters. Backing reigning autocrats for short-term gain could replicate the Mideast's political-instability problems, but U.S. officials believe abandoning the region is a far worse option—and would leave only parties who lack interest in human rights and democratic change.

One of the rising dangers to U.S. fortunes is the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, or SCO, created by Beijing in 2001 to counter growing U.S. influence. It excludes Washington but includes Russia, four of the region's states—Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan—and has given observer status to Tehran.

It was at an SCO summit last July that China and Russia convinced Uzbek leader Islam Karimov to ask the U.S. military to leave one of its best-positioned bases anywhere, established after 9/11 and in preparation for the war in Afghanistan.

Mr. Karimov was already in a foul mood toward the U.S. when he arrived at the meeting, as the Bush administration was supporting calls for an international investigation of his brutal crackdown on protesters in the city of Andijan, Uzbekistan, the previous May. His security forces had gunned down dozens of pro-democracy protesters whom Mr. Karimov said were armed Islamist radicals.

The loss of the U.S. base, leaving it just one other base in the region, in Kyrgyzstan, demonstrated the growing headwinds buffeting U.S. sway in a more complex world.

Russia's advantage in the three-way competition is Mr. Putin's fierce focus, knowing Central Asia is key to his aspirations to be an energy superpower. Moscow energy giant Gazprom won't be able to fulfill European contracts beyond 2009 without Central Asian resources. The Russians also are proficient at the region's chief policy tools of threats and bribes.

China is playing the long game in its alliance of convenience with Moscow to gain resources and counter what it considers creeping U.S. military encirclement. Beijing believes it will be more attractive over the long run to Central Asian elites, who are impressed with its mixture of glittering economic success and autocratic rule. "China gives Central Asian leaders red-carpet treatment and after what they see they come back asking, 'Who cares about democracy?' " says Ms. Baran.

The U.S. weapons in this asymmetrical battle include the enduring lure of close relations with the West, access to European and U.S. markets and to their technology and finance. Central Asian leaders also want a Western counterbalance, suspect of Chinese motivations and too familiar with the perils of imperial Russia. That has made NATO partnership agreements attractive. "We can't out-leverage them, we can't out-nasty them, so we have to win hearts and minds and trust," says a senior U.S. official.

A Kazakh proverb goes this way: If the Chinese hordes come, the Russians will seem like your own father. That provides an opening for Uncle Sam, but only if he answers the multipolar world's challenge of more plentiful, formidable and focused rivals.

#7

Knowledge is fundamental: Russian Jews have day of learning

By Lev Krichevsky

JTA, May 16, 2006

MOSCOW, May 16 (JTA) — The catch phrase on the colorful posters hanging in Jewish institutions across Moscow — “The entire Jewish world in 12 hours!” — was only a slight exaggeration. The organizers of Limmud FSU, an educational daylong marathon, clearly attempted to draw from a variety of Jewish life: “From a rabbi to a rock star,” another slogan on the same poster promised.

It was certainly a special event in Russia.

Several hundred people, many of them elderly, attended the event, some 700 people registered for the next Limmud — and 100 more registered to help as volunteers, according to the organizers.

The idea was simple, but rare in Russian Jewish life: to get as many people as possible to learn about anything related to Judaism.

“Everyone with an expertise can come and talk. That’s the beauty of Limmud,” said Chaim Chesler, the founder of Limmud FSU.

The idea of Limmud FSU was based on another event of the same name, an annual conference in Britain, now in its 25th year, that in recent years has been replicated in other parts of the world.

This week’s event — which the organizers unofficially called “pre-Limmud,” referring to a five-day conference to be held next February — offered eight types of activities, ranging from lectures on Jewish philosophy and Holocaust to arts workshops, kids’ activities and even Jewish karaoke.

One of the most popular sessions was the well-known Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz, who discussed Jewish mysticism. His “Kabbalah: Is it for Madonna Esther or Is it for Me?” drew 150 participants into a packed room.

Like almost every other new undertaking in the Russian Jewish community in recent years, Limmud is imported from the West.

Conceived by an Israeli and an American, and funded primarily by Western sources, the initiative also involved a group of younger locals who, the organizers hope, will eventually take upon the entire project.

While the impulse came from the outside, the locals mainly selected topics and speakers for this week’s event, said Sandra Cahn, a Jewish activist and philanthropist from New York who headed the organizational committee of Limmud FSU.

The idea of Limmud FSU has already inspired Westerners and Israelis. A host of major Jewish groups and individuals from outside the former Soviet Union helped to fund it: from the Jewish Agency for Israel, the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee, the World Jewish Congress, World ORT or Hillel, to many private foundations and a few local groups.

Like many other Western Jewish leaders who attended Limmud in Moscow, Israel Singer, chairman of the Policy Council at the World Jewish Congress believes Limmud has a chance to provide local Jews “an opportunity to inspire themselves, to invigorate Jewish culture.”

There is irony, Singer told JTA, that “this part of the world, where great Jewish culture came from, is now encountering a tremendous amount of Jewish ignorance.”

The hesitation of a middle-aged Jewish man who was perusing the 50-page program in the club's lobby exemplified Singer's point.

"There is a session on the differences between Litvaks and Chasidim," said Boris Bramberg, an engineer, referring to a session co-hosted by two Moscow rabbis representing the two streams in Judaism. "I would love to go there, but I don't even know the difference between Orthodox and Reform Judaism."

An hour later, Bramberg was involved in a lively conversation with a Chabad rabbi.

Those who helped organize the event say several things help Limmud stand out among other projects in Russian Jewish life.

First is the idea of a transdenominational event not organized by a specific organization.

"Nobody owns it, and nobody has a veto," said Deborah Lipstadt, a Holocaust studies and Jewish history professor from Emory University who was a member of the project's advisory group and one of the lecturers at Moscow Limmud.

Then, there is the notion of voluntarism: Some 30 young professionals from Moscow, Kiev, Minsk and other cities made up the team that helped put together the program and invite people.

Finally, those who came to listen, watch and learn had to pay. The \$5 entrance fee for the Sunday marathon was a rather modest amount, even by Russian standards. But organizers said those attending next year's five-day Limmud at a retreat near Moscow will pay \$120.

To persuade people to pay for their Jewish education is a step forward for a Russian community used to receiving free Jewish services, said Alexander Pyatigorsky, 25, who coordinated the event on the Russian side.

"This is a step to change the way of thinking in people who call themselves members of the Jewish community. People should give their time, money or both, and for that they can get what they want, not what the organizations have to offer them."

#8

Azerbaijan to open trade office in Israel

By Hilary Leila Krieger

Jerusalem Post, May. 16, 2006

Azerbaijan plans to open a trade office in Israel in the coming year, according to Azerbaijan officials.

There has long been talk of Azerbaijan, a secular Muslim state in the Caucasus, establishing an actual embassy in Tel Aviv. Israel opened an embassy in Baku in 1993. A trade office could be a prelude to the opening of a such an embassy in Israel.

An Azerbaijan government source told The Jerusalem Post that the trade office would open "within the year." In an interview with the Post on Tuesday, Foreign Minister Elmar Mammadyarov indicated that opening a trade office this year is "on our agenda." He added that "having [full] diplomatic relations will happen for sure."

Mammadyarov also discussed the possibility of Israel joining in the oil pipeline Baku is building from the Caspian Sea to the Mediterranean via Turkey, to reach Western buyers.

That pipeline might then be linked with Israel, which could both use it as an energy source and provide an outlet via Eilat for shipping oil to the Far East.

Israeli Ambassador to Azerbaijan Arthur Lenk said such an arrangement would represent "a natural connection [for Israel] as a customer and for national and strategic reasons." He said "developing ties" such as the opening of an Azeri trade office or embassy in Israel "serves the interests of Israel and Azerbaijan."

The strong Azeri link with Turkey, its moderate Muslim stance, and its energy resources point to the key diplomatic importance the country could play for Israel, particularly given its location next to Russia and Iran.

But that very geopolitical significance means that the country has to balance its Western aspirations with its strategic location.

In the past, it has been suggested Azerbaijan was concerned that fuller relations with Israel could provoke Iran, and that it needed to toe a careful line as it prepared to host the Organization of the Islamic Conference this June.

However Yevda Abramov, the first Jewish member of the Azerbaijan legislature, said the issue of opening diplomatic missions was a financial one for a small country that only gained independence after the fall of the Iron Curtain.

As soon as the country begins to receive revenue from the expanded pipeline, it will open an embassy in Israel, he said.

Mammadyarov, Lenk and Abramov were among those who welcomed MK Yosef Shagal (Israel Beiteinu) for a tour of Baku this week, organized by the Euro-Asian Jewish Congress. Shagal was born in Baku and became the first Azeri member of Knesset when he was sworn in this spring. He was visiting Azerbaijan in hopes of strengthening ties between the two countries.

#9

**Russia, U.S. should cooperate in areas of global significance – Burns
Interfax, May 18, 2006**

NOVOSIBIRSK. May 18 (Interfax-Siberia) - U.S. Ambassador to Russia William Burns said that despite recurrent differences, Russia and the United States have ample opportunity to cooperate in areas significant for the entire world community.

American-Russian relations are very important, not only for the two countries, but for the world community as a whole, Burns told journalists in Novosibirsk on Thursday in comments on U.S. Vice President Dick Cheney's recent remarks concerning Russia.

Russia and the United States must broaden cooperation in key sectors of major significance for the world, he said.

The U.S. ambassador also said that both countries should make one step back and cast a glance at common ground, where they have common fields for activity, and assess once again what they could do jointly.

Cooperation in the nuclear sphere is one such common ground, he said. The U.S. and Russia are the leaders in developing civilian uses of nuclear energy, the ambassador said, adding that the U.S. and Russia bear historically unique responsibility for preventing nuclear weapons proliferation on our planet.

Moreover, the U.S. and Russia have an opportunity to cooperate in the energy sphere in general, he said. Russia today is a major producer of oil and gas, while the U.S. is a major consumer of these products, which clearly indicates that the two countries should seek ways of establishing stronger cooperation ties, he said.

But disagreements will rise between Russia and the United States from time to time, the U.S. ambassador said, noting that both countries would be honest and would not look for any special words to voice these concerns. And this should not arouse anyone's surprise, Burns said.

#10

Bush may give Putin cold shoulder at G8

By Guy Dinmore

Financial Times, May 18, 2006

US President George W. Bush may give Vladimir Putin the cold shoulder when the Russian president hosts the Group of Eight summit in St Petersburg.

This would be the likely result if hardliners in the US win a policy battle over how to respond to what they see as Moscow's increasingly wayward behaviour.

While there is no doubt Mr Bush will attend the July summit despite calls by Republican senator John McCain and others for a boycott Mr Putin could be on the receiving end of the "minimalist approach".

"There is a push for the president to do the bare minimum in St Petersburg," said Nikolas Gvosdev, editor of the National Interest, a publication of the Nixon Center think-tank that promotes a "realistic" US approach to Russia.

This would mean no "chumminess" with Mr Putin, such as private dinners, and could involve a side-trip to a former Soviet satellite for a speech on democracy. Viktor Yushchenko, Ukraine president, has invited Mr Bush to Kiev, which might come next month, provided a coalition government has been formed.

The White House said no decisions have been taken on the US president's timetable for the July 15-17 summit. Tensions are also rising over the agenda. The US wants to tackle a range of issues that are sensitive for Mr Putin, including Chechnya.

The Bush administration is also pondering whether to send an official to an "Alternate Russia" conference of opposition politicians and non-government organisations brought together by Garry Kasparov, the chess grandmaster and outspoken critic of Mr Putin. The conference is to be held in Moscow just before the G8 summit.

Dick Cheney, US vice-president, is said to be leading the Washington charge for a tougher line towards Russia as seen in his broadside launched from Lithuania when he accused Mr Putin of backsliding on democracy and using oil and gas for blackmail and intimidation.

For Mr Cheney, according to administration insiders, the key issue is Iran. They say he is furious at Russia's arms sales to Tehran and its resistance to United Nations sanctions over the Islamic republic's nuclear programme. Condoleezza Rice, secretary of state, backs a more nuanced approach.

Mr Gvosdev said the "minimalist approach" would be a compromise between a no-show and whole-hearted engagement. But much could change in the two months before the summit.

Yuri Ushakov, Russia's ambassador to Washington, spoke of a "war of words" and heated rhetoric directed at Russia.

#11

U.S. Criticism of Putin Threatens Russian Deals

By Gregory L. White

Wall Street Journal, May 19, 2006

MOSCOW -- The deepening chill in relations between Washington and Moscow is threatening U.S. companies' chances of winning at least two multibillion-dollar business deals in Russia, according to Russian officials and others close to the discussions.

Kremlin officials have made clear that U.S. agreement on a significant deal on Russia's entry into the World Trade Organization would improve the odds for the U.S. companies. But they also warn that increasingly strident criticism of President Vladimir Putin from U.S. officials threatens to spill over into business.

"When these kinds of things happen," Igor Shuvalov, a top Kremlin economic aide, said this week, referring to the rising rhetorical tension between Washington and Moscow, "they start to affect all spheres of life."

He specifically mentioned two deals that could be affected: the \$12 billion Shtokman natural-gas project, in which Chevron Corp. and ConocoPhillips are vying to win stakes alongside France's Total SA and Norway's Statoil ASA and Norsk Hydro ASA, and a \$3 billion airliner purchase by OAO Aeroflot, where Boeing Co.'s 787 is competing against Europe's Airbus. They would be among the largest deals between the U.S. and Russia.

Until the past few weeks, the U.S. companies had been optimistic about winning both deals, according to people close to the talks. But expected announcements of the selections by both OAO Gazprom, the Russian gas monopoly, and Aeroflot, the state airline, have now been pushed back.

The delays come as the WTO talks have dragged out and Washington has stepped up criticism of Mr. Putin for undermining Russia's democratic institutions and using the country's energy resources as political weapons. The harshest attack came in a speech by Vice President Dick Cheney in Lithuania earlier this month.

Russian officials have warned that further attacks -- coming as Moscow is trying to polish its international image ahead of a Group of Eight leading nations summit in St. Petersburg in July -- could trigger retaliation against the U.S. companies.

In public, Mr. Shuvalov cast the issue in a more positive light, saying, "I think the leaders still have a chance to fix" the situation and boost U.S. companies' chances.

In private, however, Russian officials have been tougher, according to people familiar with the discussions. "They're drawing a very clear linkage between U.S. government statements and punishing a company," said a Washington-based consultant close to the discussions. Moscow also had hoped to wrap up the WTO negotiations, a Putin priority, before the summit.

With the Kremlin increasing the state's role in Russia's economy, analysts say its ability to use business as a political lever is increasing. The boards at Gazprom and Aeroflot are dominated by government officials.

"Aeroflot's management bases its decision on purely technical and financial criteria, but for the government, political factors will also inevitably play a role," said Lev Koshlyakov, deputy chief executive at Aeroflot. "It's obvious the chill in relations will affect any decision on which planes to buy."

The decision had been expected this month, but Aeroflot officials have since indicated it isn't likely until June.

Analysts and diplomats point out that politics could be only one of several motivations for the delays, which also serve to put pressure on all of the potential Western partners to improve their offers.

A senior Gazprom executive this week insisted the choice of partners for Shtokman, one of the largest undeveloped gas fields in the world, would be made exclusively on economic grounds. Company officials have said the complexity of assessing the potential partners' bids accounts for the repeated delays. Gazprom originally had planned to announce them a year ago, and then this spring. Yesterday, a senior government official said the news would come "this summer."

Boeing and Chevron declined to comment. ConocoPhillips said it supports Russian membership in the WTO.

--Guy Chazan in Moscow and J. Lynn Lunsford in Fort Worth, Texas, contributed to this article.

#12

Jewish group comes out swinging after Reform lesbian union in Russia

By Lev Krichevsky

JTA, May 18, 2006

MOSCOW, May 18 (JTA) — Russia's leading Jewish organization has called on the community to boycott Reform Jews after a Reform rabbi officiated at what is believed to be the country's first same-sex commitment ceremony. "We are calling on Jewish organizations and communities of Russia to relinquish any religious contacts with the people who have committed this sacrilegious and provocative act, as well as with the organizations these people represent," said a statement released Thursday by the Chabad-led Federation of Jewish Communities of Russia, the largest Jewish group in the country.

"Silence in this situation will be regarded by the society and posterity as a sign of consent," the group said.

It remains unclear whether the boycott call will have any practical effect in the former Soviet Union, where official contacts between Lubavitch and Reform Jewish activists are almost nonexistent.

But the tiny private ceremony for a Jewish lesbian couple in Moscow could trigger a wider public debate within the Jewish community about gays and lesbians — and homophobia — in Russia.

According to a recent poll, 37 percent of Russians believe gays and lesbians should be criminally prosecuted. Russian Jews are believed to have similar attitudes.

The ceremony took place in Moscow on April 2, but came to light only after it was mentioned Wednesday in a Moscow daily newspaper. Rabbi Nelly Shulman, who officiated, said it was not a Jewish wedding but a dedication ceremony.

Shulman insisted that she conducted the ceremony privately and without backing from her group, OROSIR, the umbrella organization of Reform Judaism in Russia. Alexander Lyskovi, the group's leading rabbi, confirmed that the group had not endorsed the ceremony.

Shulman said the federation's boycott call was unreasonable.

"This was my own initiative, and only I myself carry full responsibility for it," she said. If the federation "wants to boycott me, I'm fine with it."

Hostility and bias toward gays and lesbians remain widespread in the former Soviet Union, where homosexuality was decriminalized only with the fall of Communism.

In early May, a group of people identifying themselves as members of the Russian Orthodox Church disrupted a party at a Moscow gay club, shouting homophobic slogans and obscenities and throwing eggs at the doors.

Most recently, there was a heated public debate over a proposed gay pride festival and parade. Leaders of the Russian Orthodox Church and the Muslim and Jewish communities spoke out strongly against the festival.

Talgat Tajuddin, one of Russia's chief muftis, said the Muslim prophet Mohammed had ordered the killing of homosexuals. Tajuddin predicted that if the event takes place, the protests of Russian Muslims would be "even sharper than those abroad against scandalous cartoons."

Federation leader Rabbi Berel Lazar, one of Russia's two chief rabbis, also condemned the proposed festival, telling the Interfax agency in February that the event "would be a blow to morality."

The city government decided Thursday to ban the event.

The lesbian commitment ceremony already has had repercussions for Russia's Reform movement: In late April, Zinovy Kogan resigned as chairman of the Reform umbrella group to protest the ceremony.

A source familiar with the situation told JTA that though the Reform movement in the United States generally permits same-sex unions, Shulman is the only one of six Reform rabbis working in the former Soviet republics who supports such ceremonies.

The six rabbis likely will take up the issue when they meet in Moscow on May 29. It's possible that the movement will ban such ceremonies in Russian Jewish communities, the source said.

"We are living in a society that has not matured enough for such ceremonies," Shulman acknowledged.

Galina Zelenina, who asked Shulman to conduct the ceremony for her and her partner, told JTA she didn't mean to provoke anyone.

"Judaism allows for a certain interpretation," said Zelenina, 28, a poet who has a degree in Jewish studies from a Moscow university.

"We didn't make it a media event," Zelenina said. "But we didn't want to make it underground either."

#13

**Jewish Community of Dushanbe Takes Steps to Revive Itself
FJC, May 19, 2006**

DUSHANBE, Tajikistan – In view of recent problems with the Dushanbe synagogue and after a long process of obtaining a visa, Rabbi Dovid Gurevich, a Chabad Lubavich emissary in Central Asia, has arrived to Dushanbe to discuss the pressing issues with the newly-elected Jewish Community Chairman Valery Davydov and other community leaders.

A three-hour discussion with local leadership resulted in a plan of urgent measures to be taken as soon as possible in order to rekindle Jewish life in Dushanbe.

Everyone agreed that a meeting with city's Chief Architect regarding the renovation of the synagogue which nearly got destroyed by the city authorities was necessary and issues to be discussed at the meeting were outlined. Other points discussed were efforts to enlist help from international donors to help with the reconstruction of the synagogue, arranging for a shochet to travel frequently to Dushanbe to provide kosher meat, plans to recruit a rabbi to boost the Jewish activity in the city.

Jewish community of Dushanbe is thankful to Valery Davydov and brothers Izmail and David Ilyasov for their ongoing support of the community and the former residents of Dushanbe who help to upkeep the local Jewish cemetery.