



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

NCSJ WEEKLY NEWS BRIEF

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#1

Summary: "Human Rights in Russia and the Upcoming G8 Summit"

**By Zach Riskind, NCSJ Intern
CSIS Briefing, May 25, 2006**

Note: For this event CSIS hosted two speakers, Yuri Dzhibladze, President of the Center for the Development of Democracy and Human Rights, and Tanya Lokshina, Chair of the Moscow-based think tank "Demos." The meeting was moderated by Sarah E. Mendelson of CSIS.

Sarah E. Mendelson There is a crisis of human rights in the Euro-Atlantic region. Moreover, the U.S., by sacrificing human rights for security during the War on Terror and engaging in disappearances and torture, has lost credibility in promoting human rights. To what extent can (or should) we push the Putin administration to reform without fueling the perception that western democracies are hypocritical?

However, human rights groups operating in Russia face serious challenges: Legislation passed in April regulates the conduct of non-governmental organizations and threatens to curb their activities, and the situation in the North Caucasus is bad the violence could escalate. There has been an increase in hate crimes and army abuse. How do we prioritize between these challenges?

Yuri Dzhibladze At the July 2006 G8 summit in St. Petersburg leaders of the G7 must convey to Putin and the Russian people that human rights must improve. Russian leaders have succeeded in portraying human rights as a tool used by the U.S. to weaken Russia and further American interests rather than genuine concern about the plight of the Russian people or commitment to the principle of human rights for its own sake. The summit provides a particularly good forum to conduct dialogue about human rights with Russia because a concurrent protest by all democratic powers will be harder to dismiss as a unilateral and opportunistic imposition by the U.S. Criticisms presented will be harder to portray as anti-Russian.

Despite the setbacks in democratic institutions and human rights in Russia in the last few years, Russia is currently both chairman of the G8 and the council of Europe. However, it is not playing by democratic rules; we must make membership to the club of nations contingent on that. Do we have no leverage in negotiating human rights with Russia because of energy independence? No. The leverage should be membership in the club of nations itself, and Russia's status in the club should depend on its commitment to human rights.

The Euro-Atlantic community, despite Putin's abysmal record on democracy and human rights, is unlikely to exert much pressure on Russia to improve in these respects. The three main topics planned to be covered during the G-8 summit are infectious diseases, energy, and education, particularly at the professional level. Terrorism and security will also be covered. Human rights, however, is not very high up on the agenda. Moreover, western governments have shown little will to push Putin to reform and in the past few years have favored political and economic expediency over dealing with human rights infractions in their policy towards Russia.

For these reasons, there will be a separate NGO conference in July to discuss human rights in context of war on terror, migration, racism/xenophobia, and internal armed conflicts. This conference is held by the Russian Civic Congress, a loose coalition of democratic organizations, including grassroots social movements, student groups, environmental movements, and others. The goal is to show that there is civil society in Russia that is capable of self-organization in the face of common dangers: the rolling back of democracy, the curtailment of civic rights and freedoms, the revival of censorship, the omnipotence of bureaucracy, and endemic corruption.

In short, the aim is to show democratic community that there is "another Russia" from the one Putin is portraying at the G8 forum and to illustrate the scourges of authoritarian regimes.

Tanya Lokshina The human rights situation in Russia today is a shock. A very significant decline has occurred in a very short period of time. Despite this, the Russian public continues to support Putin. Why? Many Russians feel that a strong central power is more capable of ensuring their well-being and providing economic security. For many Russians, democracy is associated with chaos, probably the result of Yeltsin's rapid privatization and "shock therapy" plan for transitioning to a market economy. The result of this is that Putin has met little resistance in efforts to consolidate power. Rights have slowly eroded; Space for independent political activity disappearing. In Russia there is no independent media, no independent business, and no independent political forces- the parliament and judiciary are dominated by Putin supporters.

The thousands of NGOs in Russia represent the last independent forces. However, with the new laws, the government is trying to make NGOs preoccupied by query after query, thereby making the cost of operating in Russia prohibitively expensive. For example, NGOs have to report on all media coverage of their activity all over the world or face sanctions. The community of democratic states must demonstrate solidarity with Russian civil society in the face of these threats.

#2 US to press Russia on democracy: Rice AFP, May 21, 2006

BOSTON, Massachusetts, May 21 2006-Russia should be pressed on democratic reforms, US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice said in an interview published Sunday, adding that Moscow should not intimidate its neighbors.

"We still have a good relationship with Russia. We work together on all kinds of issues," Rice said. "We've come a long, long way from when there was a hammer and sickle above the Kremlin," Rice said in an interview published Sunday in the newspaper of Boston College, where she is to speak Monday.

US Vice President Dick Cheney said on May 4 in Vilnius that Russia was using energy as a weapon against former republics of the Soviet Union and meddling in their politics.

Days later Russian President Vladimir Putin referred to the United States as a wolf with a limited point of view.

"These are things we've been saying and talking about for some time," Rice said.

"They perhaps got put together in the vice president's speech, but these have been issues with the Russians and we've been vocal about them," she said.

"There are some protections for individual freedoms, but we have to worry that the kind of institutionalization of democracy that is so important -- with a free press, with a judiciary that's independent, with a legislature that is a real legislature. That is what has not taken place and indeed where there have been some reversals in Russia. And so we have to speak the truth as we know it," Rice said.

"It's also important for Russia not to intimidate its neighbors. The small states around Russia that used to be part of the Soviet Union are now independent and they have to be respected as such," she said.

"Finally, if Russia is to be a reliable energy supplier in the energy markets, which is extremely important these days, Russia has to behave in a way that its customers are to believe that these really will be matters of commerce and not matters of politics. So it was important to speak up on it," Rice said.

"Yet as the President (George W. Bush) said, nobody's going to give up on Russia. We know that it's not the Soviet Union."

#3

Investing in Russia: Big barriers, but rich rewards

By Neil Buckley

Financial Times, May 20, 2006

Russia flag and St Basils imageDoes Russia really want foreign investment? Russia has sent out contradictory signals in recent years.

The answer is: yes, but on its own terms and in some sectors, notably energy and other "strategic" areas, foreign investors are now likely to be able to acquire only minority stakes in Russian businesses. Investors still face many hurdles, especially in bureaucratic red tape and corruption. But the rewards are sizeable.

A survey by the Foreign Investment Advisory Council, a body advising on the business climate that includes many multinationals, last year found that nine out of 10 corporate investors in Russia had reported sales increases of 10 per cent or more in the past year. Three-quarters had seen profits increase more than 10 per cent, and four-fifths had successfully achieved their business plans in the past two years.

Attracted by strong economic growth above 6 per cent for seven straight years and growth in consumer spending well into double digits, foreign direct investment in the country is certainly still growing. It jumped from \$12.1bn in 2004 to \$16.7bn in 2005, according to government figures nearly five times the level in 2002.

Russia's booming consumer sector is attracting increasing inflows, especially through acquisitions. A recent report by KPMG on Russia's mergers and acquisitions market in 2005 found several of the biggest inbound deals were in the consumer sector. They included Coca-Cola Hellenic Bottling's acquisition of Multon, a Russian fruit juice producer, for \$501m and Heineken's purchase of Ivan Taranov Brewery for \$560m.

According to Clyde Tuggle, president of Coca-Cola's operations in Europe, "Russia represents arguably the single best opportunity for our business to create value over the long term, perhaps anywhere."

President Vladimir Putin set a goal in his state of the nation address in April 2005 of creating a more investor-friendly environment. He has been partly successful.

After a long period of uncertainty, the Russian government is close to delivering on his pledge to clarify areas where controls on foreign investment will be applied. A draft law will require foreign investors to get permission to acquire anything more than a blocking minority of just over 25 per cent in companies in 39 strategic sectors.

As well as defence, nuclear energy and aviation technology, the sectors would include natural monopolies. Investment in natural resources would be restricted only in oilfields or mineral deposits the government defines as strategic assets in a law on subsoil resources. Russia indicated it would define only six big oil, gold and copper fields in the subsoil law, though it has still to be finalised.

"Our goal is not to limit the access of foreign investors, but to make the process of participation transparent and to bring it into the realm of civil law," Mr Putin said after a meeting last month with Angela Merkel, the German chancellor.

Mr Putin has made less progress in other areas such as tackling corruption, which according to several studies is still on the rise.

Another trend foreign investors need to watch is growing moves by the state to retake control of key assets, at least in strategic sectors. This has mainly been confined to areas such as energy, metals, defence and aerospace. But Avtovaz, the Lada car maker, was last year taken over by a state defence exports agency, which caused some problems for its joint venture partner General Motors.

Analysts warn there is a danger that foreign entrants to the market could find themselves competing with big state-controlled rivals favoured by the government.

Research commissioned by the Russian Union of Industrialists and Entrepreneurs, the domestic lobby group, concluded that Russia's economic model had been most favourable for investment in 2002 and 2003, before the more "statist" policy emerged. Had that climate been maintained, it added, Russia could have seen an investment boom over the following two years. Industrial output growth in 2005, it projected, could have been between 7.7 per cent and 10 per cent, compared with 4 per cent in reality, leading to GDP growth of 10.2 per cent to 12.6 per cent, against an actual 6.4 per cent.

The government, it warned, was failing to control the expansion of the state sector, and still not providing a stable environment and proper protection for property rights.

"Effective economic policy does not mean a stream of bills and decrees," the group said. "It means ensuring that the situation is predictable."

#4

Putin's Hubris

By Jim Hoagland

Washington Post, May 21, 2006

The fallout from President Bush's crash-and-burn approval ratings does not stop at the water's edge. Foreign leaders -- in particular, Russia's Vladimir Putin -- oppose U.S. goals and policies abroad more directly and forcefully as Bush's support and his time left in office fade away together.

Vice President Cheney's recent speech criticizing Putin's record on democracy caught the headlines, but the real news of U.S.-Russian relations is the reversal of fortunes that has made Putin the confident, overbearing leader and Bush the transitional figure who heads a divided nation.

The spirit of hubris that was so palpable in the early Bush years has migrated from the White House to Putin's Kremlin, Hugo Chavez's Miraflores presidential palace and other oil- and gas-rich precincts. The petrocrats ride high on undreamed-of revenues while Bush manages an increasingly defensive foreign-policy agenda and unwieldy budget and trade deficits. That was the unspoken subtext of Cheney's "hold on there, Vladimir" speech in Vilnius, Lithuania, on May 4.

This reversal may turn out to be temporary. But even as a flash in the pan, it is a costly factor for U.S. prestige and power abroad. And not only the United States: Lame-duck leaders in London, Paris and Tokyo struggle to keep their nations on the march, while divided coalitions are more or less in power in Berlin and Rome. Iran's Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, Venezuela's Chavez and others know that the only time to kick their foes is when they are down.

The comfort Putin feels in reviving the Sinatra Doctrine at the Kremlin -- doing it his way -- came home to me on three fronts recently.

The first was hearing Dmitri Trenin, a clear-eyed Russian scholar based in Moscow, describe to a Washington seminar the Kremlin's satisfaction at how well the war in Chechnya is going, at least from the Russian point of view. The conflict has essentially been Chechenized, according to Trenin and to diplomats in Moscow, with Russian forces standing down as local forces stand up.

But the diplomats also report that removing Chechnya from the East-West chessboard of big-power politics seems to be intensifying, rather than moderating, Putin's aggressive determination to make sure that Russia is no longer treated "like part of the furniture" in foreign-policy terms.

The second and most significant example of the new assertiveness came when U.S., European and Russian negotiators met in New York two weeks ago to discuss stopping Iran's drive to enrich uranium. In a previously undisclosed move, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov proposed that Iran be allowed to conduct an experimental research and development program of enrichment if Tehran gives up its plan for full-scale development of nuclear reactors.

This was one big step backward. Russia had previously agreed with U.S. and European insistence that Iran be allowed no access to any type of enrichment, a key step to possessing a nuclear weapon. The Russian plan "would put us on a slippery slope. It is a red line we do not accept being crossed," said one U.S. official.

Russia's control over natural-gas supplies to Europe -- even though much of that gas originates in former Soviet republics in Central Asia and then passes through Russian pipelines -- has also emboldened Putin in his determination to keep Ukraine and Georgia from moving rapidly along the path to NATO membership. Political turmoil in Ukraine has given the Kremlin new relief on that third political front.

Cheney's speech marked a growing concern within the administration about Putin's unhelpfulness in foreign affairs rather than an attempt to roll back Putin's power at home. After all, as Trenin noted, the Russian president's 72 percent approval rating is more than double Bush's favorable standing in U.S. polls.

The Group of Eight summit that Putin will host in St. Petersburg in July is now only weeks away. Time grows short to reach an understanding on political disputes that could spoil Putin's moment on the world stage. That was Cheney's essential message -- a last effort to caution the Russian against overplaying his hand.

That is good advice at any time from anyone. But it is particularly credible coming from the Bush-Cheney White House, which five years ago was not sure it had to take Russia, a country with a gross domestic product equal to that of Denmark, into account in big-power politics. Who should know better that hubristic failure is still failure, writ large?

#5

Top bosses step in to soothe relations with Moscow

By Stefan Wagstyl

Financial Times, May 23, 2006

Russia and the European Union must co-operate more closely to realise the “enormous economic potential” of their commercial ties, according to a report from Europe’s leading industrialists.

Intervening in the debate over relations between Moscow and the EU, the European Round Table has called for reforms to boost bilateral trade and investment, modernise the Russian economy and bring the economies of Russia and the EU closer together.

While the report, published on Tuesday, makes no reference to the growing western political concerns about Russia and its energy supplies, it will be seen as an attempt to calm east-west relations in advance of the Group of Eight summit in St Petersburg.

“EU-Russia relations have enormous economic potential,” say Antony Burgmans, the chairman of Unilever, and Peter Sutherland, chairman of BP, in the introduction.

“In the view of the European Round Table of Industrialists the future benefits available to the EU and Russia from closer cooperation on economic issues are greatly underestimated. Russia has an unprecedented opportunity to strengthen its position as a global economic powerhouse. Meanwhile, the European Union could benefit substantially from increased economic integration with its largest neighbour and one of its best customers.”

The report says that last year’s EU-Russia agreement to cooperate in four “common spaces”, including the economy, “provides an excellent opportunity to foster shared economic growth and prosperity. The report paints a rosy picture of Russia’s potential, quoting a study by Goldman Sachs, the investment bank, which predicts Russia could in terms of per capita income catch up with Italy by 2018, France by 2024, the UK by 2027 and Germany by 2028.

The authors urge Moscow to lessen its dependence on oil and gas revenues and avoid the “Dutch disease” by adopting reforms to diversify the economy and improve the investment climate. They advocate greater transparency, improvements in regulation and the rule of law and more protection for investors. They also want to boost bilateral trade by harmonising customs and other procedures.

The report comes after mounting worries in Europe about energy supplies following the winter gas contract dispute between Russia and Ukraine, when supplies were temporarily cut.

East European governments are particularly concerned about what they see as Russia's increasing willingness to use energy to apply political pressure. Dick Cheney, the US vice president, this month raised the political temperature by warning Russia against resorting to "intimidation and blackmail" in energy policy.

#6

Rice: Anti-Semitism still alive JTA Brief, May 23, 2006

Anti-Semitism is a "current event," Condoleezza Rice said. The U.S. secretary of state spoke Monday at the swearing-in of her senior anti-Semitism adviser, Gregg Rickman.

"More than six decades after the Holocaust, anti-Semitism is not just an historical fact," Rice said. "It is a current event. Anti-Semitic hate crimes are on the rise still at home and abroad. And governments must take decisive action against the perpetrators of those crimes and new generations have to be inoculated against the dangerous bigotry that is instilled often through education in intolerance."

Rickman is inaugurating the position, which will coordinate U.S. policy on addressing anti-Semitism around the world.

The position stems from legislation sponsored by Rep. Tom Lantos (D-Calif.) and Sen. George Voinovich (R-Ohio).

#7

Russian Jewish teen samples Torah studies and spins techno By Yasha Levine JTA, May 21, 2006

VOLGOGRAD, Russia, May 21 (JTA) -- Just two weeks before Russia's recent May 9 Victory Day celebrations, the Russian city of Volgograd was awash in preparations. As crews hung up posters of World War II soldiers and veterans, stringing red banners across streets and adorning lampposts with Russian flags, Alexander Chizhikov, a student at Volgograd's Jewish day school, is making preparations of his own.

Alexander is clutching a CD case and reviewing his notes of the songs in his DJ mix in preparation for his graduation from Volgograd's first DJ school.

At just 15, he is the school's youngest student, but like everyone else he is expected to perform to a packed audience at one of Volgograd's premier dance clubs situated on the Volga River.

Alexander's life has revolved around the Jewish community since he was 8 years old when his older brother first started attending Volgograd's synagogue. His mother, Inna Chizhikova, has long been an editor at Volgograd's Jewish newspaper -- and he is now a student at Volgograd's Chabad-run Jewish school.

Around the Jewish community, he is known by his Hebrew name, Josif. But Alexander is not particularly observant. The custom of taking on a Hebrew name is a common practice in Jewish communities formed around Chabad-sponsored Jewish institutions.

But aside from his interests in his Jewish identity, Alexander is trying to find himself as an individual as well -- and his struggles with his Jewish and secular identities are similar to those faced by young Russian Jews in cities far from the Jewish centers of Moscow and St. Petersburg.

Broad shouldered and tall -- his lack of facial hair is the only thing that gives away his real age -- Alexander talks with a measured assurance uncommon for a teenager. .

He entered the world of electronic music less than a year ago after attending a local dance party.

"I come to a club to dance. I do not come there to drink alcohol or take drugs. I dance all night and come out with a smile on my face," he says.

Alexander explained that he entered the world of being a DJ, or spinning, through his earlier interest in rap and hip-hop cultures.

Until a few months ago he figured prominently in Volgograd's youth hip-hop circles, composing his own lyrics and performing them around the city's venues since he was 13. He even was ranked one of the top 10 artists at Volgograd's StreetArt city festival.

But Alexander's interest in rap culture began to wane as he realized that people's lyrics touched on mostly destructive themes.

"People never said anything smart," he complains.

That is when he began to drift more toward electronic music, which according to him, promotes a more positive message. He now dreams of becoming a professional DJ.

I'm just glad that my son can find the right balance of secular and religious identity, his mother said. "He is not an extreme Chasid, but he is not alone either," she says, referring to the morals that her son's Jewish identity instill in him.

She believes that Judaism will help guide Alexander to make the right decisions in life.

Alexander is trying to bridge his Jewish identity to his everyday secular life, but it isn't easy.

Volgograd, with a population of slightly more than 1 million people, has a Jewish community of only 5,000.

None of his friends in the electronic music scene are Jewish and many have no clue as to what being Jewish means.

Nonetheless, he prides himself on his Torah studies as well as his musical achievements. "In school I enjoy the reputation as one who you can ask" about Torah studies, Alexander says.

Although Russia has seen a rise in hate crimes -- with Volgograd believed to have one of most visible neo-Nazi skinhead presences nationwide -- Alexander does not see any anti-Semitism in his social circles and does not believe that his openness about his Jewish identity hinders his ability fit into secular Russian life.

"I can walk around in a T-shirt that says 'Born to be wild in Israel' and not have any problems," Alexander told JTA.

Inna Chizhikova pointed out that it is very hard to grow up in a provincial city such as Volgograd. Defeatism, stagnation and drug abuse -- mainly stemming from a lack of opportunities and jobs -- are a staple in virtually any provincial Russian town.

Many young people, including a few of those attending Alexander's graduation party, strive to leave Volgograd for a metropolitan center.

For non-Jewish Russians, Moscow is the only logical destination. And Alexander isn't turned off to the idea of leaving for Israel after finishing school either, especially now that he has learned of a DJ school in Tel Aviv run by trance duo Infected Mushroom. His older brother already made aliyah a few years ago.

But if that doesn't work out, Alexander is content on staying in Volgograd and continuing his DJ aspirations while studying medicine.

It is not unusual for a 15-year-old kid to have aspirations that reach to the sky. But then it might not be a coincidence that Exodus -- which, in part, chronicles the Jews' fleeing Egypt -- is Alexander's favorite book in the Torah.

"I like it for the message that it gives; that nothing is impossible to achieve," he said.

#8

Russia's NGO Law: An Attack on Freedom and Civil Society

By Yevgeny Volk

The Heritage Foundation, May 24, 2006

In early May Russian President Vladimir Putin signed executive orders that give the Justice Ministry and the Federal Registration Service broad powers of control over non-governmental organizations (NGOs). The mechanisms for enforcing the new NGO law are now in place. The Federal Registration Service, whose staff has swelled by as much as five thousand, will conduct check-ups of an NGO's activity to verify its compliance with its objectives stated in its founding documents. The Justice Ministry, to which the Federal Registration Service is subordinate, will determine the order of these check-ups.

The idea for this NGO law originated within the Kremlin administration in 2005, and the law embodies the present ruling elite's fears of the "color revolutions" on the post-Soviet space, such as those in Georgia, Ukraine, and Kyrgyzstan, where NGOs took the center stage. The Kremlin was especially concerned with Western NGOs and foreign funding of Russian NGOs. Putin repeatedly indicated that the Kremlin would not allow financing political activities in Russia from abroad.

In early November 2005 a group of the Kremlin-connected State Duma deputies submitted a harsh bill designed to tighten state control over NGOs. The bill envisioned compulsory registration for NGOs followed by the submission of information about their performance and the filing of fiscal reports for scrutiny by a registration agency. The bill's authors proposed to prohibit the operations of foreign NGOs' representative offices in Russia. These foreign offices would be required to register their branches in Russia as Russian public policy associations.

The bill put before the Duma raised a tide of protests both in the Russian democratic community and in the West. Most Russian NGO leaders decried the bill as unconstitutional and counter to the standards of civil society.

Western leaders including George W. Bush repeatedly expressed concerns about this anti-democratic law with President Putin. The U.S. Congress passed a resolution denouncing the bill, and an avalanche of

protests from American and other foreign public policy organizations assailed the State Duma and the Kremlin.

Nevertheless, the State Duma put through a first reading of this bill, and Putin and parliament were forced to reckon with the flaming protest at home and abroad. Putin suggested that the State Duma soften tough provisions of the NGO bill in the first reading, and he proposed to do away with the requirement that foreign NGOs register their Russian branches as Russian public policy associations.

The passage of the law was preceded by a media campaign initiated by the Russian secret services that leveled charges at a number of Russian NGOs for having contacts with Western intelligence services. Its purpose was to justify the need for a stiff control over NGO financing.

On December 23, 2005 the State Duma approved the amendments to the NGO bill that took account of President Putin's remarks. On December 26, the federation Council, the upper House of parliament, endorsed the bill. This bill, however, introduced a new requirement—foreign NGOs would have to notify the Federal Registration Service of their incoming funds and the way these funds were spent. The bill also imposed penalties and sanctions—up to filing a suit to shut an NGO down—for failing to submit this information.

The passage of this softened version of the bill did not quell the protests inside the country or abroad. On January 10, 2006, President Putin signed the bill into law in total secrecy, even as he was hosting German Chancellor Angela Merkel, who had also been critical of the document. The circumstances of the signing became known after a few days. Clearly, Putin did not want to call Merkel and the whole world's attention to his anti-democratic decision.

The NGO law came into effect on April 18. It will regulate the activity of over 500,000 NGOs in Russia, including 148,000 public policy organizations and 5,000 foreign NGO branches. To manage these oversight duties, the Justice Ministry has employed a 5,000-strong bureaucratic staff, in addition to the 1,000-strong NGO registration staff.

As NGOs feared, the regulations issued by the government agencies in response to the law have introduced harsh restrictions on NGO performance. From now on, NGOs will have to report every detail of their activities. An activity report form is seven small-print pages long and includes accounts of performance, both of the substance of an NGO's work and its expenses. If money is spent on putting on events, the NGO must detail their number, the topics, and participation. Foreign organizations, such as the Heritage Foundation's Moscow office, also must indicate the cost of office supplies. The regulations will significantly increase an NGO's expenses.

Russian rights organizations are unanimous in their belief that the worst expectations of this new law are justified. If an NGO cannot be banned directly, the red tape, all-out control, endless check-ups, and a stepped-up financial burden could smother it.

What America Can Do to Support Freedom in Russia

To promote democracy and arrest Russia's drift to autocracy the Bush Administration should take a resolute action. It should do the following:

Conduct permanent monitoring of the freedom situation in Russia;

Evaluate the scale and nature of the abuse of individual freedom in Russia;

React decisively and protest violations of basic freedoms;

Engage the Russian government in public discussions on every level on the status of freedom in Russia;

Criticize the NGO law and its implementation practices at the G8 Summit in St. Petersburg;

Encourage the U.S. OSCE Commission to hold regular hearings on the status of freedom in Russia;

Call for sanctions against Russia in case of its violent abuse of freedom; and

Provide broad support to the freedom movement in Russia by contacts with freedom fighters, inviting them to international forums, rendering them political and moral assistance.

Russian NGOs and foreign NGO representative offices in Russia remain the stronghold of nascent civil society and freedom in Russia. The work of these organizations cannot be strangled by the intrusions of the Russian government.

#9

Russia gays hear call: Go back to the closet

Homosexuality is no longer a crime, but as the nation's first gay pride parade nears, scorn and abuse intensify, and religious leaders weigh in

By Alex Rodriguez

Chicago Tribune, May 25, 2006

MOSCOW -- On a recent Sunday night, the organizers of a gay party at a Moscow nightclub peered nervously out the front door. Clustered outside were hundreds of screaming demonstrators, some of them liquor-addled skinheads throwing bottles and eggs, others old women in head scarves clutching Russian Orthodox icons and crosses studded with small nails.

The mob pounced on anyone who approached. The women used the icons as cudgels against guests coming up to the door. Young toughs in tracksuits and steel-toed black boots slammed their heads into the front door, shouting, "Russia is for Russians!"

"It was very frightening," said Lyubov Ulyanova, the club's director. "The police just stood there and watched it all."

Homosexuality was taken off the books as a crime in Russia in 1993, but the gay community remains a magnet for scorn and abuse, forced to tread carefully and quietly through a society saddled with Soviet-era biases.

Parade still lacks permit

Gay leaders in Moscow hope to raise awareness about their community Saturday, when they attempt to kick off Russia's first gay pride parade through the streets of the capital. Whether the event ever gets off the ground remains in doubt. So far, city leaders have refused to give parade organizers permission.

Gay leaders vow to stage the event anyway, despite the protests outside the Renaissance Event Club on April 30 and another demonstration at a different club the next night.

"We want this to be our public coming out," said Nikolai Alexeyev, a leading gay activist behind the parade effort. "We don't want to stay in the closet anymore."

In an age when gay communities in the West actively assert their rights and enjoy social acceptance, many homosexuals in Russia find themselves forced to keep their lifestyles a secret from families, friends and co-

workers. Russian employers routinely find ways to cull gay workers from the workplace. Physical attacks on gay men are rarely taken seriously by police and Russian courts.

"The mindset within the gay community is, 'Let's keep quiet, otherwise they will come and get us,'" said Alexander Golousenko, a 36-year-old gay Muscovite who owns a travel agency that caters to gays and organized the party at the Renaissance Event Club. "Everyone says, 'Try not to show you are gay, be careful about what you say, be very discreet.'"

Russia's intolerance for homosexuality is rooted in the Soviet era, when it carried a penalty of up to five years in prison. A poll conducted in 1989 indicated that a third of Russians favored extermination of the country's gay population, and 30 percent favored segregating them, according to Igor Kon's 1995 book, "The Sexual Revolution in Russia." Only 6 percent of the poll's respondents supported the gay community.

"During the Soviet period . . . lesbians were locked up in psychiatric wards, treated as if they were insane and given medication normally given to schizophrenics," said Yevgenia Debryanskaya, a longtime gay activist and owner of Moscow's 12 Volts Club. "That same kind of homophobia that we had during Soviet times exists today."

With the advent of glasnost, a gay subculture began to evolve as journalists and academics began discussing homosexuality more freely. The movement picked up after the Soviet collapse in 1991. Clubs catering to the city's gay population opened; gay newspapers and magazines began circulating.

Nevertheless, in many ways Russia's gay community remains as stigmatized as it was during Soviet times. Alexeyev, 28, founder of the gayrussia.ru Web site, says his attempt to submit a doctoral thesis on the rights of Russia's gay community was rejected by his professors at Moscow State University.

Religious leaders take sides

"They simply said it's not the kind of topic they want at their university," Alexeyev said. His lawsuit alleging discrimination by the university failed in a Moscow court, and he now is pursuing the case in the European Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg, France.

Alexeyev appears headed for another showdown with authorities, this time over his attempts to organize Russia's first gay pride parade. Sergei Tsoi, a spokesman for Moscow Mayor Yuri Luzhkov, told reporters in February that a gay pride parade was out of the question, largely because it "evoked outrage in society, particularly among religious leaders."

One of those religious leaders, Talgat Tadzhuiddin, a top Russian Muslim cleric, warned that Russian Muslims would take to the streets and flog gays if the parade were permitted. Bishop Daniil, a Russian Orthodox leader from the far eastern Yuzhno-Sakhalinsk, region, likened homosexuality to leprosy.

The backlash has been just as strident in the Duma, Russia's lower chamber of parliament. Alexander Chuyev, a prominent member of the nationalist Motherland Party, has proposed legislation that would criminalize material in the media or the Internet that in any way depicts homosexuality or promotes the gay community's agenda.

Chuyev doesn't mince words about his view of gays in Russia: As long as homosexual men and women stay in the shadows, he doesn't have a problem with them. "But if the gay community wants to come out into the open, that encroaches on our rights--our right to a normal life," Chuyev said.

Under Chuyev's proposal, an editor or TV producer could be banned from the profession for two to five years if convicted of publishing "gay propaganda" in the media or the Internet.

"In our country, the majority of people do not agree with homosexuality," Chuyev said. "So if homosexuality comes to public life, we'll see the beginnings of a very dangerous situation in society. A public citizen war, I think."

In making his case for banning the parade, Luzhkov told Human Rights Watch that city officials had to "take into account the point of view on the issue of the overwhelming majority of Muscovites and residents of Russia." Making popular sentiment the determining factor, Human Rights Watch argues, is an argument unlikely to hold up if the dispute is brought to international court.

"One key purpose of human-rights protection is precisely to ensure that majority opinion cannot deny the rights of minorities," Scott Long, director of Human Rights Watch's lesbian and gay rights program, wrote in a letter to Luzhkov dated May 8. "Banning the planned parade because of fears of disturbance due to counter-demonstrators would amount to giving violence a license to curb free expression."

#10

Russian Officials Say Arrests End Gang Accused of Racial Killings

By Steven Lee Myers

New York Times, May 25, 2006

MOSCOW, May 24 — The authorities in St. Petersburg announced Wednesday that they had broken up an extremist group that had shocked Russia with a string of racially motivated killings, including that of an African student in April and of an expert on hate crimes nearly two years ago.

The authorities said they recently arrested five members of the loosely organized group. Two others appeared to have been arrested earlier on separate charges, while an eighth was shot to death as the police tried to arrest him last Thursday. The police seized weapons, explosives and neo-Nazi and other extremist literature in raids of the gang members' apartments, the authorities said.

Though no charges have been filed yet, let alone any trials held, the case amounted to a rare judicial success in Russia's fight against a deadly wave of racism and xenophobia that has resulted in at least 48 killings and scores of assaults across the country in the last year and a half.

Yet even as officials made the announcement they played down the scope of racially motivated crimes in Russia and in St. Petersburg, which has been the scene of some of the most grisly killings, including that of a 9-year-old Tajik girl in 2004. It is also President Vladimir V. Putin's hometown and the site of this year's meeting of the leaders of the Group of 8 industrialized nations in July.

St. Petersburg's prosecutor, Sergei P. Zaitsev, said the seven young men in custody were members of a small extremist group with no known name. One of its leaders, Aleksei Voyevodin, was convicted and sentenced to three years in prison in December on charges of inciting racial hatred. He was also a member of an extremist group called Mad Crowd, but it was not clear if that group was linked to the one said to have been broken up.

A second leader, Dmitri Borovikov, was shot to death as the police tried to arrest him last Thursday in what appeared to be a wave of arrests. Mr. Zaitsev did not say when the other arrests had occurred, though Russian news reports said it was last week. Mr. Zaitsev said the police continued to search for at least five other members of the group.

The group's members are accused of killing Lamzar Samba, a 28-year-old student from Senegal, who was shot in the neck as he left a St. Petersburg nightclub on April 7. Although foreigners and Russians of non-

Slavic ancestry routinely face violent assaults, his death was believed to be the first racially motivated killing involving a firearm.

Mr. Zaitsev went on to accuse the group of killing an Armenian and a Korean, as well as two of its own members. Without elaborating, he said the group was also involved in the killing of Nikolai M. Girenko, a Russian anthropologist who became an expert on neo-Nazis, skinheads and other extremist movements.

Racially tinged violence is routine here, with attacks occurring almost daily. Many more are believed to remain unreported by immigrants who fear police retaliation or abuse.

The Sova Center, a research organization in Moscow that tracks hate crimes, said at least 17 racially motivated killings had already occurred in Russia this year, a pace that would yield a total well in excess of the 31 reported last year. The center has tallied at least 104 violent assaults. Most of the victims are visitors from Asia or Africa or members of Russia's myriad ethnic groups.

The violence has prompted sharp criticism at home and abroad. In a report released this month titled "Violent Racism Out of Control," Amnesty International called the response by the authorities "grossly inadequate," despite public denunciations of racism by Mr. Putin.

#11

Local Press Plagued By Corruption By Galina Stolyarova St. Petersburg Times, May 26, 2006

Local media are corrupt and most newspapers are packed with planted stories and hidden advertising, according to research by political science students at Herzen Pedagogical University, who presented their results this month at the Regional Press Institute.

Following an internship at the St. Petersburg Legislative Assembly, a group of fifth-year-students completed a report analyzing the coverage of a series of significant political events in the local newspapers. The publications date from March to November 2005 and deal with high profile, controversial subjects such as City Hall's conflicts with the St. Petersburg Charter Court and the Baltic Pearl construction project.

"The alarming thing was that the publications openly supporting City Hall keep repeating the key arguments almost word for word; they don't quote any critics and they look as if they were all written by the same person, who has, shall we say, a limited vocabulary," said Alexander Balayan, one of the report's authors. "We could even see identical mistakes or misspellings circulating from article to article."

The students said it was impossible to establish the identity of the writers of these reports. "The editorial offices were being elusive," Balayan said. "The staff were saying that the person we are looking for 'is not there,' 'has never worked there,' or that 'this is a pen-name, but we don't know who is behind it'."

Balayan said the researchers have not been able to locate a single author of reports that appear to be planted, whereas journalists who write balanced reports used their real names and were accessible.

The report said suspicious-looking stories were most often found in "Smena," "Vecherny Peterburg" and local editions of "Komsomolskaya Pravda" and "Moskovsky Komsomolets."

"Nobody is hiding anything anymore," said political analyst and Yabloko politician Boris Vishnevsky. "Things are quite openly done these days. Some editors who are not at liberty to deny a request from Smolny do

publish planted stories but sign them in a special way, like, for instance, Smolsky a verbal reference to Smolny or Valentin Matveyev a reference to Valentina Matviyenko.”

Sergei Gulyayev, a lawmaker with the St. Petersburg Legislative Assembly, said the demand for paid stories has increased significantly.

“I have seen it used against me,” Gulyayev said. “For instance, one newspaper would blatantly misrepresent my words or use them in a different context with scathing remarks, and other newspapers would happily reprint it, without checking or contacting me for a comment.”

Planted stories are hardly new to the Russian media. In a survey conducted by the locally based Institute of Sociology of the Russian Academy of Scientists in 2001, 12 percent of St. Petersburg journalists admitted that they “regularly” produce stories involving hidden advertising. A further 18 percent said that they produce such stories “occasionally,” and 37 percent said that they had done so “more than once.” One hundred local journalists took part in the survey.

“These figures indicate how easy it is to manipulate journalists in Russia,” said Tatyana Protasenko, a senior Institute researcher who conducted the survey. “The market has become almost limitless here: if we talk politics, the damage is done to particular politicians’ reputations, but if readers trust planted stories about a miraculous drug, the victims could pay with their health, if not lives.”

“But if ten or even five years ago it was difficult for them to resist financial temptations because, like most people, they had rather modest incomes, these days, in most cases, it is not a matter of survival,” the analyst said in a telephone interview on Thursday.

According to Protasenko’s research, forty-seven percent of St. Petersburg journalists and 32 percent of regional journalists considered “financial issues” to be a major obstacle for Russian journalism. Almost exactly the same percentage in both categories named “the lack of professionalism among journalists” as a key problem.

Protasenko said only a handful of local publications manage to maintain full independence from Smolny. “City Hall doesn’t have to directly intervene or openly use pressure against the editorial teams,” she said. “The media bosses have long accepted a servile attitude with the authorities; they observe a friendly tone and tread carefully, avoiding potentially sensitive subjects and leaving out controversial commentators.”

The sociologist also said the paid-for articles are often very difficult to detect. “To readers’ confusion and advertisers’ benefit, this field has become much more professional,” she said. “These murky policies are a good explanation of the depressing trend whereby papers’ circulations have dropped to laughable levels. The culture of reading newspapers, which is still vital in Europe, has degraded in Russia.”

#12

Russian Mogul Eyes 'House of Lords'

By Marc Perelman

Forward, May 26, 2006

Like many top-tier philanthropists, Moshe Kantor was tired of listening to staffers at charitable organizations tell him how to spend his considerable wealth. So the Russian business tycoon came up with a solution: the creation of a "House of Jewish Lords" that would serve as a place for well-to-do donors to throw their philanthropic money around as they see fit.

Kantor, 52, is the owner of Akron, one of Russia's largest fertilizer companies. He recently launched his new philanthropic club, called the European Jewish Fund, with the goal of recruiting at least 50 ultra-rich European Jewish donors to pay a minimum entry fee of \$1 million for a lifetime membership that eventually might be transferable to their heirs. The plan is for the new body to vet project proposals made by a "chamber of professionals."

Kantor, who splits time between his native Moscow and Geneva, says that his "House of Jewish Lords" has received an endorsement from Israeli President Moshe Katzav, as well as from Jewish communal organizations in a dozen Eastern and Southern European countries.

"There is a big contradiction between philanthropists and Jewish public life, and this is not favorable to Jewish goals," he said during a recent Forward editorial briefing.

The new body is one of several relatively recent endeavors that have transformed Kantor into an influential Jewish communal leader with an international reach. He is president of the Russian Jewish Congress and chairman of the board of governors of the European Jewish Congress.

He paid personally for the high-profile commemoration in Krakow in January 2005, which marked the 60th anniversary liberation of the Auschwitz extermination camp. The event brought together about 40 heads of state and governments. It was formally held under the aegis of the European Jewish Congress and the World Holocaust Forum, an entity that Kantor founded for the occasion. The forum is also funding a continentwide Holocaust education project for schools.

Kantor, who lost most of his family during World War II, is now working with Ukrainian authorities to hold a similar ceremony in late September to mark the 65th anniversary of the Babi Yar massacre. It has been said that about 100,000 Jews, Gypsies and other civilians were murdered in September 1941 at Babi Yar, a field near the Ukrainian capital of Kiev, by Nazi troops and local collaborators. Kantor discussed the project earlier this month with Ukrainian President Viktor Youshchenko. Invitations to several heads of state have been sent out already.

Kantor argued that such events could produce concrete results, pointing to the visit of Russian President Vladimir Putin to Israel just a few months after attending the Auschwitz commemoration.

In addition to the event in Ukraine, Kantor is seeking to organize a summit of Russian and American philanthropists in Moscow under the aegis of the Russian Jewish Congress and of United Jewish Communities, the roof body of Jewish charitable federations in North America.

He emphatically denied that any of his recent moves had anything to do with his public spat earlier this year with the president of the European Jewish Congress, Pierre Besnainou of France, over control of that organization's funds. During the annual general assembly in Prague, Besnainou accused Kantor — the largest donor to the European Jewish Congress — of blackmail because of his demand that bylaws be adopted granting him control over the disbursement of his donations. At the time, Kantor told the Jewish Telegraphic Agency that he was entitled to know where the money was going, but he told the Forward that the dispute was about process.

Kantor said that he still hopes a compromise can be reached, but he is clearly upset at his Western counterparts — especially the French — for what he sees as their patronizing ways and suspicion toward rags-to-riches Russians such as himself.

"This is a new time for Jewish life in Europe," Kantor said. "We don't want to be patronized by other Jewish communities."

Besnainou could not be reached for comment.

Serge Cwaigenbaum, the EJC's secretary-general, dismissed the dispute as minor but acknowledged that there was a personality clash.

He said that Kantor was fully entitled to set up a new entity to use his private money. "The EJC represents European Judaism by bringing together national organizations through a democratic mechanism," he said. "You also have structures that are not representative but are sources of power because of their financial clout. But one should not influence the other."

While they will not acknowledge it publicly, several Jewish communal leaders in Western Europe are disturbed by what they see as Russian businessmen using their extraordinary wealth to gain prominence in Jewish public life. They are also in fear of a potential public-opinion backlash should the fact emerge that some of that money comes from dubious sources.

Since the fall of communism, several prominent Russian Jewish oligarchs have benefited from the confusion and corruption of the mass privatization of Soviet companies to become billionaires. Several have since clashed with the Kremlin, most recently Mikhail Khodorkovsky, oil tycoon and Kantor rival, who is now in jail for tax fraud in what many observers claim is a ploy by Putin and his allies to snuff out political opposition.

In his interview with the Forward, Kantor said that being Jewish had nothing to do with Khodorkovsky's predicament.

The son of a Red Army officer who earned his doctorate in astrophysics, Kantor made a fortune in the metal industry under Boris Yeltsin and — unlike Khodorkovsky and several other oligarchs — has stayed on good terms with Putin. Kantor praised Putin for his commitment to fighting antisemitism, and he described Russia's approach to Iran and Hamas as a smart Soviet-era gambit to get close to your enemies in order to better control them.

#13

New Parliament Convenes In Kiev

By Natasha Lisova

AP, May 25, 2006

KIEV -- Leaders from Ukraine's reformist, pro-Western parties pledged Thursday to bring an end to their messy coalition talks and be ready to present a governing agreement to the parliament and the nation within 15 days.

The promise came as the 450-seat parliament held its inaugural session, setting into motion a 30-day deadline to form a coalition and a 60-day deadline to name the new government. If talks fail, President Viktor Yushchenko can call new elections.

The new lawmakers took their seats in the ornate chamber that once served as home to Soviet Ukraine's parliament, as the poem "Love Ukraine" was recited. Their election on March 26 was praised as the most free and fair ever in Ukraine.

The pro-Moscow Party of the Regions won the most votes and took 185 seats in the new parliament. Ousted Prime Minister Yulia Tymoshenko, one of the most popular figures during the 2004 mass protests, won 129 parliamentary seats for her bloc, while Yushchenko's bloc took 80. The Socialists, who back Yushchenko, and the Communists have 33 and 21, respectively. Two lawmakers have not yet been registered.

"The election was recognized as worth imitating across the whole region," Yushchenko told the lawmakers. "I did what I promised as president." He said he had come to the hall Thursday "to show my respect for the conscious choice of our people."

Tymoshenko's lawmakers arrived wearing identical white sweaters emblazoned with her red heart campaign logo, which the former prime minister said symbolized her party's hopes that the new parliament would embrace "clean and transparent politics."

Leaders from the estranged Orange Revolution allies held a joint news conference to announce the formation of a working group charged with reaching an agreement on the coalition by June 7. The agreement will include the coalition's main policy agenda, and only then will the three blocs start discussing who gets what job, officials said.

"Of course, differences exist but we will find a way to solve them," Socialist Party leader Oleksandr Moroz said. Tymoshenko, who wants to return as prime minister, added, "We need time and we will find understanding."

Tymoshenko's bitter falling-out with Yushchenko last year soured relations, and the president said he was reluctant to try such a partnership again. Tymoshenko has lately stopped talking about the prime minister's job in what appears to be a negotiating strategy rather than a change in position. Her staff continue to repeat that she is the best candidate for the job.

An opinion poll by Kiev's Razumkov Center found that nearly 40 percent of those polled would like to see a coalition between Yushchenko's bloc, Tymoshenko's and the Socialists. Some 17 percent said they wanted to see a union between Yushchenko's Our Ukraine and the Party of the Regions, led by Viktor Yanukovich, the man whom Yushchenko accused of trying to steal the presidency in 2004.

Some 13 percent said they wanted all the parties except the Communists to unite. The poll, which surveyed 2,000 people, had a margin of error of 2.3 percentage points. On Thursday, lawmakers formally accepted the current government's resignation.

But Prime Minister Yuriy Yekhanurov and the rest of the Cabinet -- many members of which also won parliamentary seats -- were asked to stay on in an acting capacity until a new Cabinet was formed. Previously, the president appointed the prime minister and the Cabinet.

#14

Westward bound

By Hilary Leila Krieger

The Jerusalem Post, May. 25, 2006

Azerbaijan is not a place where you get woken up by the call of the muezzin. In fact, you're much more likely to hear hip-hop blaring from a car stereo than catch a mullah reciting the Koran from a minaret in this secular Muslim country sandwiched between Russia and Iran.

For the eight-million-strong Caspian seaside state with oil reserves it's looking to sell to the West, openness could be part of the marketing campaign.

It's been that way for as long as Yosef Shagal can remember. Shagal left the Azeri capital, Baku, when he was 42 to make aliya in 1990. After being sworn in as a freshman Yisrael Beiteinu MK last month, he returned to his birthplace last week to press for closer Azeri-Israeli ties.

Both countries see some potential benefits. For starters, Azerbaijan is looking at tapping into Israel's close relationship with America and its Jewish community to help change US legislation banning aid to the central Asian country. And Israel is looking at tapping into Azerbaijan's new one-million-barrel-a-day pipeline bringing oil to Turkey and the Mediterranean. But Israel is also eyeing the secular Shia nation as a potential exporter of a moderate Islam which can exist in peace and cooperation with the Jewish state.

As Shagal puts it, "It's a great model of tolerance." But it's a model that might not lend to imitation in the Islamic world. In the search for what makes Azerbaijan unique, one comes across a somewhat syllogistic reason: its history, resources and geography - which are themselves singular. Azerbaijan sprang from a peculiar Asian position that gave it a European vista; was endowed with energy resources that put it in the view of the West; and then perversely benefited from Western oversight - Russia's - that stamped out many Eastern inclinations, such as religious entrenchment.

Yet those very particular realities make Azerbaijan a place with limited rather than infinite horizons, since whether it looks East or West (or North or South), Russia and Iran are there. In its struggle to live in both worlds, it has welcomed an Israeli embassy in Azerbaijan but has no embassy of its own in Israel.

To be sure, Jews there enjoy a level of comfort rare in both the Muslim and former Soviet worlds. Currently, about 20,000 live in Azerbaijan, the majority in Baku and up to 5,000 in Quba, located 880 km. away in the mountains. (Some 60-80,000 have immigrated to Israel.)

THE JEWS of Quba are mountain Jews, while Baku has tended to be a center for Ashkenazim. The former trace their ancestry back to the destruction of the First Temple and have lived in Azerbaijan for centuries. Quba itself was set up in the mid-1700s by the leader Fatali Khan as a place of Jewish refuge, and the river bank he assigned them has remained a Jewish enclave ever since, picking up the name "Little Jerusalem."

Ashkenazi Jews came more recently. Many migrated east to find a more tolerant home than that provided in the Pale of Settlement under the Russian Empire and later throughout the Soviet Union. Many more came from that region during World War II to escape the Nazi advance.

Several of those former Soviet regions, such as Ukraine and Russia itself, are now experiencing increasing attacks on Jews. The Euro-Asian Jewish Congress, the group that brought Shagal to Baku, recently issued a report documenting anti-Semitism from Bulgaria to New Zealand. Azerbaijan wasn't included, because there were no anti-Jewish incidents on record.

That tolerance isn't just borne out by statistics, it's borne in the air, according to Jews who live there. Rabbi Meir Bruk, a Chabad emissary stationed in Baku, illustrates this point by noting that whenever his Muslim neighbors see him walking on Shabbat, they offer him a ride, unaware of the religious dictate against driving on the Sabbath.

"Someone has to help me," he explains. "This is tolerance." And the tolerance, according to Bruk, goes both ways. Many of the 260 students at the Chabad day school come from mixed families, since one need have only a Jewish mother to be eligible to study there. "We have students who fast on Yom Kippur and on Ramadan. We don't have a problem with that," he says.

The school corridors are filled with posters of Israel and displays about Jewish holidays. But there's also one wall dedicated to Albert Agaronov, a national hero and a Jew killed in 1992 in Azerbaijan's war with Armenia.

The display is there so the students "know that they are also a part of this country," explains teacher Haya Lewis.

INDEED, the Jewish community takes its nationality seriously. At a recent event to mark Israel's Independence Day, the crowd burst into cheers when one of the participants, Member of Parliament Yevda Abramov, addressed them in native Azeri rather than Russian as the other speakers had.

Abramov became Azerbaijan's first Jewish parliamentarian this November. As such, he says, "I've never seen any anti-Semitic attitude." As Abramov speaks, he tucks into his lunch at an Italian restaurant where Jewish dietary laws are most definitely not observed. Like the Muslims, Azeri Jews tend to exhibit secular tendencies. The evening before, Abramov, Shagal and the rest of the Israeli delegation were hosted by an Azeri high official at a meal featuring bacon and red wine - both of which are proscribed under Islam.

Headscarves are no more common in Baku than in any European city; women wear short skirts and high heels as they stroll along tree-lined boulevards and neatly carved parks. Among the onyx statues paying homage to national poets and military heroes throughout the city is one dedicated to a woman throwing off her veil. Set atop a tall column in a central circle, it can be seen far and wide. Harder to spot are mosques, which are easily outnumbered by high rises. Foreign dignitaries stopping to place the obligatory wreath on the massive grave of Heidar Aliev, father of independent Azerbaijan, would be hard-pressed to spot a Koranic inscription or even a carved crescent.

Though Azerbaijan has been almost entirely Muslim since the Arab conquest in the seventh and eighth centuries, the population has long had a history of moderation.

Rovshan Geydarov, head of the Israel-Azerbaijan Friendship Association, attributes that trait to the origins of their faith.

"They remember until today that their roots weren't in Islam but something else," he says. "They know they became Muslims under force."

According to Brenda Shaffer, a Haifa University lecturer on the Caucasus, "Azeris still call themselves 'Muslims under the sword,' meaning Muslims under distress." But it also has something to do with geography and resources. Four times the size of Israel and abutted by Russia, Georgia, Iran and arch-enemy Armenia, Azerbaijan was part of the Russian Empire from 1806-1917 and the Soviet Union from 1920-1991. It has long been a cultural and trading crossroads boasting a diverse population with a Western inclination.

The national book of Azerbaijan, published in 1937 but set pre-World War I, puts an emphasis on multiculturalism and location from its first line: "We were a very mixed lot, we 40 schoolboys who were having a geography lesson one hot afternoon..." In the second paragraph of Ali and Nino, their teacher tells them, "It is partly your responsibility as to whether our town should belong to progressive Europe or to reactionary Asia." The country seems to still be in the process of making that choice.

MUCH OF the foundation for joining Europe came from the Russian imperialists, but the way was also paved by foreigners from further west who came digging for black gold. Among the notables to get in on the

action after Russia opened up oil concessions for international ownership: the Nobel and Rothchild families. They came toting Continental architects and street planners.

Around the old city with its winding lanes, low stone structures and arched entries sprouted a panoply of broad-shouldered buildings dressed with pastel paint and right-angled moldings.

Ali and Nino describes a world where "Muhammadans" drink wine and waltz with unveiled non-Muslims. To that was added all manner of Western recreation.

Azerbaijan became the first Muslim country to boast European diversions, such as opera, thanks to these bored aristocrats. In the case of opera, it began when a diva lured by oil money visited Baku. She was horrified at being unable to find a proper place to sing, so a robber baron had a theater built in just 10 months. The latter also brought ballet, casinos and, later, jazz. Jews, meanwhile, were able to work without many of the restrictions they typically faced and soon rose to the top of professions such as medicine and academics. And then the Soviets came. For the next 70 years, they suppressed religion.

It came in two major forms: heavy-handed oppression and progressive policies. Two prominent buildings along the central Independence Avenue illustrate the dual approaches. One, a charitable house, had its Koranic inscriptions erased by the Soviets and replaced with the five-pointed USSR star. Next door stands a building which originally housed a school dedicated to the instruction of Muslim girls, later becoming the Manuscript Institute.

"The greatest tool against Islam is education," says Fuad Akhundov, an Azeri documentarian, translator and self-described "amateur historian." The Soviet authorities also took public stances against Islamic traditions that they didn't approve of. In one case in 1926, a woman who took off her veil was murdered by her father and brother. The Russians put both of them on trial, but the crucial issue wasn't so much to punish them as to raise awareness about what had happened. In the end, thousands of Azeri women were marching in the street, taking off their veils. Though inspired by Russian action, it was an Azeri artist who created a sculpture of a woman removing her veil which stands in downtown Baku to this day.

"The Islamic traditions were severely undermined by the Soviets," says Akhundov, himself a secular Muslim. He particularly stresses the role that education for the whole society has played in preventing a resurgence of Islam post-USSR.

"The level of education is pretty high. The Islamic clergy cannot really offer them anything," he continues. "The mullahs no longer play a significant role in the society, so they don't have any base." He concludes, "Ethnic groups under the Soviet Union have a lot to be thankful for... They could only make their breakthrough and emancipation under the Russians."

It's hardly a model that other Islamic countries can follow, as Israel's ambassador to Azerbaijan, Arthur Lenk, acknowledges. But he points out that Soviet rule is long gone: "That ended 15 years ago. The president of Azerbaijan today likes that model of [tolerance] and is encouraging that model in Azerbaijan. There are other choices he could have made. That's a choice that lots of us in the West and Israel believe in."

SINCE THE fall of the Iron Curtain, there has been some religious revival, as is true throughout the Former Soviet Union. Now that religion is allowed, there is greater exposure and therefore interest in it, according to Shaffer, who also has an appointment at Harvard. She also noted that the Azeri economic situation that followed the Soviet break-up was a traumatic one.

"If people are in economic difficulty, religion is very comforting, and after the Soviet Union there was a testing of new ideologies," she says, adding that, "there is some more interest in religion, but I don't think there are any political implications."

Out of the chaos, Heidar Aliev emerged as a sure if autocratic and corrupt leader who brought stability to the country. A former Communist apparatchik, he decided to orient Azerbaijan toward the West to ensure minority religious rights and to keep the country secular.

Shaffer describes the last tenet as coming in part from Aliev's own upbringing. The Azeri elite has remained well-educated and non-religious. "It's a big part of their ideology, and they're very proud of their secularism," she says, and likened the situation to that in Turkey, which also has maintained a strict secularism. Azeris are Turkic by ethnicity and share many common denominators with their larger neighbor, despite being Shia rather than Sunni.

Azeri has replaced Russian as the official language, and new mosques, churches and synagogues have opened since the independent government has allowed religious freedom.

Sheikh Allahshukur Pashazadeh, the head of Azerbaijan's spiritual leadership and of the Office of Caucasian Muslims, representing Muslims throughout the region, even made a symbolic contribution to the building of a new Ashkenazi synagogue in 2003.

"It's our obligation and position to be together," the sheikh explains.

He receives the Israeli delegation in his modest palace, green-themed in a nod to Islam, but decorated with upholstered couches and inlaid wood tables.

Notwithstanding the relative openness to minority faiths, it could be argued that religious freedom is most hampered by the state's insistence on keeping the country secular.

"They can no longer prohibit professing a religion, but they try to keep the mosque out of the government," Akhundov says.

In part, notes Shaffer, that stems from the leadership's interest in fostering ties with the West, where religious pluralism is the norm. (Following Heidar Aliev's death in 2003, his son Ilham has taken the same line.) Shaffer explains that the choice to go West is connected to Azerbaijan's desire to ally itself with the world's largest economic powerhouse, the United States.

"The United States is the Rome of the day," she says. "The Pax Americana - that's what most states are going to tie themselves to regardless of their ideology." But she says the choice is also related to Azerbaijan's aspirations for independence, that it not be swallowed up by the neighboring political powerhouses of Russia, Iran or Turkey.

Had Azerbaijan decided to join OPEC, she says, "It would have been just another drop in the bucket." Going alone, according to Shaffer, "really helps to balance out the power of the monopoly." And boosting world oil production - currently around 85 million barrels a day - by another million barrels "really has a soothing effect on the market."

Lenk sees it as a rare opportunity for a struggling post-Communist country to reverse its fate.

"It's almost like they won the lottery. They found all this oil. The lottery ticket is one million barrels that are about to flow through the BTC [Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline]. This is such an exciting time for them. They can change their history. Most counties don't win the lottery. Countries in Asia and Africa can't change their [situation]. The question is what they're going to do with their lottery ticket."

SPENDING their winnings, so to speak, could also change - or at least help improve - Israel's future. A strong Azerbaijan allied with Israel would give the latter a firmer toehold in a region within both the Russian and Iranian spheres of influence. And the potential for an oil source independent of both states would help the Israeli economy. It could also strengthen the strategic relationship with Turkey, since there's talk of extending the end of the Azeri pipeline from Turkey through Israel.

According to Lenk, such an arrangement would represent "a natural connection [for Israel] as a customer and for national and strategic reasons."

Azeri Foreign Minister Elmar Mammadyarov says the possibility of an Israeli extension on the pipeline will be decided by experts. "From the political point of view, I don't see any problems." Yet when it comes to ties with Israel there are political difficulties and limitations - arising from the same realities that allow for so much opportunity: namely Azerbaijan's rough neighborhood.

The biggest challenge is posed by Iran. Around a third of Iran's population - 20-plus million people - are ethnic Azeris. Azerbaijan is worried about offending the Islamic republic, one of the issues that surfaces along with talk of Azerbaijan opening an embassy in Tel Aviv.

But Abramov, the MP, attributes that more to lack of money than political will, noting that Azerbaijan has indicated its intention of having representation in Israel.

Shaffer concurs that "Israel wasn't the first one in line" when the newly independent and non-too-prosperous Azerbaijan began establishing diplomatic missions.

According to MK Shagal, however, a more important issue has been the threat of losing Arab votes in the UN with such an Israeli presence. Azerbaijan, he explains, depends on the Arab bloc to support it in resolutions concerning its long-standing conflict with Armenia.

"Azerbaijan is very afraid that the moment they open an embassy in Israel, Iran, together with the other Muslim countries, will cut them out," he says. "For Azerbaijan that's a catastrophe."

And then there's the fear of Iran itself. A small Islamic party has sprung up in Azerbaijan, though it's not allowed to participate in elections (which are heavily weighted toward the ruling party in any case). There have also been softer attempts to win a following, though they don't seem to have made many inroads. An Iranian bookstore stocked with Islamic books and posters of Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad has several sales clerks, but no customers. Next door, at the university book store selling Azeri, Russian and English titles, patrons cue up to pay for their purchases.

Despite the lack of success, the fear of fundamentalism lurks. And that, says Shaffer, might be what connects the Israelis and the Azeris the most.

In this context, she explains, "they feel shared values with Israel." That, of course, is nothing new to Shagal. He remembers the friendship and "togetherness" of his past life in Azerbaijan. He recalls the unwritten code that no weddings could be held during either Jewish or Muslim holidays lest the other group be excluded from the festivities.

"We lived with Muslims like brothers," relates Shagal, a cigarette dangling from under the dark mustache that can be seen on many of his former compatriots. Even he acknowledges the difficulty in using Azerbaijan as model for others.

"In all my life, I never saw a place like this," he says.