



WASHINGTON, D.C. January 25, 2008

TO: NCSJ Leadership and Interested Parties

**FROM: Edward B. Robin, Chairman;
Lesley Israel, NCSJ President;
Mark B. Levin, NCSJ Executive Director**

In Brief: Staff Introduction; Russia Analysis; Potential Hate Crimes Legislation in Ukraine

Dear Friend,

NCSJ is pleased to inform you that Benjamin Sack has joined our staff as a program assistant. Ben recently worked for U.S. Senator Bill Nelson of Florida, and is a graduate of the University of Central Florida. During his time at UCF, Ben was quite active in Jewish community activities, including president of his Hillel chapter. Among his NCSJ responsibilities, Ben will oversee the production and distribution of the Weekly Update. I know you will join us in welcoming Ben to our staff. He can be reached at BSack@ncsj.org.

In this week's update, we are featuring a piece by Michael McFaul and Kathryn Stoner-Weiss on the eight year tenure of Russian President Vladimir Putin. It is a fascinating article that focuses on the reasons behind Putin's popularity and consolidation of power. I would be interested in hearing any feedback after you have had a chance to read it.

Also, the Ukrainian government announced that it will introduce new hate crime legislation in the parliament. Regular readers will remember this is something that NCSJ and our member agencies have been advocating for some time to better address the problems of anti-Semitism, xenophobia and extremism in Ukraine.

Sincerely,

Mark B. Levin
Executive Director



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

NCSJ WEEKLY NEWS BRIEF
Washington, D.C. January 25, 2008

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#1

The Myth of the Authoritarian Model: How Putin's Crackdown Holds Russia Back
Michael McFaul and Kathryn Stoner-Weiss
Foreign Affairs, January/February 2008

<http://www.foreignaffairs.org/20080101faessay87105/michael-mcfaul-kathryn-stoner-weiss/the-myth-of-the-authoritarian-model.html>

#2

President forwards draft law to VR

Press office of President Victor Yushchenko, January 21, 2008

President Victor Yushchenko forwarded to the Verkhovna Rada a draft law "On amending article 161 of the Criminal Code of Ukraine regarding responsibility for offence against citizens equality depending on their race nationality or religious beliefs".

The amendments which are introduced by this draft law foresee toughening of the responsibility for violations in the abovementioned sphere.

The draft law shall be represented during its discussion in the Verkhovna Rada by Secretariat Deputy head I. Pukshyn

#3

Ukraine reaches accord to join WTO

AFP Brief, January 25, 2008

Ukraine has reached an agreement with the World Trade Organisation to join the global trade body, a WTO source said on Friday.

Ukraine's candidacy will now be put to the WTO's General Council meeting on February 5, followed by a six month ratification process, a WTO official told AFP

#4

Russia denies harsher Iran draft

JTA Brief, January 24, 2008

Russia says the new U.N. draft resolution against Iran does not contain new, harsher sanctions.

Foreign Minister Sergei Ivanov denied that the resolution contains new sanctions, saying it simply requires "countries to be vigilant in developing trade, economic, transport and other relations with Iran so that these relations are not used to transfer illegal, banned materials that can be used in nuclear affairs," according to a report by the BBC.

The BBC said that several diplomats confirmed on Tuesday that the new resolution, drafted in response to Iran's ongoing enrichment of uranium in defiance of U.N. sanctions, would create harsher sanctions. The five permanent Security Council members, Russia included, and Germany agreed on the terms.

The draft, to be submitted by the United Kingdom, France and Germany, opens the possibility of direct talks between Iran and the United States if conditions are met by Iran.

#5

Extremist incidents in Russia soar

JTA Brief, January 24, 2008

Extremist incidents in Russia have risen threefold since 2004.

Alexander Chekalin, the first deputy head of the interior ministry, said In an interview Monday with Interfax that there were 356 recorded events of extremist activity in 2007, a 300 percent increase over the 130

recorded in 2004. Chekalin said the statistics refer to "crimes in general committed on ethnic or religious grounds." There were 264 such crimes in 2006 and 152 in 2005.

However, anti-Semitic attacks in Russia dropped last year from 2006, according to Alexander Verkhovsky, director of the Sova Informational Analytic Center, a Moscow-based nongovernmental organization that analyzes hate crimes in Russia. His group tallied 30 incidents of vandalism and nine violent attacks on Jews in 2007.

In the wake of the increase in extremist incidents, the Chabad-led Federation of Jewish Communities of Russia has publicly called on the Russian government to do more to combat rising xenophobia. The vast majority of xenophobic attacks in recent years have been directed at dark-skinned immigrants from the former Soviet republics, especially Central Asia, said the federation's chairman, Alexander Boroda.

"It's just that xenophobia is now less directed against Jews, but it is evident to us that the situation in society in general leaves much to be desired," Boroda told Interfax. "And we are not at all happy about the fact that some people hate Jews more than they do other ethnicities."

#6

The majority of Russians suppose new Russian president should prefer the Russian Orthodox Church to all religions – poll

Interfax Russia Brief, January 22, 2008

55% of Russians believe that the next Russia's president should prefer the Russian Orthodox Church to other religious organizations.

45% think he should not be a religious person himself, but should respect the Russian Church, help it and attend festival divine services, the Russian Public Opinion Research Center (VTsIOM) told Interfax-Religion on Thursday.

1600 people in 153 populated points of 46 Russia's regions and republics were questioned during the poll held on August 25-26, 2007. Statistical discrepancy does not exceed 3,4 %.

According to the poll, 10% suppose that a new president should be a religious person and support the Church actively.

One third (34%) think that a new president should treat all religions equally and observe the principle of the Church separated from the state. This thesis finds more support in Moscow and St. Petersburg (43%) than in other cities and towns of the country.

The VTsIOM also gave data on the reasons for growing interest in religion among Russians and their opinion on principles of church-state relations in the country.

#7

Federation of Jewish Communities concerned about surge in hate crimes

Interfax Religion Brief, January 22, 2008

Alexander Boroda, chairman of the Federation of Jewish Communities of Russia, has called on the Russian administration to respond to the information about a surge in hate crimes over the past few years provided by the Interior Ministry.

"Of course, the fact that the Interior Ministry is reporting a dramatic increase in hate crimes in Russia over the past four years raises concerns about the spiritual state of our society," Boroda told Interfax on Tuesday.

A special department of the Federation of Jewish Communities, which registers incidents of anti-Semitism nature in Russia, last year noted a decrease in the number of anti-Semitic incidents in 2007 as compared with 2006, said Boroda. However, that "does not mean a decrease in xenophobic tendencies as such," he said.

"It's just that xenophobia is now less directed against Jews, but it is evident to us that the situation in society in general leaves much to be desired. And we are not at all happy about the fact that some people hate Jews more than they do other ethnicities," he said.

Boroda said he hoped the authorities "will take these signals very seriously and will intensify work aimed at preventing such negative incidents."

#8

Vandals Strike Ukraine School Months After Suspicious Fire

By Tamar Runyan

Chabad.org, January 20, 2008

Less than three months after part of a Jewish school in Kiev, Ukraine, went up in flames under suspicious circumstances, vandals apparently threw stones through the windows of two of its classrooms and an on-site synagogue.

Rabbi Gavriel Gordon discovered the damage Saturday night as he was locking up the Simcha School, a Chabad-Lubavitch day school serving 600 students from kindergarten through post high school.

According to officials, no one had heard anything. The guard had seen a few youths hanging around the school's fence earlier in the day, but had asked them to leave.

The building had been full of visitors over Shabbat, many of them in town for a local wedding that happened earlier in the week. Rabbi Mordechai Levenhartz, principal of the school, suspects that the damage occurred some time after the last Shabbat guest left.

"Thank G-d, everyone had left the building," said Levenhartz.

Back in October, the school's entranceway was heavily damaged in a suspected arson with anti-Semitic overtones.

This time, Levenhartz said that he plans to reassess the building's security. First on the list, he said, are more cameras and a stronger fence to enclose the school's 500 square meter yard.

"The security of the people and the children is of utmost importance," said the principal.

#9

Belarus Denies Plans to Sell Missiles to Iran

By Ron Popeski

Reuters, January 18, 2008

Ex-Soviet Belarus dismissed as laughable on Friday a report by intelligence journal Jane's that it was ready to sell Iran two missile systems for \$140 million.

Jane's on Thursday said Belarus, a fierce critic of the United States, was in the final stages of negotiations with Tehran over the sale of Soviet-era S-300PT air defense systems. The report quoted Belarussian defense sources.

"This is untrue. Such information can only induce laughter," said a spokesman for Belarus's security council. "There are no grounds for the story and no grounds for any sale."

Russia denied last month statements by Iran's defense minister that it intended to supply an S-300 anti-aircraft missile system to Iran.

The S-300 missiles have a longer range than the TOR-M1 surface-to-air missiles which Russia said earlier this year it had delivered to Tehran under a \$1 billion contract.

The United States and Israel criticized that deal, saying Iran could use the system to attack its neighbors.

Iran is subject to U.N. sanctions over its refusal to halt sensitive nuclear activity that Western countries suspect it wants to master to build nuclear bombs. But conventional weapons sales to Tehran are not banned.

A foreign ministry spokesman said Belarus would abide by all U.N. measures concerning Iran. Western media have previously suggested that Russian missile systems could be supplied to Iran, possibly through Belarus, which is accused by the United States and European Union of violating fundamental human rights.

Jane's quoted the Belarussian sources as saying that the S-300PT systems would be transported to Iran partly assembled aboard cargo aircraft.

The S-300PT was one of the first modified versions of an air defense system first developed in the Soviet Union in 1978.

The modified system, completed in the 1980s, is used by three air defense brigades in the country wedged between Russia and three European Union countries.

Belarus, under President Alexander Lukashenko, has been developing ties with several states criticized by Washington, including Iran, Cuba and Venezuela.

The United States had previously accused Belarus of selling arms to now-deposed Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein, while offering no conclusive proof.

#10

Georgian President Sworn in as Opposition Rallies AFP Tbilisi, January 20, 2008

Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili was sworn in Sunday to lead this strategic Black Sea nation for a second five-year term as his opponents rallied for his election win to be overturned.

"I promise before the nation and God to protect the Georgian constitution," Saakashvili, 40, said in a lavish ceremony on the steps of parliament watched by thousands of supporters and foreign dignitaries.

"We held the most democratic elections in Georgia's history and in this election you made the choice for the unity of Georgia," he said.

Saakashvili's win in January 5 presidential elections has been widely recognized abroad despite the opposition's objections, boosting a democratic image severely damaged by the violent break-up of opposition protests in November.

But tens of thousands of opposition protesters gathered at a Tbilisi racetrack in another part of the capital to call for the official results that gave Saakashvili 53 percent of the vote to be overturned.

"We have to provide a counterweight to the masquerade that is taking place on Rustaveli Avenue," opposition leader Constantine Gamsakhurdia told the crowd in a reference to the inauguration. "We will not give up our fight."

He was referring to a military parade of soldiers, tanks and heavy artillery rolling down Tbilisi's main thoroughfare watched by Saakashvili and guests as fighter jets roared overhead.

The inauguration was to be completed on Monday with a blessing for Saakashvili at the 1,000-year-old Orthodox Christian Bagrati cathedral near the western town of Kutaisi.

Foreign guests at Sunday's ceremony included Polish President Lech Kaczynski and his Romanian counterpart Traian Basescu, while Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov represented Russia. Saakashvili told the crowd he wanted his second term to see an improvement in cooperation with Moscow, whose relations with Tbilisi plummeted during his first term as he moved to bring Georgia into NATO and the European Union.

In the next five years "we will reach out to our friend Russia," Saakashvili said, while vowing to push ahead with his pro-Western policies.

"Our European orientation is not directed against the interests of any country," he said. Lavrov met with Saakashvili briefly after the swearing-in ceremony and said Russia was considering lifting sanctions that were imposed after a diplomatic spat, according to the Interfax news agency.

In September 2006, Georgia arrested four Russian officers on charges of spying. Tbilisi has long been infuriated by Moscow's support for the breakaway Georgian regions of South Ossetia and Abkhazia.

By way of response, a total ban on Georgians travelling to Russia was imposed along with a freeze on postal links, although certain categories of citizens were later exempted. All direct transport links between Russia and Georgia remain blocked while Russian gas supplies to Georgia were cut off during the winter of 2006.

Difficulties with Russian relations notwithstanding, Saakashvili has won plaudits for pulling Georgia out of years of economic chaos and political instability since he led the popular Rose Revolution in 2003.

But while the opposition backs his pro-Western course, it accuses him of authoritarian tendencies and forgetting impoverished Georgians who have been left behind in free-market reforms. "My foremost goal is the prosperity of every Georgian family. My goal is to beat poverty," Saakashvili said Sunday.

At the city's hippodrome, protesters were convinced that nothing would change.

"We are tired of the government, it only cares about the privileged," said Maria Natelachvili, 57. A flamboyant politician who speaks five languages, Saakashvili's reputation as a model democrat suffered a body blow when the November protests led to a state of emergency and the calling of January's snap presidential election.

Many analysts suspect the opposition has given up hope of overturning the result, focusing instead on parliamentary elections due later this year.

"The opposition is united," Constantine Gamsakhurdia told the crowd at the hippodrome. "We will win parliamentary elections and we will come to power in May."

#11

Lack of Confidence in New Government

By Toms Klanin

European Weekly, January 19, 2008

The choice of Ivars Godmanis as the new Latvian premier couldn't thaw the soaring concern of the Latvian people on the troubled state of the economy with inflation pinching the household coffers, according to a new survey.

In the survey conducted by the polling firm SKDS, only 19 percent of Latvians backed the idea that 2008 would be better than 2007, whereas 33 percent echoed general concern saying it would be worse, the most pessimistic result since polling on this question began in 1999.

In the aftermath of joining the EU bloc and NATO the Latvian economy started an upward journey though many experts continually cautioned on the adverse outcome of a probable crunch expected to follow the overheating.

Now, with the country on the verge of an economic downturn, Godmanis has taken up the baton, and people are worried.

The return of Ivars Godmanis in the prime minister's office was not really a welcome move for most of the Latvians, according to the survey.

He was of the leaders of the Latvian independence movement, after almost 14 years in political limbo. Godmanis' first term as prime minister from 1990 to 1993 came during one of the most exciting and at the same time difficult periods of Latvian history, when the country broke away from the Soviet Union and weathered the first, traumatic years of the transition from a planned economy to market capitalism.

Quite apart from the symbolism of Godmanis' return, there are real reasons for concern. The property market, one of the main drivers of Latvia's EU-leading economic growth over the last three years, is starting to contract, and nobody knows how low it will go or how much of the economy it will pull down in its wake.

Many foreign economists are predicting a hard landing, and even the relatively sanguine president of the Bank of Latvia, Ilmars Rimsevics, is predicting that the coming year will be painful for the retail, real estate, and construction sectors.

#12

Lugar Post Soviet Effort Continues

By James R. Carroll

The Courier Journal, January 20, 2008

As we mentioned here previously, Sen. Richard Lugar, R-Ind., was traveling overseas earlier this month. And one of his stops was Kazakhstan.

While he was there, a team of American scientists quietly packed up and removed sample strains of bubonic and pneumonic plague that had been there since the days when that nation was part of the now-defunct Soviet Union.

The plague strains had been made ready by the Soviets for use in weapons.

Lugar and former Sen. Sam Nunn, D-Ga., are authors of the law that created an international program to secure and destroy nuclear, biological and chemical weapons in the former Soviet Union. The Kazakhstan operation was under the auspices of that program.

The strains were taken from Almaty, Kazakhstan, by a U.S. Air Force C-17 (a long-range airlifter), to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in Fort Collins, Colo. At the time, Lugar was in the capital city of Astana.

In Colorado, American and Kazakh scientists will continue research on the plague strains to help develop test kits, antidotes and cures.

"It provides new hope for places where the disease is naturally occurring and helps deter the plague's use as a bio-terror weapon," Lugar said in a statement after the transfer was completed.

Lugar and members of the Nunn-Lugar program negotiated with Kazakhstan for five years to secure the plague samples.

This has been done before. In 2005 Lugar and Sen. Barack Obama, D-Ill., helped secure the transfer to the United States of more than 60 deadly biological agents from Azerbaijan.

#13

The Caspian Moment

By Elmar Mammadyarov, Foreign Minister of Azerbaijan

Wall Street Journal, January 21, 2008

The Caspian is back on the international energy agenda. Our region, rich in oil and gas, is emerging from the Soviet past with a bang. But we still have unfinished business. Regional integration is a priority for Azerbaijan. It makes economic sense in the Caspian and the global context. Integration, however, can only happen if we can find a lasting solution to the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict.

When Armenian forces occupied this south-eastern region of our country and seven surrounding territories in 1992, close to one million Azeris were forced to flee. They are now living in temporary settlements. They should be allowed to return to their homes.

Azerbaijan cannot make any compromises when it comes to its territorial integrity and the right of return for internally displaced persons. This is in accordance with the norms and principles of international law, the relevant U.N. Security Council resolutions and decisions taken by the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe. Other international organizations, including NATO, the Council of Europe, and the European Union, have repeatedly stated the same.

It is almost 14 years since the Azerbaijan-Armenia war ended in a Russian-mediated ceasefire. But to this day we still have Armenian troops on our territory. The continued occupation of parts of our nation is something we cannot tolerate. The so-called Minsk process, an OSCE-led effort to find a peaceful, negotiated settlement to this conflict, has been helpful in providing the framework for dialogue between Azerbaijan and Armenia. It also gives an international dimension to this conflict. But we need to urgently conclude this process. Maintaining the status quo is just too costly.

The current market price for oil and gas is high and we should be able to maximize the economic potential of our strategic resources. The unresolved Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, however, threatens the security of the existing pipeline infrastructure, preventing us from optimizing the region's energy trade with Europe. For us in Azerbaijan this will impede economic growth, which has been averaging around 30% in the past few years.

Diplomacy is Azerbaijan's preferred solution. I believe that Armenia would also benefit from regional integration and development, and should look beyond the protracted conflict. The resolution of this issue would not only improve our bilateral relations. It could also improve Armenia's relationship with Turkey.

Some critics have accused Azerbaijan of overspending on military procurement. But we are only responding to the security reality in the region while at the same time modernizing our military and upgrading it to NATO standards. Close cooperation with NATO is a centerpiece of Azerbaijan's security doctrine.

Transnational threats like organized crime, smuggling and terrorism, which affect this region as well, can only be effectively countered if addressed through a collective framework. This is yet another reason why Armenia should be serious about finding a solution to the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. Unresolved border disputes and quasi-autonomous territories give room to organized crime. To properly deal with asymmetric

threats requires good regional cooperation, which in turn necessitates that we resolve our differences with Armenia.

Having said this, Armenians should know that we are ready to grant Nagorno-Karabakh the widest possible autonomy within Azerbaijan. And we are even ready to substantially increase central funding for the development of this Azeri province.

Resolving this frozen conflict would also help Azerbaijan assume its role as a bridge between the EU and Central Asia. As EU expansion moves further east, Central Asia, with its rich oil and gas resources, becomes increasingly important. The EU must have a strong interest in stability and economic development in a region that could play a central role in helping Europe meet its energy needs. Closer relations with Azerbaijan can also be seen as part of a European outreach to Central Asia.

With our partners from Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan we are building a strong and genuine trans-Caspian partnership. We are discussing connecting the two sides of the Caspian Sea with a network of pipelines. We are talking about setting up mechanisms for regional economic and security cooperation. The regional market, if integrated, will be more competitive, more efficient, and better organized. This has positive implications for all countries involved. Surrounded by massive economies like the EU, Turkey, Russia, and China, the case for rapid and sustained growth across the Caspian region is more than convincing. This is why we are optimistic that Baku could be transformed into a European hub in this region.

A European perspective of closer economic integration is as relevant to the Caspian as is the partnership with Russia and China. Azerbaijan is committed to pursuing all these links. However, a truly regional framework hinges on the resolution of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, which is why this problem can no longer wait. Baku is serious about moving on.

#14

Candidates Kick Off Armenian Presidential Campaign

By Astghik Bedevian, Ruzanna Khachatryan, Ruben Meloyan, and Anna Saghabalian

Armenia Liberty, January 21, 2008

Candidates presented their manifestos and held first meetings with voters on Monday as campaigning officially got underway for Armenia's presidential election that will determine outgoing President Robert Kocharian's successor.

Former President Levon Ter-Petrosian was the first to hit the road, with other major opposition candidates contenting themselves with holding news conferences and other indoors meetings. For his part, Prime Minister Serzh Sarkisian, the presumed frontrunner, visited several of his campaign offices in Yerevan.

Sarkisian is scheduled to travel to the southern Vayots Dzor on Tuesday in his capacity as prime minister. It is not clear if he will hold official campaign meetings there.

Ter-Petrosian, meanwhile, spent the day touring towns and villages in central Armenia in a motorcade of about 40 cars that carried leaders of various opposition groups supporting his presidential bid. His meetings there appeared to attract considerable interest from local residents who turned out to hear their former president speak publicly for the first time in over a decade. Hundreds attended a Ter-Petrosian rally in the town of Artik, the starting point of the campaign swing.

Addressing the crowd, Ter-Petrosian recalled severe hardship suffered during the first years of Armenia's independence which coincided with the war in Nagorno-Karabakh and broader turmoil in the region. "I know that during my rule I did not live up to all of your expectations and hopes," he said. "There were disappointments, there was discontent, there were very harsh criticisms. I accept all of that."

“And if you think that I am to blame for that, I apologize for my guilt,” added Ter-Petrosian. “I have managed to make sense of the past. This is all I can do. I can’t do more. So you decide.”

The ex-president issued a similar public apology at a big rally in Yerevan last November. He made it clear at the same time that he believes that the deprivations of the early 1990s were the inevitable cost of the Armenian military victory over Azerbaijan,

“I have not come here to ask or beg for votes. That’s Serzh’s business because he has no votes in Armenia,” Ter-Petrosian claimed on Monday, prompting “Levon! Levon!” chants from the crowd.

Ter-Petrosian again sounded supremely confident of his victory as he spoke at a similar rally held in another small town, Aparan. “It’s you, not me, who will win on February 19,” he claimed in a town square opposite Sarkisian’s local campaign headquarters. “I congratulate you on your victory in advance.”

Ter-Petrosian’s local campaign office is run by Razmik Petrosian, Aparan’s former mayor and a veteran of the Karabakh war. “Ter-Petrosian remains my commander-in-chief,” he told RFE/RL.

Ter-Petrosian’s wartime leadership of the country was also evoked by other local residents. “We have had only one victor in our history and that person is Levon Ter-Petrosian,” said one man. “I will vote for Levon because he is an intelligent man,” reasoned another.

But the crowds attracted by Ter-Petrosian were clearly not made up only of the ex-president’s sympathizers. “I will listen to everyone before making up my mind,” said one undecided voter in Aparan.

“I’m here because I am idle,” said another, older man. “I don’t trust anyone.”

Another major opposition contender, former parliament speaker Artur Baghdasarian, kicked off his campaign, titled “A civic movement for new Armenia,” with an official presentation of his 32-page election manifesto in Yerevan. “My victory will eliminate corruption and embezzlement rooted in the country,” he told to journalists and activists of his Orinats Yerkir party. “My victory will mean equality before law, a drastic rise in the living standards of the people of Armenia.”

Baghdasarian dismissed claims by government loyalists that the Armenian opposition can not scuttle a handover of power from outgoing President Robert Kocharian to Sarkisian because it has failed to field a single presidential candidate. “There are and there will be alliances,” he said without elaborating. “As for the authorities, they are not united either,” he added, noting that Sarkisian is also challenged by a candidate of the Armenian Revolutionary Federation (Dashnaktsutyun), a junior partner in the governing coalition.

The Dashnaktsutyun candidate, Vahan Hovannisian, held a similar campaign event in Yerevan later in the day. Both he and Baghdasarian have said that the presidential election will require two rounds of voting.

Also meeting journalists was another opposition candidate, Artashes Geghamian. Geghamian again spent much of his news conference, supposedly devoted to his campaign platform, attacking Ter-Petrosian and denouncing what he called a “barbaric” smear campaign waged against him by opposition newspapers. The latter have alleged that Geghamian was bribed by the authorities to enter the fray with the sole aim of discrediting the ex-president.

Geghamian’s opposition credentials were also questioned over the weekend by the Zharangutyun party of Raffi Hovannisian, a major opposition group that has so far declined to endorse any of the presidential hopefuls. “Mr. Geghamian’s recent political behavior raises questions about his being in opposition and reinforces the government’s positions,” Hovsep Khurshudian, a Zharangutyun spokesman, told RFE/RL.

Geghamian is not the only opposition candidate highly critical of Ter-Petrosian. Vazgen Manukian, Ter-Petrosian’s erstwhile comrade-in-arms and a longtime political rival, clearly had the ex-president in mind on Monday when he urged disgruntled voters not to look for a “lesser evil.” While having no fond memories of

Ter-Petrosian's years in power, many of them are even more unhappy with the current Armenian leadership and feel that only he can unseat it.

"An election must represent a choice between the good and the bad," Manukian said in a meeting with a group of young Armenians. "The people must choose the good, and not the lesser evil."

#15

Skeleton Find Sparks Vilnius Row

By Leon Symons

The Jewish Chronicle, January 18, 2008

The British organisation locked in a row with the Lithuanian government over the future of the Jewish cemetery in Vilnius has demanded the return of two skeletons found on the site, to give them a proper burial.

Rabbi Hershel Gluck, of the Stamford Hill-based Committee for the Preservation of Jewish Cemeteries in Europe, said the skeletons were found between two buildings being erected on top of the 700-year-old cemetery.

"The Lithuanian authorities are playing silly games," said Rabbi Gluck. "First they did not tell us they had found the skeletons. Then they told us they might not be Jewish."

He said the CPCJE believed more human remains may have been found and disposed of.

"We have asked for these skeletons to be returned to give them a proper Jewish burial, but so far they have not released them to us," he said.

The discovery emerged at a meeting in Vilnius last month when it was decided that a survey of the area — delayed from last year — will now take place later this month. It will establish the geographical boundaries of the cemetery and, ultimately, whether the building on the site can be completed.

A spokesman for the Lithuanian Embassy in London said: "There were no reports of any skeletons being found recently... There was a report of two skeletons being discovered 10 years ago but nothing since."

#16

Soviet activists who stayed behind helped build a new Jewish life

By Matt Siegel

JTA, January 22, 2008

When the Soviet government began issuing exit visas for Jews in 1987, hundreds of thousands of people trapped for decades reacted with understandable exuberance.

What came next was a tidal wave of aliyah, the largest since the creation of the state of Israel in 1948, and then the collapse of the USSR.

But for many Soviet Jews active in the struggle to throw off the yoke of Bolshevism, the question of emigration was more complicated. Some had elderly relatives who couldn't make the trip or younger children they feared to uproot. Some simply couldn't abandon their community.

While most of the emphasis during the 40th anniversary of their struggle is being placed on the plight of the refuseniks and the worldwide movement to free them, it was the Jews who stayed behind who became responsible for the transformation of Jewish life here in the world's third largest Diaspora community.

"I found myself in the position where most of my friends left and everyone gave me some kind of heritage," says Mikhail Chlenov, a major player in the emigration movement who ultimately chose not to leave.

Chlenov says he remained in Russia primarily because he had three young children at the time and was too involved in community activity to uproot them all.

His son Motya, now 37 and head of the Moscow office of the World Congress of Russian Jewry, was raised in the refusenik movement. Motya even attended what was referred to as "refusenik kindergarten" at a country house outside of Moscow.

A community leader and activist, Motya Chlenov's heavy involvement in community building was clearly shaped by his childhood experiences.

"One of my first memories from my life was a large table with lots of Jewish kids sitting around," he recalls. "The adult people were schmoozing about things, about people who got arrested, people who got refused, who got a visa, but I wasn't participating in that."

Naomi Zubkova, a journalist and translator who had longed to immigrate to Israel along with her brother but stayed to take care of her parents, describes her experience as very common.

"I wanted to go, I had friends in Israel from summers. I wanted to go then and I thought I'd find my place there," she says. "But I couldn't go."

While Zubkova seems satisfied with the development of Jewish life, she laments the current state of Russian politics. She describes the lack of press freedoms and increasing state control of the media with barely contained disgust.

Many of those who stayed behind to build the secular organs of communal life fit a similar description: strong-willed intellectuals with Zionist proclivities.

Josef Zissels, 61, a native of Chernovtzy, Ukraine, fits that bill as well as anyone.

"I'm a traditional/Masorti Jew and Zionist in a wider meaning of the word," he says. "The optimal formula is strong Israel and strong Diaspora."

He was a member of the human rights movement in Ukraine and the Soviet-era Jewish resistance. Imprisoned twice for his work, Zissels spent six years as a political prisoner in the Soviet Gulag. But when the time came to leave Zissels, who spent decades fighting for the rights of Jews to emigrate from his native Ukraine, chose to stay.

Ironically his father has wanted to immigrate to Israel and Zissels now has many relatives there. Still he says he is fully satisfied with his life and activities in Ukraine in spite of a recent spike of xenophobia and anti-Semitic attacks, and he has no plans to leave.

Zissels leads the Association of Jewish Organizations and Communities of Ukraine, a nationwide umbrella group based in Kiev, and serves on the board of the European Jewish Congress.

Aware of his vital role within the community, Zissels sees his mission as developing the Jewish community of Ukraine, which he says "will become stable in a generation."

"We have to restructure ourselves because what we were doing more than 20 years ago is no longer suitable today," he says.

For many who stayed behind, who were raised in an environment of resistance and left to revive an indigenous Jewish culture decimated by 80 years of Soviet communism, the period brings bittersweet memories as marking the end of an era.

Motya Chlenov recalls fondly the cramped apartments full of friends on holidays and the annual street parties outside Moscow's Choral Synagogue on Simchat Torah, where thousands once gathered in defiance of the general ban on Jewish meetings.

"They all got their exit visas and they all left," he says with a touch of bitterness. "In 1992 I went to the Choral Synagogue for Simchat Torah and there was nobody there because they had all gone."

His father, who described himself as a "very secular Jew," seems ambivalent about developments since the fall of communism.

Mikhail Chlenov is clearly overjoyed at the outpouring of Jewish cultural life, but when the talk turns to the predominance of Orthodox Judaism in Russia today, much of which is imported from abroad, he grows slightly agitated.

"Well, I am a bit disappointed that the dominant religious pattern which is imposed on the Russian Jews and Russia is obscurantist," he says, "but I can certainly find positive traits in this development, too."

Zubkova's family has been directly affected by the ubiquity of the Orthodox. Despite coming from an extremely secular background, one of her sons, whom she described as a "deep and thoughtful person," has become fervently Orthodox.

"I see he's happy," she says pensively and deliberately. "I know he had very difficult times when he was discovering all those things for himself."

Her other son, a doctor in New York, remains fiercely secular. She calls his success a "present from the last 17 years."

In a twist that would have been difficult for men of his father's and Zissel's generation to imagine when they started out struggling for the rights of Soviet Jews 40 years ago, Motya Chlenov has decided to stay in Russia because of what it offers him that Israel or Europe, where he lived for three years, cannot.

"I see a lot of more opportunities here for me," he says. "Yes, this country is becoming less comfortable for living, not just because of the political reasons but because of traffic and expensive living." He says he knows both New York and London, and Moscow has "a lot of the same bad marks and less good marks."

Still, his decision is an outgrowth of much of the work done by his father's generation to make the environment here more welcoming not only for Jews but for all the citizens of the former Soviet Union.

Not everyone, even in his own family, agrees with Motya's assessment, however. His twin brother immigrated to the United States in 1997; his sister moved to Jerusalem the same year.

And while so much of the work here has been done by people like Mikhail Chlenov who stayed, some former refuseniks who left still remain active here, too. One example is Uli Kosharovski, an Israeli who was in Moscow recently as part of a delegation to the World Congress of Russian Jewry.

Asked if he had ever considered returning to live in his native Russia, Kosharovski's soft eyes grow large with incredulity.

"Oh no," he laughs, "never. Look, I didn't run from Russia. I just wanted to be Israeli."

#17

Medvedev's Regional Policy

By Nikolai Petrov

The Moscow Times, January 22, 2008

First Deputy Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev left Moscow in early January to tour a few regions. He is traveling more as President Vladimir Putin's de facto successor than as a presidential candidate. Medvedev is using his trip to inspect the major projects that are located in the regions and to establish contact with the local political elite.

From Jan. 10 to 17, Medvedev visited Kaliningrad, Murmansk, Tyumen and Chelyabinsk. Dedicating about a day for each region, he attended meetings on the national projects for housing and health care. The press gave wide coverage to his visits to factories, hospitals, construction sites and ships as well as to impromptu talks with ordinary voters. Medvedev reached out to the entire government bureaucracy wherever he went by including all officials and governors in his meetings.

Along the way, he made sweeping declarations clearly directed toward the voters, promising to enact pension reform and to transform Russia into a superpower of food production. He also issued instructions for resolving local problems and instructed officials to make changes to legislation concerning the environment.

Medvedev's general tone during the tour was positive, with only an occasional criticism aimed at the local bureaucracy, without naming names.

At each stop, governors touted their local successes to Medvedev, and Medvedev tried to turn these local successes into national ones. We heard a lot about new housing for military personnel during his visit to Kaliningrad, improvements to the health care system while in Murmansk and significant improvements to the environmental situation in Chelyabinsk. Although he emphasized successes, Medvedev underlined that those accomplishments were not enough and encouraged everyone to work harder.

During the tail end of his trip in the Urals, Medvedev was accompanied by Sergei Sobyenin, who serves as both his national campaign manager and the Kremlin chief of staff, as well as by Regional Development Minister Dmitry Kozak. Directors of high-profile federal agencies also joined the entourage.

Medvedev's choice of regions to visit is somewhat puzzling. On the one hand, it seems Medvedev is attempting to increase his popularity ratings in regions where United Russia candidates received lower-than-average results in the December State Duma elections. His Kaliningrad and Murmansk visits would seem to correspond to this logic, as would his stopovers in the northwest. But on the other hand, Medvedev was able to offer only superficial answers to the regions' most pressing problems due to his inability to prepare more thorough responses, and this will probably not win the hearts of local voters.

Medvedev most likely intended to use the regional trips as a podium to make declarations through the press to the entire country. For the most part, the problems Medvedev addressed fell well within the framework of the national projects, which he has headed for some time now, with only minor exceptions such as discussions on the Russian-Norwegian border delimitation while visiting Murmansk.

He made almost no reference to traditional "presidential" issues such as those concerning national security and foreign policy. Moreover, his comments concerning the environment -- a theme that he is scheduled to address at the United Nations Security Council during its January session -- and commodities security came across more as the pronouncements of a zealous business executive than a defender of the country. He made no statements about his political priorities, except for pension reforms that are planned for 2008. It is anticipated, however, that Medvedev will make a series of major position statements as early as Tuesday.

In the meantime, governors are eagerly offering to head Medvedev's campaign headquarters in their regions. The three governors who are mentioned in this capacity are St. Petersburg Governor Valentina Matviyenko, Samara Governor Vladimir Artyakov, and Leningrad Governor Valery Serdyukov. But the exact number of governors choosing to enlist under Medvedev's banner will become clear only on Tuesday, when Medvedev is scheduled to meet with his regional campaign chiefs.

There is little doubt that the regional elite will be a primary campaign resource for Medvedev, combined with a dash of populism thrown in for good measure.

#18

No presidential candidate can beat Putin's protege, Dmitry Medvedev

Translated By Dmitry Sudakov

Pravda, January 10, 2008

The complete list of candidacies running for the position of the Russian president will finally be exposed before the end of this month. Experts say that neither former prime minister Mikhail Kasyanov nor the leader of the Democratic Party of Russia, Andrei Bogdanov, will pass the registration. According to experts' estimates, candidacies of only three parliamentary parties will fight for votes in March of 2008.

Putin's protege, Dmitry Medvedev, who has already earned the reputation of Russia's next president, already started to perform some of his would-be functions. Following Putin's example, Medvedev attended a church on Christmas night for a standing service on December 7.

Vladimir Zhirinovsky, a candidate from the Liberal and Democratic Party of Russia, has not been showing any activity lately. Gennady Zyuganov, the chairman of the Communist Party of Russia, currently watches ratings of mentioning in the media.

Candidates from three parliamentary parties were registered at the end of 2007. Two independent nominees, Mikhail Kasyanov and Andrei Bogdanov, launched their campaigns to collect two million signatures in their own support. The signatures will have to be submitted to the Central Election Commission not later than January 16, where they will be checked during the following ten days.

Andrei Bogdanov's pre-election campaign experiences a shortage of funds. The law stipulates the maximum of 400 million rubles for election campaigns of presidential candidates. Bogdanov can boast of raising only ten percent of the required amount. A half of this money will be spent to collect signatures, which makes it obvious that Bogdanov will not be able to compete with other runners. "It is just honorable to be a presidential candidate in Russia. It is important to get registered so that our candidate would be mentioned in mass media as a serious politician," an official spokesman for Andrei Bogdanov's election team said.

Mikhail Kasyanov's followers say that they have already collected 1.7 million signatures. They say that the biggest problem which they had to face during their work was connected with Russian people's indifference to the forthcoming voting, which is obviously not true to fact. The majority of Russians know that the election will take place on March 2, 2008.

Experts say that independent candidates – Kasyanov and Bogdanov – do not have many chances to become registered candidates. Expert Dmitry Oreshkin stated that the Kremlin administration would most likely remove them both from the race. "If they believe that the two candidates do not pose any threat but create the appearance of competition, they will most likely stay," the expert said.

Vladimir Zhirinovsky apparently intends to move forward by attacking his rivals. For example, in December of 2007 Zhirinovsky harshly attacked communists: "Communists have been blackening and shaming our country for a hundred years," he said.

#19

Analysis: U.S. has ally in Azerbaijan

By John C.K. Daly

UPI International, January 18, 2008

In retrospect, 2007 will be remembered as the high-water mark of Washington's attempts to develop the Caspian's post-Soviet hydrocarbon riches. If early 2008 is any indication, then the one remaining friend that

America has in the Caspian basin is Azerbaijan. Neither Iran, subject to ongoing U.S. sanctions, nor the Russian Federation have evinced the slightest interest in sharing their oil and natural gas reserves with U.S. companies, while Turkmenistan's resources are locked up for the foreseeable future with Russia and China and Kazakhstan has played hardball with the Western consortium developing Kashagan, wringing out of its nervous joint partners a doubling of Kazakhstan's share in the massive development project. Only Azerbaijan remains as the first and brightest hope of Western efforts to corral Caspian development, a post-Soviet republic still firmly committed to its Western partners.

Azeri interest in maintaining its Western connections amid growing nationalist settlement in the Caspian basin is personified in the recent two-day visit of U.S. Sen. Richard Lugar, R-Ind., head of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, to Baku. On Jan. 14 Azeri President Ilham Aliyev received Lugar. The Azeri media heavily covered the event and proclaimed, "The head of the state said that bilateral cooperation between U.S. and Azerbaijan are developing successfully in all the fields."

Lugar had a full agenda during his two-day visit: According to the Azeri media, among the topics that Lugar discussed were Washington's appreciation of Azerbaijan's anti-terrorist efforts, bilateral cooperation, the first world war's Armenian "genocide," Nagorno-Karabakh, regional energy cooperation, Azeri elections and Iran's nuclear program.

Perhaps the most notable of Lugar's observations came when, following his discussions with Aliyev, he suggested "George Bush should appoint a special representative on energy issues in the Caspian region. . . The appointment of special representative will be a signal that U.S. regards this region as a priority."

Lugar's comments follow up on a letter that he and fellow Senate Foreign Relations Committee member Joseph Biden, D-Del., sent on Oct. 4 to Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice stressing the need for such a special representative focused on energy issues in the Caspian to safeguard long-term U.S. interests.

In words that doubtless enchanted his Azeri hosts Lugar added, "These long-term interests lie in not allowing Russia to be dominant in the South Caucasus and Central Asia."

The prize is certainly tempting: The Caspian's 143,244 square miles and attendant coastline are estimated to contain as much as 250 billion barrels of recoverable oil, boosted by more than 200 billion barrels of potential reserves, quite aside from up to 328 trillion cubic feet of recoverable natural gas.

Whatever Lugar says, however, the reality is that in the short term Russia effectively "dominates" Kazakh and Turkmen energy exports. Turkmenistan uses the Soviet-era Transneft pipeline monopoly, while Kazakh oil exports currently flow westward through the 938-mile Caspian Pipeline Consortium joint venture. The CPC pipeline opened in 2001 and has a current capacity of 700,000 barrels per day. While Chevron, LUKoil, ExxonMobil, BP, Rosneft, Shell, BG and KazMunaiGas are all CPC partners, the pipeline pumps oil westward from western Kazakhstan and Siberia to Russia's Novorossiisk Black Sea port.

The West's great success is Azeri production, which now sends more than 800,000 barrels per day through both the Baku-Supsa and Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipelines; BTC is designed to handle up to 1 million bpd and in 2008 Baku is hoping to increase exports up to 1.2 million bpd. In 1994 Azeri President Geidar Aliyev signed the "Contract of the Century" with Western energy concerns to develop Azerbaijan's Caspian Azeri-Chirag-Gunashli fields. In 1997 the Baku-Novorossiisk pipeline opened to export Azeri oil from the black Sea to Western markets, but initial throughput was limited to 40,000 bpd. Two years later Baku's export options broadened with the opening of the \$600 million, 515-mile Baku-Supsa 100,000 bpd pipeline, followed by the inauguration of the \$3.6 billion, 1,092-mile, million-barrel-per-day Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline, which had a capacity of 1 million bpd. The opening of the BTC pipeline allowed Azerbaijan to cut itself adrift from Russia's pipeline monopoly and represented the culmination of Washington's dream of a Caspian export route that bypassed both Russia and Iran.

Since then however, Washington's reveries of controlling Caspian production have run into some nasty geopolitical realities. Last month Iran reiterated its previous position that Caspian offshore waters should be

shared equally among coastal nations, setting back for the foreseeable future any definitive division of the Caspian's territory, a crucial element in Washington's strategy of constructing undersea pipelines.

Even worse, Kazakhstan forced its Kashagan partners to rewrite the contracts for production of the massive Caspian offshore field, the world's largest single discovery of the last 30 years. Under the original joint venture agreement Kazakhstan's national hydrocarbon concern KazMunaiGas and Japan's Inpex each held an 8.33 percent share in the project, while ConocoPhillips holds a 9.26 percent share. Four major foreign oil companies that dominated the project -- Italy's Eni, France's Total, U.S. ExxonMobil and Anglo-Dutch Shell -- all held 18.52 percent stakes each. Under the new terms, State-run KazMunaiGas will pay \$1.78 billion to increase its share from 8.33 percent to 16.81 percent at the expense of its foreign partners, with Eni, Shell, Total and ExxonMobil seeing their stake drop from 18.52 percent to 16.81 percent, while ConocoPhillips and Inpex will also have "slight" adjustments made to their stakes.

For all of Lugar's calls to action, the appointment of a U.S. "special representative" for Caspian affairs would seem to be a classic case of too little, too late.

#20

Top US Defense Official Plans Visit to Uzbekistan

By Olzhas Auyezov

Reuters, January 22, 2008

U.S. Admiral William Fallon plans to visit Uzbekistan soon, he said on Tuesday, in what would be the first high-level attempt to mend ties since relations broke off in 2005.

The United States condemned Uzbekistan, once a U.S. ally in its war on terror, when troops fired on a protest in the town of Andizhan in 2005. Uzbekistan in return evicted U.S. troops from a key military airbase used as a hub for U.S. operations in Afghanistan.

Fallon, head of the U.S. military Central Command, said he planned to visit the Central Asian nation but did not say when.

"I would like to pay a future visit to Tashkent," he told reporters during a visit to Tajikistan, another Central Asian nation bordering Afghanistan.

The U.S. embassy in Uzbekistan confirmed that a visit was planned but did not disclose the date.

Fallon was tight-lipped on the agenda but said he had no plans to discuss the airbase issue.

"But in any event a visit there would not involve any discussions on the base from my initiative," Fallon said.

"That's not something that we have on our agenda," he said, adding he would travel to Pakistan and Afghanistan first.

Uzbekistan's ties with the West suffered a blow in 2005 when troops fired on protesters in Andizhan, killing hundreds, according to witnesses.

The Uzbek government blamed the violence on Islamic rebels and said only security forces and terrorists died at the time.

In another sign of more active diplomatic contacts, Pierre Morel, EU Special Representative for Central Asia, met Uzbek President Islam Karimov in Tashkent last week.

#21

Medvedev Address Hints at Change

By Anna Smolchenko

The Moscow Times, January 23, 2008

In his first major campaign address, presidential front-runner Dmitry Medvedev pledged Tuesday to stay the current Kremlin course but hinted at a softer stance in several key policy areas and opportunities to mend some fences with the West.

Speaking at a meeting of the Civic Forum, an event organized by the Public Chamber bringing together representatives from the country's nongovernmental organizations, Medvedev praised President Vladimir Putin's policies of the last eight years and pledged continuity and stability.

But the tone and language of his address -- where words like "democracy" and "freedoms" enjoyed a conspicuous place -- differed significantly from those usually embraced by Putin, who has taken an increasingly strident line as the end of his second term draws nearer.

Medvedev's appearance came a day after he was officially registered as a candidate for the March 2 presidential vote. With Putin's endorsement, he is widely expected to win -- the latest nationwide survey by pollster VTsIOM shows Medvedev with the support of more than 60 percent of decided respondents -- so much of the focus has already shifted to whether he will act as an independent president or remain a mere conduit for Putin's orders and policies.

Some of the strongest comments Tuesday from Medvedev, like Putin a lawyer by training, concerned corruption.

"Without exaggeration, Russia is a country of legal nihilism. No European country can boast of such disregard for law," Medvedev said, adding that purchases of pirated CDs and DVDs were just one obvious example.

Corruption exists on a "huge scale" and permeates everything in the country, he added, saying that dealing with the problem should become a national program.

Fighting corruption and stressing the importance of the rule of law have both enjoyed a vogue in Putin's policy pronouncements in the past, although with little to show in the way of results. Even higher on Putin's list of issues as a campaigner were questions like dealing with the conflict in Chechnya and bringing the country's oligarchs to heel. Medvedev has launched his campaign with the issue of corruption and rule of law out front.

As first deputy prime minister and, formerly, Putin's chief of staff, Medvedev has been put in charge of the so-called national programs, aimed at improving conditions in the areas of health care, housing, education and agriculture. Work on the programs has provided him with blanket television coverage.

Medvedev, 42, said a prolonged period of stability was what Russia most needed to foster further development.

"The main thing is to continue calm and stable development," he told the forum. "Decades of stable development are needed, something our country has been deprived of."

He said the government would continue developing the market economy and protecting entrepreneurship and property rights.

If development continues at its current pace, Medvedev said, Russia could expect to become one of the world's five leading economies in the next 10 to 15 years.

Some of the remarks appeared to be borrowed from a policy address delivered by Sergei Ivanov, his one-time rival for Putin's blessing as successor, delivered at the St. Petersburg International Economic Forum

last June. Ivanov said Russia should be a top-five world economy with a competitive edge in aviation, shipbuilding, nanotechnology, space launches and the nuclear sector by 2020.

On Tuesday, Medvedev described economic policy as a "big theme," saying he would return to it at a later date.

On the theme of domestic politics, Medvedev defended reforms to the party system under Putin, saying that before the changes, elections had been a mere "carnival of populist promises." Critics of the current system decry the lack of direct election for regional leaders and the reduction of the State Duma to what they call a "rubber-stamp" parliament for laws produced in the Kremlin.

On foreign policy, Medvedev offered a different, more conciliatory feel than the one to which observers have grown accustomed under Putin.

Russia, he said, may be encountering problems because other countries still don't have a clear understanding of the country's goals.

"Russia will openly and precisely explain its economic and political goals and will find more and more allies in solving acute international problems," he said. Under Putin, Russia's foreign policies alienated a number of countries, critics say, with the most recent brouhaha coming with Britain over the closing of British Council offices here.

Medvedev defended the country's right to active relations with its neighbors in the Commonwealth of Independent States and added that Russia would continue its relations with so-called "problematic" states, in a clear reference to countries like Iran and North Korea.

"The most unproductive move would be to cut off relations and start carpet bombing," Medvedev said.

"Nobody should be in doubt," he said. "In the future, Russia will continue to remain open for dialogue and cooperation with the international community."

The speech was carefully worded and well articulated, if heavier on platitudes than specifics.

"Power is not for itself but for an effective control of the country in the interest of people," he told the forum, adding that social policy should focus on individuals and not just social issues.

Many in the audience welcomed the marked difference in Medvedev's tone from that of Putin, suggesting that it could be a harbinger of changes for the better in at least some areas.

Igor Bunin, of the Center for Political Technologies, said the "intonation" of the address stood in stark contrast to speeches from national leaders in recent years.

"There are somewhat different hues than there had been before," Bunin said on the sidelines of the forum. "It was consistent, logical, unemotional."

He also praised Medvedev's comments aimed at the West, saying the meaning was: "We are not at all your enemies." He added that this could indicate an "independent" streak in the candidate.

Genri Reznik, a high-profile lawyer, struck a similar note.

"Today, I heard a style that pleased me," he said. He added that it was refreshing to listen to a legal mind instead of tough-talking military officials.

Speakers who took the floor ahead of Medvedev focused on, among other issues, the improvements the national projects have brought for people's lives, without directly referring to Medvedev.

An exhibition near the main hall for the gathering featured stands run by various NGOs and public groups, as well as a cardboard cut out of a smiling Medvedev with the caption: "We are betting on leaders."

#22

Will Russia's foreign policy change?

By Matt Siegel

JTA, January 23, 2008

When a soft-spoken ex-KGB operative named Vladimir Putin took the helm of Russia on the eve of the new millennium, the country was in a tailspin. Its economy was anemic and its influence, once far reaching, was fading.

When Putin steps down in March to become prime minister, his likely successor, Dmitry Medvedev, will inherit a Russia in a radically different position.

Flush with oil money and brimming with confidence, Russia under Putin has moved to reassert itself as a major global power while seeking to re-establish its influence on key global issues, especially the Middle East. This can be seen on matters ranging from Iran's nuclear program to ties with Syria to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Several of Russia's positions, including its construction of a nuclear plant in Iran, have brought the country into direct conflict with the West. That is no accident, says Steven Sestanovich, a senior fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations in Washington.

"Moscow is trying to balance the psychological benefits of nose thumbing with an effort to protect its reputation as a responsible member of the great power club," Sestanovich said.

While experts expect Medvedev to continue the policies of his predecessor, steering a course between a Russia commanding international respect and exorcising the demons of post-Soviet inadequacy through anti-Western posturing, a quiet debate is under way in the country about what changes Medvedev might make if he asserts his independence from Putin.

Russia watchers say it is too early to tell whether Medvedev will usher in change or whether Putin will continue to steer Russian foreign policy from his new post as prime minister.

Part of the uncertainty stems from a debate over Putin's power as president the past seven years.

While the news media generally portray Putin as a steely-eyed autocrat, one school of thought in Russia views Putin's real strength as that of a mediator between powerful Kremlin cliques, each with its own power base.

Without Putin at the helm to mediate, the consensus he has engendered among these cliques may fall apart, particularly given that Medvedev beat out many of the cliques' candidates to succeed Putin. A struggle for power could ensue, leading to unclear ramifications for Russia's foreign policies.

"The question really is," said Professor Carol Saivetz, a research associate at Harvard University's Davis Center and a visiting scholar at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology's Center for International Studies, "are there differing foreign policies between and among these cliques, and if one of them were to become ascendant if Putin were no longer the balancer in the middle, what would that portend for Russian foreign policy?"

Even if Medvedev asserts powerful leadership and plots the course of the country his own way, it's not clear which direction he will take it. Beyond his loyalty to Putin, little is known about the foreign policy positions of Medvedev, the chairman of the Russian state energy giant Gazprom and a former presidential chief of staff.

On Tuesday, at his first news conference since registering as a candidate for president, Medvedev, considered a moderate liberal, said, "Russia will openly and precisely explain its economic and political goals, and will find more and more allies in solving acute international problems."

Putin in his term has directed much of his energy overseas into counterbalancing the world's only superpower, the United States. He repeatedly has cited U.S. dominance of a unipolar world as the cause of Middle East instability, from the war in Iraq to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Putin has sought to bring stability to Russia by making sure no one country can drive the world to chaos, especially in his own backyard.

Evgeniy Satanovsky, the director of the Institute for Middle Eastern Studies in Moscow, says the foreign policy discrepancies between Moscow and Washington have been driven by a fundamental difference in priorities.

"The major difference between Russia and the Western world is that the priority of the Western world is democracy," Satanovsky said. "The priority of Russia is stability."

The Middle East's geographical proximity to Russia and its neighbors -- especially the former Soviet republics in central Asia, where Russia buys large amounts of gas and exports it to Europe -- has made that region a top priority.

Russia invited Hamas leaders to Moscow following their victory in last year's Palestinian elections, signaling that Russia would play a more vigorous opposition role as a member of the Quartet group of nations backing Israeli-Palestinian negotiations.

Along with China, Russia has blocked numerous U.N. Security Council resolutions on Iran. Russia has engaged in shuttle diplomacy with Tehran even as the United States talks publicly about military options against the Islamic Republic. Russia is also the largest supplier of arms to Syria.

Despite the characterization of Russia by some Western officials as an impediment to stability, Russia exerts a mostly stabilizing effect on the region, some analysts say.

Saivetz listed as examples a number of low-profile moves Russia has made to pressure Iran on the nuclear issue. These include Russia's suspension of construction at the Bushehr nuclear plant over a relatively small payment dispute -- \$50 million in a project costing more than \$1 billion -- and its 2003 decision to delay construction at the plant until 2005 following a negative assessment of Iran's cooperation by the International Atomic Energy Agency.

These moves, made at key points, had the dual effect of slowing Iran's nuclear progress while providing more time for a diplomatic resolution, which Russia favors. Thus they helped stabilize the volatile Iran situation, Saivetz said.

Such actions demonstrate that Russia recognizes that a non-nuclear Iran and a stable Middle East are in its interest, she added. In all likelihood, Putin's successor will arrive at the same conclusion.

"It will be absolutely the same," Satanovsky said. "Not because of Putin, but because of the Russian reality. Iran is our neighbor, Syria is our market. That is the only reality."

#23

Rice says NATO must leave door open to Ukraine

By Sue Fleming; Editing by Ralph Boulton

Reuters, January 23, 2008

U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice on Wednesday indicated Washington's support for Ukraine's bid to join NATO, said a U.S. official, in a move likely to anger Russia.

Ukraine's Western-leaning leadership this month wrote to NATO asking it to accept the country into the Membership Action Plan, a step toward accession.

In a meeting with Ukraine's President Viktor Yushchenko on the sidelines of the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland, Rice discussed internal developments in Ukraine as well as their bid to join the military alliance, said the official traveling with Rice.

"The secretary reiterated the U.S. view that NATO should leave the door open to those European, democratic states who meet membership requirements," said the official after Rice's meeting with Yushchenko.

Russia views with deep misgivings NATO's military expansion towards Russia's borders and said this week that former Soviet republic Ukraine's membership bid would have serious implications for relations between neighbors.

In hard-hitting comments on Wednesday, Russian's Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov said there was no security justification for enlargement of NATO, and that the expansion plan was a throwback to the Cold War.

The U.S. official said Rice also talked about Ukraine's negotiations for entry into the World Trade Organization.

Ukraine has relied on Washington for support in its entry bid into the WTO. Their accession bid is expected to be endorsed next month unless there are any last minute technical objections to it.

#24

The New Russia

By Reuben F. Johnson

The Weekly Standard, January 24, 2008

Excluding the little more than symbolic access to the political process granted to a few small opposition groups, the pro-Kremlin United Russia party has assumed a monopoly on the Russian political sphere much like that enjoyed by the old Communist party of the Soviet Union. It is widely expected that Russian President Vladimir Putin will assume some senior position in this party, if not as its general secretary, once the Russian presidential elections are held in March and his hand-picked successor, First Deputy Prime Minister Dmitri Medvedev, assumes the presidency.

Medvedev, who is expected to cruise to an easy victory since there are no other credible candidates, has also already asked Putin to be his prime minister, which effectively leaves power in the hands of the same individuals that are running the country now.

The old saying is that "absolute power corrupts absolutely," but when this is played out in the new Russia--supposedly governed by a "dictatorship of the law"--everyone tries to get in on the action.

It was announced on January 14 that two senior United Russia officials were dismissed over "possible" financial fraud linked to Medvedev's presidential campaign. Sergei Zhiltsov and Vladimir Barinov, members of the party's executive committee, are suspected of "financial machinations" for posting requests for campaign contributions to nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) friendly to the first deputy PM.

Normally, soliciting campaign contributions is not considered a crime, but the problem with these letters was that they all went out before Medvedev had officially registered as a candidate. Asking for money for a

person who has not even yet announced his candidacy would have left the money collected in a dubious legal status--as in it could have been taken and spent however the persons collecting it were inclined.

Calls to Zhiltsov's United Russia office went unanswered Monday. United Russia has since revised its entry rules for new applicants, said the head of the party's executive committee, Andrei Vorobyov, in a story in the Moscow paper Vedomosti. As of now some previous participation in party activities--such as making donations or membership in a professional union--and an interview will be among the new requirements.

But one does wonder just why a man with Medvedev's personal wealth cannot afford (ala Mitt Romney) to be self-financing. His need for any substantive campaign expenditures also remains a mystery. None of the other candidates who are running will receive any significant coverage from the Kremlin-controlled media, leaving no apparent rationale for Medvedev to buy advertising in the first place.

Another Moscow paper, Nezavisimaya Gazeta, reported the day after the United Russia scandal that the Russian central television channels are already giving "complete supremacy" to Medvedev and have marginalized the other presidential candidates. The paper's count was that the main channels mentioned Medvedev 344 times during the two week period that ended 13 January. The leader of the nationalistic Liberal Democratic party of Russia, Vladimir Zhirinovskiy, was second with 96 references. (Zhirinovskiy is not considered to be a serious candidate and his party almost always backs the actions of the Kremlin, so he does not really qualify as an "opposition" candidate. Hence the mention of his name rather frequently compared to the other candidates running against Medvedev.)

Medvedev received 12 hours of media coverage in this same period. Communist Party leader Gennady Zyuganov, who came close to unseating former President Boris Yeltsin in 1996, was given only two hours. Former Prime Minister Mikhail Kasyanov, who is considered one of the only serious opposition candidates, was heard on state television only two times during the two-week period compared to 172 appearances for Medvedev.

Other candidates who had been running for the March 2008 balloting have since dropped out, namely former First Deputy PM Boris Nemtsov, on the grounds that participating in such a blatantly undemocratic election with a pre-determined outcome only lends credibility to a process that does not deserve it. Nemtsov had encouraged Kasyanov to drop out as well, but on Thursday the former PM delivered boxes of the required 2 million signatures needed for registration as a presidential candidate to the Central Election Commission.

Kasyanov has vowed to stay in the race at all costs. "People sharing this attitude are urging me to go to the end. This is a great responsibility, and I cannot drop my decision now. Therefore, I will not quit," he said to the Russian Interfax news service.

In another example of Russia's regression to its Soviet past, while registration of a presidential bid is still theoretically possible, the obstacles to doing so are nearly insurmountable. A candidate must have a vast infrastructure in place and stretching across the country in order to collect the required petition signatures. Candidates have only one month to collect these signatures (an average of almost 70,000 per day) and no more than 50,000 signatures can come from any one of the country's 85 regions.

Not surprisingly, a democracy monitoring NGO based in the United States, Freedom House, states this week that freedom and democratic practices in Russia have gone "from bad to worse" in 2007. According to the group's statistical rating, Russia citizens now enjoy the same level of freedom as persons do in Angola, Egypt and Tajikistan.

Freedom House groups nations into one of three categories: free, partly free, and not free. Russia has been in the "Not Free" column for several years, but Freedom House states that the situation has deteriorated further, as typified by the abuses that took place during the State Duma elections late last year.

"One can't ignore the almost blanket inability of alternative voices to find their way into the news media," said Freedom House's Christopher Walker told the Moscow Times in a recent interview. "If they do, it's often in a jaundiced fashion, with them being portrayed negatively."

The Freedom House report categorizes Russia as belonging to the group of several "energy-rich dictatorships," (the same club Iran and Venezuela belong to) that leverage their oil wealth "to negative effect on their smaller neighbors."

Not surprisingly, the response from Moscow has been another blast from the Soviet past.

In an interview that the late Senator Daniel Moynihan gave to New Yorker correspondent Jeffrey Toobin in 1999 he said that "Hannah Arendt had it right. She said one of the great advantages of the totalitarian elites of the Twenties and Thirties was to turn any statement of fact into a question of motive." This perfectly characterizes the response by one of Russia's leading political analysts, Sergei Markov, who is also now a newly-elected Duma member and one of the select few talking heads with the Kremlin's blessing to push the party line to the Western press.

"You can listen to everything they say, except when it comes to Russia," said Markov to the Times. "There are many Russophobes there."

History has gone full circle now. The days of foreign tourists to Russia being inundated with propaganda like the old Cold War-era polemical pamphlets entitled "Who Profits From Telling Lies About The Soviet Union" cannot be far off. In the meantime, the pantomime of a presidential race, and an ever intensifying scramble among those who want to dip their hands into the money till, go on. The question for the future is what will happen when the crowd in power in Moscow can no longer depend on \$100 per barrel oil prices to shore up their popularity.

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Saakashvili to Shuffle Cabinet The Associated Press, January 25, 2008

Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili said Thursday that Foreign Minister Gela Bezhushvili will be replaced as part of a major government reshuffle.

"More than half of the ministers will be replaced, the changes are not focused just on him," Saakashvili told reporters at the Council of Europe, where he addressed the human rights watchdog's parliamentary assembly. Saakashvili said policy changes would be made in all major portfolios, including economy and justice, but gave no details.

The announcement of major government changes follows Saakashvili's re-election this month in a vote that the opposition contends was rigged.

Although Saakashvili handily outdistanced his opponents in the results, the 53 percent he won was far lower than in his overwhelming 2004 victory, which came just weeks after he led the peaceful protests that became known as the Rose Revolution, ousting his predecessor.

In Tbilisi, acting Prime Minister Vladimir Gurgenzidze told reporters Saakashvili had chosen his campaign chief, David Bakradze, to replace Bezhushvili. Before the campaign, Bakradze was minister for conflict resolution, in charge of interaction with the breakaway regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

In his comments in Strasbourg, Saakashvili welcomed assurances by Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov that the Kremlin would not rush to acknowledge Abkhazia and South Ossetia as independent countries.

"We hail Lavrov's statement, which proves Russia can respect our point of view," Saakashvili said.