



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

NCSJ WEEKLY NEWS BRIEF

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#1

Silver anniversary honor for Levin Washington Jewish Week, June 8, 2006

NCSJ: Advocates on behalf of Jews in Russia, Ukraine, the Baltic States & Eurasia is scheduled to honor executive director Mark Levin for his 25 years of leadership next Tuesday.

The Senate Russell Caucus Room event is slated to include tributes from Sens. Barbara Mikulski and Paul Sarbanes (both D-Md.) and House Minority Whip Steny Hoyer (D-Md.), among others, and include a song-and-story session with actor Theodore Bikel on American Jewry's efforts to free Soviet Jews.

Former NCSJ Chair Shoshana Cardin also will be honored at the reception, which has as honorary co-chair of five former secretaries of state.

#2

Putin Fires Prosecutor, Providing Grist for Kremlinologists By Steven Lee Myers New York Times, June 3, 2006

MOSCOW, June 2 — President Vladimir V. Putin has dismissed Russia's chief prosecutor, who only a week ago promised to disclose new "high-profile criminal cases" involving government corruption, officials said Friday.

The dismissal, ordered on Thursday and approved by legislators on Friday, was unexpected and, as is typical for the Kremlin, largely unexplained. It prompted a flurry of speculation about Mr. Putin's motives.

Officials in or close to the Kremlin hinted at a larger government shake-up still to come, while political analysts suggested that the Kremlin's internal struggle for power was spilling into public well before the presidential election to be held in 2008.

The prosecutor, Vladimir V. Ustinov, presided over the country's most prominent cases, including that of Mikhail B. Khodorkovsky, the former chairman of Yukos Oil. Mr. Khodorkovsky was sentenced to eight years in prison last year after an investigation and trial that critics have called purely political.

Mr. Ustinov also oversaw investigations of the country's worst accidents and terrorist attacks, which left few satisfied with the results. These included the sinking of the nuclear submarine Kursk in 2000 and the seizure of hostages in a Moscow theater in 2002 and in a school in the southern town of Beslan in 2004.

The prosecutor, appointed in 1999 by Mr. Putin's predecessor, Boris N. Yeltsin, was the longest-serving figure in the Putin administration, which has dismissed few high-level officials aside from Mr. Putin's first prime minister, Mikhail M. Kasyanov.

Mr. Ustinov's departure came only three weeks after Mr. Putin dismissed the chief of Russia's customs service and a dozen other officers in what was described as a newly energized fight against a deeply corrupt bureaucracy.

At a conference just last week in Minsk, capital of the neighboring republic of Belarus, Mr. Ustinov declared that the fight was unending. "So far as concrete work on the fight against corruption is concerned, I believe it was, is and will remain a pressing issue for Russia," he said, promising to reveal the new cases.

Mr. Putin made no public statement about the dismissal, which required a vote of the upper house of Parliament. After no deliberation, the vote was virtually unanimous, with only two abstentions. Nor did Mr. Putin announce a replacement, though the Kremlin said a deputy of Mr. Ustinov's would serve as acting prosecutor general.

In the absence of a clearly stated motive, speculation abounded, as did contradictory statements among Mr. Putin's political allies.

The speaker of the upper house of Parliament, Sergei M. Mironov, described it as a "technical step" requested by Mr. Ustinov himself. The deputy prime minister and defense minister, Sergei B. Ivanov, hinted that there were "good reasons" for the departure.

Dmitri S. Peskov, a Kremlin spokesman, said in a telephone interview that the president's decision reflected his desire to appoint — and presumably dismiss — "some key people," but he would not elaborate.

"The position is extremely important," he said of the prosecutor general's office, "especially if you take into account the fight against corruption, against terrorism and so on. The one thing that is obvious is that there will be no timeout in that fight."

Political figures and analysts outside the government split over the meaning of Mr. Ustinov's departure. Some suggested that Mr. Ustinov had done little to combat corruption seriously, while others said his blunt remarks about corruption might have been seen as doing too much.

Olga V. Kryshtanovskaya, a sociologist who has written extensively about the Kremlin hierarchy, said Mr. Ustinov was "practically stupid" to speak openly about the extent of criminality and corruption in Russia, though Mr. Putin has also denounced them in public statements.

"Putin had been doing everything he can to improve Russia's image," Ms. Kryshtanovskaya said in a telephone interview. "He didn't want the image of a country where the mafia is in charge of everything."

She and others attributed the prosecutor's departure to a struggle among Mr. Putin's cadre of advisers, one that waxes and wanes as speculation mounts over whom Mr. Putin will anoint as successor when his second and, by law, final term as president ends in 2008.

Mr. Ustinov was widely seen as a hawk among the Putin advisers from security and law enforcement backgrounds, known as the siloviki and led by the deputy chief of the presidential administration, Igor I. Sechin.

A second faction is made up of aides who are viewed as comparatively liberal and are aligned with a Putin protege, Dmitri A. Medvedev, now the first deputy prime minister and chairman of Gazprom, the energy giant.

"The departure of Ustinov is an important victory for liberals in the government and president administration in what appears to be an ongoing power struggle behind the scenes," Goldman Sachs said in a research note.

Vladimir A. Ryzhkov, one of the few independent critics of Mr. Putin in the lower house of Parliament, dismissed Mr. Ustinov's departure as ultimately insignificant, saying the prosecutor general's office under Mr. Putin had lost any judicial or legal independence.

#3

Israel eases visa process for Russian tourists

By Ashley Perry

EJ Press, June 4, 2006

JERUSALEM (EJP) --- In an attempt to increase Russian tourism to Israel, the Israeli Tourism Ministry is streamlining its process of acquiring a visa to enter the country. The new system follows a successful trial-period.

The Israeli Government gave the go-ahead for the new system in July last year but had to go through a lengthy procedural progression until it was ready to be in use.

The first part of the process will be on the internet as the hopeful tourists fill out an online form. This eases a very lengthy process where previously the candidate would have to go to the Israeli Embassy in Moscow. Many would have to travel large distances for this initial meeting without success.

Only after the Israeli Embassy reviews the candidates will the successful ones be invited for a follow-up meeting in Moscow. Russian citizens having legally visited Israel in the past as well as those already possessing visas to the United States or Schengen countries (Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Iceland, Italy, Greece, Luxembourg, Netherlands, Norway, Portugal, Spain and Sweden) will benefit from the streamlined process.

The government is examining introducing similar Internet services to other countries in the region, the Ministry of Tourism added. Tourism Minister Avraham Hirschon said earlier in the year that the next country to benefit from the visa streamlining could be Ukraine.

Rise in Russian tourism

The revised procedure follows efforts by Israel's Ministry of Tourism to ease the visa application process for Russian tourists. In 2005, the number of visitors arriving from Russia rose 22 per cent over the previous year to 68,000. The applicant will be asked to pay a surcharge of just over 13 Euros.

The Russian tourist industry is seen as one of the largest by Israel and the large number of applications for visas is seen as expediting the process. Israel is home to a large contingent of former Russians with some estimations of well over one million in Israel.

#4

Uncovering anti-Semitism in old Kiev

By Debbie Snyder-Eliraz

Jerusalem Post, June 5, 2006

At the 10th anniversary of the establishment of Hillel in Ukraine last month, a host of international officials came to laud the efforts of the largest Hillel center in the former Soviet Union.

But as Hillel representatives, students and city officials walked out the doors of Hillel House after the festivities, they were greeted with quite a shock.

A few meters from the Hillel House entrance stands a sizable kiosk crammed with barefaced anti-Semitic literature - pamphlets, magazines and books. Propaganda and anti-Semitic cartoons and caricatures line the shelves like something from Nazi-era Germany.

"I couldn't believe my eyes," says Rabbi Yossie Goldman, Associate Vice President of Hillel: The Foundation for Jewish Campus Life. "We are celebrating the renaissance of Jewish student life in Ukraine - of Jews returning to their roots after decades of Communist rule that denied their parents and grandparents the ability to worship, practice and proudly identify as Jews. Here we are in the year 2006, and our young people still have to deal with blatant anti-Semitism."

The kiosk is sponsored by the Inter-Regional Academy of Personnel Management (MAUP, a Russian acronym). This Kiev-based university, the largest private university in the country, continues to generate controversy for its notorious anti-Zionist stance, and for its widespread publication and distribution of virulent anti-Semitic propaganda. MAUP claims 50,000 students, including hundreds of foreign students, who study at a number of campuses throughout the country, the largest being in Kiev.

Both the government of Israel and the Simon Wiesenthal Center have urged the Ukrainian authorities to close MAUP, or at least ban its anti-Semitic publications, but so far, no sanctions have been imposed upon the university. MAUP is considered a prominent and well-respected university in Kiev, and many Ukrainian politicians have received honorary titles and degrees from the institution. Last summer, MAUP sponsored a conference entitled "Zionism as the Greatest Threat to Civilization" at which Jews were referred to as "Judeo-Nazis," and appeals to "deport the Jews from Ukraine" were heard.

To date, there has been little interest in halting this show of anti-Semitism. When the newly-elected Mayor of Kiev, Leonid Chernovitsky, was asked to intervene, he suggested that Hillel seek restitution in the court system.

While Ukrainian President Viktor Yuschenko has openly condemned xenophobia and the anti-Semitic actions of MAUP, no official legal steps have been taken to rein in its activities.

HILLEL, THE largest Jewish student organization in the world, has 27 centers throughout the former Soviet Union. Goldman, who founded Hillel in the former Soviet Union 11 years ago, explains that Hillel's goal is to enrich the lives of Jewish students with meaningful Jewish experiences so that they may enrich the Jewish people and the world.

Yosef Axelrud, the Director of Kiev Hillel, claims that his students are extremely upset. "They asked me how something like this can happen in a democratic country," he says.

Axelrud believes that students will take action, demonstrating against such anti-Semitic propaganda and making their voices heard in the local press.

According to Goldman, anti-Semitism was kept under wraps during Communism, but since Ukraine became an independent democracy, the appearance of blatant anti-Jewish sentiment has mushroomed.

"I was astonished and appalled to see such anti-Semitic titles as *The Jewish Syndrome*, David Duke's *The Jewish Question*, *Matzah of Zion*, and *The Truth About Babi Yar* all translated into the Russian and Ukrainian languages, adorning the plentiful bookshelves," says Goldman. Hillel officials questioned the young girl selling the books, who said that she wasn't responsible for the literature, and was just glad to have a well-paying job.

Axelrud sees this trend as very dangerous. "Kiev today has become inundated with stalls like this selling fascist and anti-Semitic literature, mainly published by MAUP. Unfortunately, young people who want to learn about Judaism read this literature and think it is true."

According to the Ukrainian Jewish organization Va'ad, MAUP is responsible for 85 percent of anti-Jewish publications disseminated in Ukraine. MAUP plays a critical role in legitimizing these extremist views for the mainstream.

"Last year a yeshiva student was almost beaten to death," bemoans Axelrud, " and the perpetrators claimed that they had based their act on literature of this kind. So we see that an event such as this is a direct result of unbridled, and easily accessible, fascist propaganda."

Goldman and Axelrud contend that Hillel and the Ukrainian Jewish community will not remain passive about this issue. "Jewish youth have it hard enough, awakening their sense of pride and knowledge about their Jewish heritage, denied to them and their parents for so many years, let alone making ends meet, and deciding about their future. Now they must also contend with this challenge as well."

The writer is publications and grants coordinator for the Israel division of Hillel: The Foundation for Jewish Campus Life at the Hebrew University.

#5

US-Russia relations deteriorating sharply, experts warn

By Guy Dinmore

Financial Times, June 7, 2006

Relations between the US and Russia are deteriorating badly and there is a danger of conflict in the flashpoints of the south Caucasus, according to senior former officials and corporate leaders advising the EastWest Institute (EWI).

EWI board members at the think-tank's annual meeting in Charleston were almost unanimous in calling for moves to prevent what one called an emerging "cold peace" between the US and Russia.

John Mroz, founder and president of EWI, called the deterioration worrisome. He placed the trend in the context of growing distrust between the major powers, including China, with the world in a state of transition between globalised and marginalised societies "no longer on automatic pilot moving towards a market-centric world".

This had resulted in the rise of ethnic and nationalist identities, with growing numbers seeing globalisation threatening their cultures and religion.

Western societies were also losing their moral authority, he said, citing the example of the reported massacre of Iraqi civilians by US troops in Haditha which would inflict "enormous damage" on the US.

Several speakers - who under EWI guidelines spoke on condition of anonymity - expressed concerns that "populist" presidents in Taiwan and Georgia risked overplaying their nationalist hands and triggering military incidents or conflict between the US and China, and the US and Russia.

With Montenegro newly independent, and Kosovo on the way to statehood, the dangers of domino-style conflict were rising in the breakaway, Russian-backed enclaves of Abkhazia and South Ossetia in Georgia.

"Georgia is an alarming situation and worse than thought," said one former official.

"The mood is ugly and getting uglier," said a corporate executive on the state of US-Russia ties.

Noting that every declared US presidential candidate was "bashing Russia", one speaker predicted a worsening trend as both countries headed towards elections in 2008.

Established in 1980, EWI describes itself as a "do-tank", working mostly behind the scenes directly with governments to address global security concerns. In the mid-80s it arranged "non-meetings" of senior US and Soviet defence officials in Budapest to discuss confidence-building measures.

Under a new initiative, Germany has seconded Ortwin Hennig, a senior official dealing in conflict prevention, to EWI to head a task force on US-Russia relations. Washington and Moscow are also each appointing a senior diplomat to focus on the south Caucasus. EWI is working with diplomats from all sides preparing for the G8 summit in St Petersburg next month.

#6

Putin Seeks to Reassure the West on Russia's Path

By C. J. Chivers

New York Times, June 7, 2006

NOVO-OGARYOVO, Russia, June 6 - President Vladimir V. Putin spoke warmly on Tuesday of Russia's possibilities for cooperation with the United States, hailing a recent six-nation agreement on incentives aimed at defusing an impasse with Iran as a sign that the United States and Russia could still work well together.

"Although the views of Russia and the United States have not coincided on all occasions, we generally understand each other and, what counts most, are able to reach compromises," he said.

Mr. Putin, speaking during a midday appearance at his country residence with former Secretary of State Henry A. Kissinger, made much of the recent diplomatic effort to try to solve the standoff over Iran's nuclear program. Along with China, Russia has been seen as an impediment to tough international action against Tehran if it refuses to stop enriching uranium.

The remarks seemed to represent the latest attempt by Mr. Putin at a public charm offensive before the summit meeting next month in St. Petersburg of the Group of 8 industrial nations, of which Russia now holds the rotating presidency.

In a series of recent appearances, he has sought to reassure the West about concerns about Russia's direction and minimize signs of strain in its relations with Washington.

Doing so has not always been easy.

On Monday, Mr. Putin gave an address to the World Association of Newspapers, emphasizing his commitment to press freedoms. He made his comments moments after the association's president sharply questioned the Kremlin's commitment to the idea that a vibrant press is part of a healthy society.

Demonstrators crashed his appearance, shouting, "Putin is the executioner of freedom!"

Last weekend Mr. Putin was host to six foreign journalists at a meal and question-and-answer session, in which he said that on balance the Kremlin's relationship with Washington was positive. But he also flashed an angry side, mocking a question about what steps should be taken if Iran continued to enrich uranium as speculative, according to The Associated Press, which had a reporter at the meal.

"What if my grandmother had certain sexual attributes?" the Russian president snapped, the news agency reported. "Then she would be my grandfather."

His increased public presence has come after a din of criticism this year of the Kremlin's increasingly, and some say brazenly, autocratic steps.

These have included consolidation of oil and gas resources under its control, arms sales to Venezuela, Syria and Iran, and support for the authoritarian governments of Uzbekistan and Belarus.

The most direct criticism came last month, when Vice President Dick Cheney accused Russia of rolling back democracy and blackmailing its oil and gas customers through supply manipulation or control of the means of transport.

Mr. Putin has since lashed back occasionally, but the most pointed retorts have come from less prominent Russian officials while the president has sprinkled his comments with descriptions of areas of mutual collaboration and interest.

He did so again on Tuesday as he appeared with Mr. Kissinger, who has long advocated engagement with the Kremlin. "Of course there are nuances, but the real content of our relations is changing for the better," Mr. Putin said.

Mr. Kissinger evaded a direct answer to a question about Mr. Cheney's remarks.

"First of all, let me say that I am leaving Russia with a very positive feeling," he said.

"One has to look at the evolution of countries," he added later. "And I have confidence in the Russian evolution."