



WASHINGTON, D.C. February 8, 2008

TO: NCSJ Leadership and Interested Parties

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

In Brief: The OSCE and Beyond

Dear Friend:

Yesterday, I had the privilege of testifying before the U.S. Helsinki Commission on the state of anti-Semitism in the former Soviet Union. It was a humbling yet exhilarating experience to participate in.

I was part of a panel that included colleagues from the American Jewish Committee, the Anti-Defamation League and the Simon Wiesenthal Center.

Commission Chairman Representative Alcee Hastings oversaw the hearing. He was joined by Co-Chairman Senator Ben Cardin, and by Senator George Voinovich, Representative Christopher Smith and Representative Hilda Solis. Our community is fortunate to have such dedicated advocates in the fight against global anti-Semitism.

I focused my testimony in two areas, the current conditions facing the Jewish populations of the former Soviet Union and a series of recommendations that could counter the ongoing incidents of popular anti-Semitism in the region. This week's update has a link to my full testimony as well as a brief report on the hearing.

For those unfamiliar with the Helsinki Commission, it is a joint Congressional/executive branch committee that is responsible for monitoring and participating in the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE). The OSCE deals with issues related to security, economic and human rights concerns in Europe. The United States and Canada are the only two non-European member states.

In the 1970s and 1980s, the Commission was a leading voice in the struggle to promote human rights in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union. It was through this international body that our movement was best able to challenge the Soviet Union to open the emigration gates. NCSJ was one of the original supporters of the creation of the Commission and has worked closely with its members and staff for more than 30 years.

Today, NCSJ and our member agencies work continue to work with the Commission on a whole host of

issues, including anti-Semitism and democracy issues.

I will be writing to you from Tbilisi, Georgia next week, where NCSJ Chairman Ed Robin and I will participate in the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations Mission to Georgia and Israel. The Georgian Jewish community has been in existence for more than 2,500 years. We will be meeting with community leadership as well as government officials.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Mark B. Levin". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Mark B. Levin
Executive Director



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

NCSJ WEEKLY NEWS BRIEF
Washington, D.C. February 8, 2008

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#1

Helsinki Commission: Combating Anti-Semitism in the OSCE region

By Ben Sack

NCSJ, February 7, 2008

Today on Capital Hill, NCSJ Executive Director Mark Levin testified before the U.S. Helsinki Commission on the state of anti-Semitism in the member countries of the Organization on Security and Co-operation in Europe. Commission Chairman Rep. Alcee Hastings (D-FL), led the hearing, which was attended by co-Chairman Sen. Ben Cardin (D-MD), past Chairman Rep. Chris Smith (R-NJ), Sen. George Voinovich (R-OH), and Rep. Hilda Solis (D-CA).

Mr. Levin joined other prominent activists from the government and the NGO community in testifying before the Commission. The first two witnesses were Dr. Gregg Rickman, U.S. State Department Special Envoy for Monitoring and Combating Anti-Semitism, and Felice D. Gaer from the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom. Mr. Levin, representing NCSJ, Rabbi Andrew Baker from the American Jewish Committee, Rabbi Marvin Hier from the Simon Wiesenthal Center, and Stacy Burdett from the Anti-Defamation League testified on the second panel.

Mr. Levin described the efforts to combat anti-Semitism in the region and the challenges that still remain. He praised the Commission for their ongoing work to combat anti-Semitism and intolerance in the 15 successor states, and offered several recommendations as a way to begin to remedy the problems encountered by Jewish communities in the former Soviet Union

He called for the creation and implementation of comprehensive hate crime legislation in the region. To ensure proper enforcement of any new legislation, Mr. Levin recommended that local police forces receive training to recognize and report hate crimes, in conjunction with ongoing efforts to monitor bias and hate motivated activities. Mr. Levin also recommended that countries make a concerted effort to implement tolerance education for people of all ages, and that regional media and religious outlets project a positive message.

This multi-pronged effort, Mr. Levin stated, can be achieved through an active foreign policy by the U.S. and other member states of the OSCE. NCSJ will continue to work with the U.S. Government and the OSCE to implement these recommendations.

At the end of his testimony, Mr. Levin stated that "...we have learned over these last three and a half decades, progress can be slow. However, millions of people have benefited from our unwavering commitment to freedom and fighting intolerance. Today, millions continue to depend on this commitment."

We will keep you informed of any new developments related to this issue. For more information on the Helsinki Commission and the complete text of Mr. Levin's testimony, please visit our web site www.ncsj.org.

#2

Putin points to extremism threat JTA Brief, February 7, 2008

Russian President Vladimir Putin called nationalism and xenophobia a genuine threat to the government.

Putin made the comments during an expanded meeting of workers from the Ministry of Internal Affairs, according to a report by the Russian Web site Jewish.ru.

"Militant nationalism, xenophobia, calls to violence and interethnic discord always have been and continue to be a ticking time bomb beneath our government," Putin said, adding that extremism had to be "cut off at the root."

The statement came on the heels of a Jan. 30 report by the Sova Informational-Analytical Center that said hate crimes had grown by 13 percent in 2007 over the previous year.

A new law to combat extremist speech was passed ahead of the 2007 state Duma elections. Proponents of the law maintain that it will make it easier to prosecute hate speech, while opposition figures have expressed fears that the law was designed to target their operations.

#3

Bush defers on Durban II JTA Brief, February 8, 2008

The Bush administration is deferring a decision on U.S. participation in the second U.N. Durban Conference against Racism.

"There has been no decision as to future participation because it will be held in 2009," Gregg Rickman, the top U.S. official dealing with anti-Semitism, said at a hearing Thursday of Congress' Helsinki Commission.

Canada formally opted out of the 2009 reconvening of the conference, pointing out that the inaugural conference in '01 devolved into an anti-Semitic shout fest hijacked by states hostile to Israel, notably Iran.

Pressed by members of the commission -- the congressional body that monitors human rights overseas -- Rickman said the Bush administration did not think it appropriate to second-guess its successor.

The United Nations has yet to decide on a venue for Durban II.

In the second of two Helsinki hearings on anti-Semitism, the commission on Thursday looked at the United States and the former Soviet Union. Last week it addressed anti-Semitism in Europe.

In addition to Rickman, the State Department's special envoy on the topic, witnesses included representatives of the American Jewish Committee, the Anti-Defamation League, the Simon Wiesenthal Center, the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom and NCSJ: Advocates on behalf of Jews in Russia, Ukraine, the Baltic States and Eurasia.

#4

Moscow Suspicious of Iranian Rocket Reuters Brief, February 7, 2008

Russia said Wednesday that Iran's test launch of a rocket raised suspicions about the real nature of the country's atomic program, in what could signal a hardening of its stance toward Tehran.

Iran launched a rocket Monday designed to carry its first locally made research satellite next year, showing the country's advances in ballistics at a time when Western powers are already wary that it may be developing a nuclear weapon.

"Any movement in terms of creating such a potential weapon naturally worries us and others," Deputy Foreign Minister Alexander Losyuko told journalists, Interfax reported. "All the more so since it creates suspicion toward Iran about its possible desire to create a nuclear weapon."

"Rockets of such range are one of the components of such a weapons system. Of course this raises concern," he added

Russia has previously said there is no evidence that Tehran is trying to make nuclear weapons.

#5

Yuschenko, Bielski meet in Ukraine JTA Brief, February 5, 2008

Ukrainian President Victor Yuschenko met with leaders of the Jewish Agency for Israel.

Yuschenko on Monday in Kiev discussed Jewish issues in Ukraine with Ze'ev Bielski, the Jewish Agency's chairman, among others.

Yuschenko said he was committed to an Ukrainian-Israeli initiative on dialogue and expressed his desire to gain recognition for Holodomor, or the Great Famine of 1932-33, as a genocide of Ukrainian people.

He told the Jewish Agency leaders about a monument to Zionist visionary Ze'ev Jabotinsky being built in Odessa, establishing museums and expos devoted to prominent Israeli leaders, and the transfer of synagogue buildings and Torah scrolls from the state back to the Jewish communities of Ukraine.

Aharon Abramovitz, the director general of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Israel, and Zina Kalay-Kleytman, Israel's ambassador to Ukraine, also joined the meeting.

Jewish Agency officials, local Jewish community representatives and Ukrainian officials participated in Tuesday's opening ceremony of the renovated Israeli Cultural Center in Kiev .

#6

Lithuania and Poland Support Georgia's Integration Into NATO Prime News Brief, February 2, 2008

Valdas Adamkus, President of Lithuania and Lech Kaczynski, President of Poland, expressed their support to Georgia's integration into NATO at the meeting held in Vilnius.

The Presidents called an important to promote a closer relationship between Georgia and NATO and reiterated their support to Georgia's aspirations for integration into Euro-Atlantic structures.

Valdas Adamkus and Lech Kaczynski visited Tbilisi on January 20 at the inauguration of President Mikheil Saakashvili.

#7

Moldova will not join NATO - Voronin Interfax Brief, February 1, 2008

Moldova does not plan to join NATO, though bilateral cooperation has been beneficial, Moldovan President Vladimir Voronin said.

"We simply cannot afford not to work with NATO, because Moldova is a neighbor of the EU. We are inevitably subjected to all NATO activities, because we are situated at the border. However, this does not mean that we are going to join this organization," Voronin said in an interview with the Chisinau Observer newspaper on Thursday.

Moldova's cooperation with NATO is beneficial and has allowed to dispose of 18,000 tonnes of pesticides, the president said.

Speaking about the Transdniestrian settlement, Voronin noted that Russia, in general, agrees with his proposed confidence-building initiatives between Chisinau and Tiraspol.

"Russia wants to be sure that Moldova will maintain its neutral status in the future," the Moldovan president said, adding that his country was also interested in long-term neutrality.

There are "no secret Transdniestrian settlement plans," Voronin said, adding that the main obstacles to the resolution of the conflict are the "chauvinists and unionists on both banks of the Dniester River."

#8

Abjuring Holocaust study in Russia JTA Brief, February 1, 2008

A leader in the Russian Orthodox Church said Russian students should not study the Holocaust.

Evgeny Nikiforov, chairman of the Radonezh Orthodox Society, said it's absurd that Russian students should learn tolerance by studying the murder of Jews during World War II rather than the Russian tragedies of the 20th century, according to the Interfax news agency.

"The history of Russian tragedy -- the Russian Holocaust -- has not been written down yet and it is absolutely absurd to study the history of Jewish, Hungarian, Cambodian or other people's tragedies while our own history has not been studied," he said.

Nikiforov added that he found it "strange that we Russians should learn tolerance from the Jewish nation's history," when "the richest Russian history, especially in the 20th century, gives a lot of positive and negative examples for tolerance study."

#9

From Russia with hate: Jew attacks get more violent Russia Today, February 2, 2008

Young people protested in front of the Ulyanovsk Jewish cultural centre, a Holocaust memorial was desecrated in Volgograd, and in Nizhny Novgorod three young men broke into a synagogue shouting nationalist slogans.

"The rise of ethnic nationalism endangers the very foundation of Russia, which is a multiethnic and multiconfessional country," Andrey Zolotov from Russia's Profile magazine says.

Perhaps the most shocking and widely discussed act occurred two years ago, when a young man freely entered the doors of a synagogue in Moscow's centre during an evening service. A few minutes later a bloody drama played out. Aleksander Koptsev stabbed nine Jews.

The 20-year-old Muscovite was charged with attempted murder and fomentation of racial hatred. The verdict was 13 years behind bars - an outcome which did not satisfy the Jewish community.

Statistics from the Federation of Jewish Communities in Russia show that the number of anti-Semitic acts actually declined slightly last year.

"Social situation and political situation in the country became much more stable. Stability in the country is the best weapon against xenophobia. So we hope as Russia becomes stronger xenophobia will become less," Borukh Gorin from the Federation of Jewish Communities says.

More than one per cent of Russian citizens are Jews.

#10

Bills on Cancellation of the Jackson-Vanik Trade Restrictions for Baku and Astana Passed to US Senate Ria Novosti Brief, January 31, 2008

On 29 January a cancellation of the Jackson-Vanik restrictive foreign trade bill for Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan was passed to the US Senate, the Secretariat of the House said.

These documents envisage the establishment of a normal foreign trade regime with these two countries. They were submitted in the form of draft laws enabling the US President to cancel the Jackson-Vanik bill for Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan, and apply a 'non-discriminated regime (normal trade relations regime) for goods from these countries.

The cancellation of this bill will be effective on the date to be determined by the President for the application of non-discriminated regime.

#11

Participants in anti-Semitic action arrested in Ulyanovsk Interfax, January 31, 2008

A dozen young men held an anti-Semitic action near the Jewish community center in Ulyanovsk, Andrey Glotzer, the press secretary of the Russian chief rabbi, told Interfax.

"The action took place on Tuesday afternoon. The young men painted swastikas on the center's walls, chanted anti-Semitic slogans and tossed around brochures of the Russian National Union," he said.

They broke into the center and continued chanting the slogans, he noted.

Officers of the local department on organized crime, who happened to pass by, detained four assailants. The others escaped. In the words of Glotzer, the detainees are 14 or 15 years old.

The case is being investigated. No one was hurt, and there was no property damage, Glotzer said.

#12

Seeking a Path in Democracy's Dead End By C. J. Chivers New York Times, February 3, 2008

Late in the afternoon of Jan. 24, an American military plane landed in Tashkent, the capital of Uzbekistan, carrying Adm. William J. Fallon, the commander of the United States Central Command.

Admiral Fallon, who oversees the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, had arrived for an introductory meeting with the Uzbek president, Islam Karimov, one of the post-Soviet world's durable strongmen.

Relations with the United States have been largely frozen since 2005, when Uzbekistan, bristling under American censure for a bloody crackdown against anti-government demonstrators, evicted the Pentagon from an air base that had been used to support the war in Afghanistan.

Admiral Fallon said he had no grand plan for Uzbekistan. He was not seeking restored access to the air base or even rights for military planes to fly through Uzbek airspace. His visit, he said by telephone, marked a renewal of dialogue and the possibility of a thaw.

It actually marked more than that. It was the latest signal of an undeclared shift in Washington's foreign policy across the stunted democracies and outright dictatorships that lie to Moscow's southeast, from the Caspian Sea to China's borders.

In the last three years in these former vassals of the Kremlin, the exuberant vision of nurturing pluralistic societies and governments responsive to popular will — enunciated by President Bush's public calls for democratization — has met so many obstacles that it has been quietly recalibrated. Throughout the region, journalists and opposition figures have been harassed, threatened, beaten, imprisoned and sometimes killed. American policy has accepted less ambitious goals.

Democracy promotion is not gone. But it has taken its place in a wider portfolio of interests. These include access to oil and gas, improving trade and transportation infrastructure and expanding military, counter-narcotic and counter-terror cooperation — all informed by a sense that in the competition with Russia and China for regional influence, the United States has lost ground.

If the shift seemed abrupt, it was not. The erosion of the ambitious vision began almost as soon as it was declared.

Three years ago, street demonstrations had forced exhausted governments from power in Georgia and Ukraine, and the new governments were vowing to embrace the West. Opposition parties in the Caucasus and Central Asia thought they saw signs that civil liberties and government by citizens' consent might be universal and inevitable.

In February 2005, Mr. Bush spoke as if one of his principal aims was to rescue repressed populations, in part through suffrage, and help them choose their own course. "The ultimate goal," Mr. Bush said, was "ending tyranny in our world."

Weeks later, demonstrators in Kyrgyzstan chased President Askar Akayev over the border, the aftermath of yet another rigged election. There seemed to be momentum to the "color revolutions," as they came to be called after the roses carried by defiant Georgians and the orange banners of the Ukrainian revolution. Popular discontent, reminiscent of the grassroots energy that finally toppled the Soviet Union 15 years before, seemed on the rise. This was to be a second wave.

Except that it was already over. Though no one knew it at the time, Mr. Akayev's departure from the presidential suite ahead of the mob (one British correspondent wandered through the suite in the minutes after, and found Kyrgyz citizens trying on Mr. Akayev's wool suits) was the closing bell on a revolutionary phenomenon that had only just found its name.

Two months after Mr. Akayev fled, in May 2005, a prison break by inmates who said they had been falsely tried by Uzbek authorities triggered an anti-government demonstration in the Uzbek city of Andijon. "Freedom!" the crowd chanted, as the authorities set a cordon around them.

Uzbek soldiers struck back before nightfall, dispersing the demonstrators with machine-gun fire. At least several hundred unarmed people were killed, survivors said, including wounded civilians who were executed in the street.

The West condemned the violence. But isolation weakened Mr. Karimov only to a degree. He blocked independent investigation of his government's conduct and evicted the United States military. He also tightened relations with China and the Kremlin, his former patron. Both implicitly endorsed his decision to turn guns on the crowds.

Democratization in the region had stalled. The counterrevolution had taken the field. Signs that the strongmen have won the ensuing contest have accumulated since, in events large and small.

Weeks after the revolution in Kyrgyzstan, Makhmadrouzi Iskandarov, an opposition party leader in neighboring Tajikistan who said he planned to run for president, was arrested, apparently with secret Russian help. By October 2005, he had been convicted of terrorism and other charges in a trial that Western officials labeled unfair, and sentenced to 23 years in jail.

In oil-rich Azerbaijan, the government of President Ilham H. Aliyev, who independent observers and Western governments say has never presided over a clean election, falsified the parliamentary contest in November 2005. He used riot police with clubs and water cannons to disperse protesters.

The region's government-controlled television stations broadcast extensive footage of the violence. The message to viewers seemed unmistakable: We run the elections. You have been warned.

The State Department briefly scolded Mr. Aliyev. But in 2006, when the White House invited Mr. Aliyev to meet President Bush, the signals from Washington became mixed.

In oil-rich Kazakhstan, the pattern has been similar. President Nursultan A. Nazarbayev, who runs the country like a family business-and-television empire and has been enveloped for years with allegations of corruption, won 91 percent of the vote in a December 2005 election that independent observers said was flawed.

Before the election, a human rights worker who published allegations of presidential corruption on a Web site was mugged. The attackers tore open his clothes and used a blade to carve a large X — the mark of the censor — on his chest. The government also confiscated newspapers that published articles on presidential corruption.

The State Department urged Mr. Nazarbayev to respect press freedoms. But, like the message to Azerbaijan, that message became mixed when the American ambassador to the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe appeared to dismiss the crackdown's significance, when she addressed a Kazakh official during a speech.

"When I was in Kazakhstan a couple of weeks ago I had the interesting pleasure of reading some of this [sic] newspapers that have been seized," the ambassador, Julie Finley, said to a session of the organization's council in Vienna in November 2005, according to the transcript. "Maybe you saved some readers some waste of time, anyway."

(The transcript was removed from the American mission's Web site but not before being saved by Western diplomats who circulated it independently. Ambassador Finley, a political appointee, declined to comment; a colleague said she has often spoken out for media freedom in Kazakhstan, and that this quote was an ad lib from her prepared text and did not reflect her true feelings.)

Two months after Mr. Nazarbayev's victory, one of the opposition leaders who had challenged him, Altynbek Sarsenbaliuly, was murdered by members of the K.N.B., a Kazakh successor to the K.G.B. And last year, Mr. Nazarbayev ushered in changes to the Kazakh Constitution that cleared a path for him to be president for life.

Mr. Nazarbayev was not alone in changing the rules to ensure power. Constitutional rules had been set aside and an election rigged in Turkmenistan, a dictatorship flush with natural gas profits, to allow Gurbunguly Berdymukhammedov, a palace insider, to succeed another president for life, Sapurmurat Niyazov, who died in December 2006.

Turkmenistan has some of the world's strangest decrees, many supporting a personality cult built around Mr. Niyazov. The new president has dismantled elements of the cult and reversed some destructive policies. But the country remains a police state, and there is uncertainty about the new president's motives: Is he trying to revive Turkmenistan, or cement power for himself?

In Kyrgyzstan, where officials promised representative government after the revolution in 2005, President Kurmanbek Bakiyev and his government have consolidated power and thwarted the opposition. An election last fall left Parliament without any likely source of a dissenting vote.

Russia, which gives the strongmen political cover and support, has followed a similar arc. Last December, its parliament also became a legislature without opposition when elections seated only parties loyal to President Vladimir V. Putin. And last week, Russia's government denied registration to the only true opposition candidate in the March 2 presidential election.

The election is being scripted to ensure the victory of Dmitri A. Medvedev, a first deputy prime minister who is Mr. Putin's chosen successor.

This was the political climate to which Admiral Fallon returned. He arrived in Uzbekistan a month after President Karimov engineered an election that gave him a third term, even though Uzbek law, on paper, limits presidents to two terms.

The admiral said he had made clear to Mr. Karimov and Uzbek officials that human rights and political plurality were problems in Uzbekistan's relationship with America, but that he hoped relations could improve

in areas where the countries might agree and their interests might align. "I told them that we couldn't do much about the past, but that we could look at the future," he said.

Whatever the future holds, the opposition movements have been routed and the revolutions are over. In a region that three years ago thought it heard freedom's call, the strongmen look secure.

#13

Ever More Russians Eager to Keep Tabs On One's Neighbor

Itar-Tass, February 1, 2008

It is widely believed that another terrible manifestation of Stalinist rule, alongside massive reprisals and purges, was the encouragement of the institution of informants on the national scale. According to a former colonel of the federal security service FSB, who spent a number of years exonerating those who fell innocent victims to Stalinist repression in a big region of Russia in the 1930s, it was not the scale of purges that surprised him the most (the lists of victims in reality proved far shorter than the mass media had claimed), but the wholesale nature of narking. Quite often, in connection with same case, there surfaced dozens of reports by voluntary self-styled informers, including those against each other, and also collective messages against third persons.

After the collapse of Stalinism the informers were castigated by the public at large, but the phenomenon as such did not disappear altogether. Of late, it began to be encouraged again.

The hot lines the law enforcement and secret services opened in all big cities triggered a landslide of messages. The law enforcers were happy - tips from informers helped them solve hundreds of crimes. But, on the other hand, the very same resource has been used ever more frequently for slander. People have been settling old scores with wealthier, more successful neighbors or colleagues.

True, nobody these days is shot or sent to a labor camp on the basis of just one unconfirmed, perhaps slanderous, report, but problems for the victim can be many.

According to available statistics, only several percent of all alarm calls and messages to the FSB's hot line telephone numbers are confirmed. Everything else is disinformation. However, when all details have been cleared up, it may be too late. Reputations get spoiled, careers ruined, and lives messed up.

Secret services say the number of Russians eager to provide 'on-line information' about crimes or minor offences has grown steadily for the past few years, says the daily *Noviye Izvestia*. People complain against counterfeiters, drugs traffickers and abusers of traffic rules. The list can be prolonged indefinitely.

Confirmed statistics are not available, but analysts are certain that narking has doubled, even tripled over the past five years. The reason for growing "consciousness" is simple. In many regions of Russia it has become standard practice to pay for tips, which in the official documents are referred to as 'on-line information'.

In the Novgorod Region vigilant people helped initiate 49 criminal cases. For assistance in tracking down and arresting a criminal each individual is paid a cash bonus of three thousand rubles (a little over 100 dollars).

In the Arkhangelsk Region no fixed tariffs for timely tips have been established. For reporting about noticed violations of the law local residents may hope to get about 500 rubles, and for information about a serial killer, up to 10,000. In Krasnoyarsk, the reward is a mere 2,500 rubles.

In the Irkutsk Region, after last year's massive poisonings with substandard alcohol governor Alexander Tishanin established a prize fund of 700,000 rubles especially for those who will be coming to the police to complain about the retail outlets selling bootleg alcohol and narcotics.

In the Tyumen Region, people are invited to inform the authorities about speed limit abusers. The most diligent informers, who state the time and place of abuse and also the vehicle's make and license plate number, are awarded souvenirs.

However, in most regions the authorities appeal to people's conscience.

In Ulyanovsk, the local authorities launched an extensive PR campaign over an e-mail address to which everybody is invited to send complaints about corrupt civil servants. As a result some 100 messages on the average pour in every day.

In Moscow and St. Petersburg practically all urban agencies have been urging people to feel free to complain. Military commissariats and military prosecutors' offices activate the hot lines in the spring and in the autumn. In this way they hunt for draft dodgers and deserters.

These days the web site of practically every department carries the hot line telephone number. In Moscow, calls to the departments of health, transport and housing and utilities sector are most frequent - over a thousand messages every single day.

The health service authorities invite patients to send in complaints about bribe-taking and rude medical personnel. The committees for education and science urge struggle against bribes, too. The tax service and the court bailiffs service urge one and all to "let them know" about people who conceal taxes or refuse to pay child support, but at the same time buy luxurious cars and apartments. Those who lease housing illegally are on the black list, too.

In the Kuban River area the authorities have gone still farther. School students in Krasnodar are advised to look for illegal self-styled buildings and dumps and promptly warn the authorities.

The daily Novyie Izvestia says the frequent calls for warning the authorities of any abuse of law and order have been made over the past few years for a solid reason.

Experts say Russian society these days is an ideal environment for narking.

"Our society is in a transitional state, and the frequency of complaints is very illustrative of this," the daily quotes Yevgeny Gontmakher, the science doyen of the Economics Institute at the Russian Academy of Sciences as saying. "Quite often people complain about a neighbor who has leased an apartment without notifying the tax authorities not because there is a crowd of 20 guest workers or a noisy student community crammed into one room. People hate to see the neighbor have an extra source of income. And this will be so, until the incentives to sneaking have disappeared, until there has emerged a full-fledged middle class accounting at least for 50 percent of the population, and not for 20 percent, as today."

Psychologists say there is a special group of people with the narking habit.

"There is a certain class of people who are certain that everything good in this life is entirely their own achievement and blame all the bad things on somebody else," says psychologist Anna Kartashova. "Very often it is elderly men, who have suddenly realized they have failed to achieve very much in life. As for young people, informers among them are very few. After all, the younger generation grew up, when the attitude to sneaks was strongly negative. Moreover, they feel no need for sneaking. A whole life is ahead."

"Russians use the hot lines not because they want to change something in their lives, but to pour hearts out," the NEWSru.com web site quotes psychologist Olga Mezhenina as saying. "Psychologically such services are very important. A person who has found an attentive listener and probably someone ready to try to tackle his or her problem receives tremendous emotional satisfaction."

The contingent of habitual complainers is very specific - housewives and retirees. Their motives are different, though. Many housewives cannot think of another way of how to use spare time, while senior citizens are lonely and have nobody to talk to, so they jump at every opportunity.

#14

ODIHR Representatives Issued RF Visas For Trip To Moscow - Budden Itar-Tass, February 2, 2008

The Office seeks to send six technical employees to Russia just next week. Twenty observers are expected to arrive in Russia on February 8 and the main group of 44 observers could come to Moscow on February 15. Thus, the total number of observers would reach 70 people.

Last Monday, the CEC chief signed invitations to international observers to the upcoming presidential election, due on March 2. The CEC offered to sign a mission of 70 people. Churov also informed that the commission was expecting the arrival of forward groups of major observer missions by mid-February.

"We expect the bulk of observers to arrive on February 27-28," he confirmed.

For his part, Christian Strohal officially asked the CEC to prolong the duration of the observer mission. ODIHR would like to send its group of logistics and security experts as early as in the beginning of next week, he said.

ODIHR also asked for completing accreditation within the period it requests, not within the dates offered in the CEC invitation. The ODIHR request did not specify the number of experts to be sent to Russia early next week.

Last Friday, the Foreign Ministry said Russia hoped that common sense would prevail in the ODIHR and a positive decision would be made in favour of delegating observers to the Russian presidential election, said the director of the Foreign Ministry's European Cooperation Department, Sergei Ryabkov.

At the same time he made it quite clear Russia would not tolerate any attempts to politicise the monitoring of elections.

"We comply with our liabilities to the letter, but we cannot afford to do more than we are expected to, and we shall not do so."

"Why should Russia invite tens of times more observers than all other countries again and again?" Ryabkov said. "And this happens at a time when some OSCE member-states have to be pressed for sending requests to the ODIHR to delegate observers. In this sense Russia has been acting in a very transparent way," the diplomat said.

"This approach is known to our partners, and the fact it is called in question is a sign of the intention to politicise the situation, create more problems having nothing to do with the declared intention to look into whether elections match the recognized standards. This is political gambling, we reject it and we have no intention of being involved in it. The ODIHR is free to chose whether to participate in the process of constructive and understandable movement towards unified electoral monitoring parameters, or to go ahead with its political gambling that is unacceptable to us."

In the meantime, ODIHR offered more explanations of its position. Its official said the ODIHR had nothing against the limitation of the number of observers, but would like them to be allowed to go to Russia in the middle of February, Curtis Budden told Itar-Tass.

He also specified some proposals contained in Strohal's message to the chief of the Russian Central Electoral Commission. The ODIHR would like to send the first group of about six technical staff at the beginning of next week, and the first group of some 20 observers, on February 8. In that case the main

group of observers of 44 members might go to Russia on February 15. The overall strength of ODIHR personnel would not exceed 70, Budden said. He dismissed reproaches the ODIHR was politicising the affair, adding that it was in no way interested in the outcome of elections, or who would emerge the winner or who would lose.

Whether ODIHR observers will be present at the elections of Russia's new president will be clear before long, when the Office's Director, Christian Strohal, makes up his mind whether to accept the invitation to visit Moscow or to reject it. In any case his decision will have far-reaching consequences, for it will determine the outlook of ODIHR-Russia relationship in the long term.

#15

Abkhazia: Prospects For Peace Plummet

By Liz Fuller

RFE/RL, February 1, 2008

In his latest half-yearly report to the UN Security Council on the situation in Abkhazia, which was released on January 23, UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon noted with regret that efforts to mediate a political settlement of the conflict are "at a standstill," and that "reliable observers on both sides of the cease-fire line have commented that the relationship between the two sides was in 2007 at its lowest point since the large-scale violence of 1998."

The tensions that persisted throughout 2007 are in part the logical continuation of the deterioration registered the previous year as a result of the deployment of Georgian special forces in July 2006 to the Kodori Gorge to quash an apparent insurrection masterminded by renegade local official Emzar Kvitsiani. Since then, the Abkhaz authorities have repeatedly said that a resumption of peace talks is contingent on the withdrawal of those Georgian forces, even though the UN has concluded that their presence does not, as the Abkhaz claim, violate a UN-mediated cease-fire agreement signed in 1994. And a series of disquieting incidents in which Russia was perceived to have played spoiler -- including the firing in March by unidentified aircraft of rockets at a Georgian-populated village in the Kodori Gorge, and a standoff in western Georgia in late October between Russian peacekeepers and Georgian forces that was defused only with the advent of Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili -- only contributed to a hardening of the Georgian position.

The timing of that latter incident was all the more infelicitous in that it occurred less than a week after then-Georgian Minister for Conflict Resolution David Bakradze traveled to Sukhum for talks with Abkhaz Foreign Minister Sergei Shamba. The talks lasted far longer than scheduled, and Bakradze was quoted as saying they might have paved the way for a resumption of dialogue. Similarly, in June 2006, President Saakashvili's envoy for Abkhazia, Irakli Alasania, who enjoyed a good working relationship with Shamba, was named Georgia's envoy to the UN less than a month after the resumption of talks with Abkhaz officials after a four-year hiatus.

At those talks in Tbilisi, Shamba and Alasania discussed the possibility of the two sides signing a formal agreement on the nonresumption of hostilities, a move that Tbilisi now categorically rules out. Speaking at RFE/RL's headquarters in Prague in June 2007, then-Prime Minister Zurab Noghaideli said that Georgia would sign such a pact only as part of a broader set of agreements that would permit Georgian displaced persons to return to Abkhazia and provide guarantees of their security. Moreover, in the wake of the October standoff, Georgian officials are now demanding first, that the Russian peacekeeping force deployed in the conflict zone under the CIS aegis since July 1994 be replaced by an international force under the UN aegis, and second, that the UN undertake an in-depth evaluation of the effectiveness of the ongoing mediation process in which Russia plays a key role.

Ban identified a number of interrelated trends as contributing to the perceived further deterioration over the past six months in relations between Tbilisi and Sukhum(i), including a consistent pattern of "disinformation and misrepresentation" by the media that only serves to reinforce the existing "image of the enemy." Ban acknowledged that "a measure of disinformation is understandable and unavoidable in an environment

where real apprehensions exist, tensions abound, and means of independent verification are scarce. But such disconnect as illustrated in the present report, between, on the one hand, realities on the ground and, on the other hand, media or official statements, is a matter of concern."

Elsewhere in his report, Ban similarly referred to "a large number of allegations concerning military deployment on both sides of the cease-fire line and incidents involving the Abkhaz militia or the CIS peacekeeping force." He noted that the UN Observer Mission in Georgia followed up on those allegations and found most of them to be "baseless or exaggerated," and he recalled his December 12 appeal to "all parties concerned" to demonstrate restraint and refrain from "acts of provocation," including militant rhetoric.

Ban cited as a further negative influence the political crackdown by the Georgian authorities in early November 2007 and the subsequent preterm presidential election held on January 5, to which the Abkhaz authorities responded with enhanced security measures along the cease-fire line. He also noted continued uncertainty over the future of Kosovo, insofar as the Georgian authorities fear Russia could respond to international recognition of a declaration of independence by the Kosovo leadership by similarly recognizing Abkhazia and other breakaway unrecognized republics as independent states.

In an apparent bid to dispel such fears, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov stressed at a press conference in Moscow on January 23 that "the Russian leadership has never affirmed that as soon as Kosovo [is recognized as an independent state] we shall immediately recognize Abkhazia and South Ossetia. I stress that the Russian leadership has never said this." Lavrov continued: "I have the impression that the idea has become firmly rooted in many peoples' minds that Russia is taking such a firm stance on Kosovo, warns that it will set a precedent, but at the same time is secretly waiting for this to happen in order to begin recognizing all [the unrecognized states] on its borders. Nothing could be more wrong with regard to the Russian position. We understand perfectly the destabilizing effect of any separatist tendencies. It was not so long ago that we experienced this threat acutely ourselves, and for that reason you can suspect us of anything at all, but not of [encouraging separatism]. It is in our interests to preserve stability, not to permit separatism, not to permit any violations of international law. That will remain our position."

Ban concluded his report to the Security Council by referring to both the Georgian demands for a revision of the peacekeeping and negotiation formats, and to Abkhaz objections to any fundamental change. He proposed a "reassessment of the peace process," while at the same time making clear that Russia, which Georgia hopes to sideline if not exclude, will, in its capacity as a member of the "Group of Friends of the Secretary General" group of countries, participate in that reassessment.

#16

Freedom in the Former Soviet Union Deteriorated in 2007

Freedom House Press Release, January 23, 2008

Freedom in the former Soviet Union declined in 2007, Freedom House reported in a worldwide survey of freedom released recently.

According to the report, Freedom in the World 2008, many of the formerly communist countries of the Soviet Union registered declines in 2007. Russia, Azerbaijan, and Kazakhstan—all countries with entrenched authoritarian leaderships and growing energy wealth—took steps backwards in 2007, as did former democratic aspirants Georgia and Kyrgyzstan.

Survey results reflect global events during 2007. A package of charts and graphs and an explanatory essay are available online.

"Developments in the former Soviet Union in 2007 are extremely disturbing," said Arch Puddington, director of research at Freedom House. "Countries that had formerly been viewed as reformers moved backwards, oil-rich autocracies continued to consolidate their power, and entrenched dictatorships failed to make any progress at all. It doesn't get much worse than that."

Both Georgia and Kyrgyzstan, countries that had made important strides toward democracy, suffered a substantial reversals in 2007. Georgia saw both its political rights and civil liberties ratings decline due to the imposition of a state of emergency in November, restrictions on press freedom, and a systematic campaign to marginalize the political opposition. Kyrgyzstan registered a decline in political rights after independent monitoring organizations pointed to serious flaws in the 2007 parliamentary elections.

In Ukraine, which continued to cling to the region's only Free rating, the score remained unchanged, although many who had hoped for a blossoming of democratic reform following the Orange Revolution remained decidedly disappointed by the country's ongoing political stalemates.

Russia, Azerbaijan, and Kazakhstan, all countries with entrenched authoritarian leaderships and growing energy wealth, registered declines in 2007. In particular, the report condemned Russia for unfree elections held in December, as well as the government's autocratic influence on its neighbors.

Three of the region's most repressive regimes—Belarus, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan—showed only downward movement in 2007. In Uzbekistan, Karimov was reelected for a third term with well over 90 percent of the vote, in blatant violation of a constitutional two-term limit.

Declines in freedom worldwide were reported by Freedom in the World 2008. Reversals were seen in one-fifth of the world's countries, particularly those in South Asia and the Middle East, as well as the former Soviet Union. A substantial number of politically important countries whose declines have broad regional and global implications—including Egypt, Pakistan, Kenya, Nigeria, and Venezuela—were affected.

Freedom House, an independent nongovernmental organization that supports the expansion of freedom around the world, has monitored political rights and civil liberties worldwide since 1972.

#17

Ukraine Joins the W.T.O.

By Andrew E. Kramer

New York Times, February 5, 2008

Ukraine joined the World Trade Organization on Tuesday after 14 years of negotiations, a milestone for the former Soviet state that helps clear the way for a valuable free trade agreement with the European Union.

Officials in Kiev suggested the membership was a coming of age, of sorts, of trade relations in the former Soviet Union. The deal is also expected to lift living standards and bring investment in one of Europe's poorest countries.

Ukraine, with a population of 46.3 million and an estimated gross domestic product of \$90 billion in 2007, became the largest former Soviet state to join the free trade group to date; Russia is also negotiating for membership.

"We have difficult homework to do," President Viktor A. Yushchenko of Ukraine said at a news conference in Geneva, where the W.T.O. is based, according to Bloomberg News "This starts the colossal integration work that lies ahead."

He said membership means "better living standards, higher wages, improved social standards and economic life."

Trade among the former Soviet states has been a realm of chaos, marred by politics, frauds and strange barter, like a swap in the mid-1990s when Ukraine paid for natural gas with rubber boots instead of cash, as countries strove to restore the trade links severed by the breakup of the Soviet system.

The final hurdle for Ukraine to join the W.T.O. was an agreement to lower existing export tariffs on cattle, animal skins and ferrous metals, and not to raise them in the foreseeable future.

The deal paves the way for talks on creating a free trade zone with the European Union, about three years after Mr. Yushchenko came to power in the street protests known as the “Orange Revolution” with a pledge to integrate Ukraine more closely with the West.

While it has declined to open membership talks, a goal of Mr. Yushchenko, the European Union had kept the door open for discussions on a free trade pact — if Ukraine became a member of the W.T.O. first.

For the time being, the W.T.O. membership should give Ukraine some leverage in settling disputes with Russia over steel, milk products and sugar. Russia is working to join the W.T.O., but because Ukraine is already in, it has veto on Russian membership under the trade organizations’s rules.

Georgia, for example, has threatened to use its veto on Russian membership unless Moscow lifts its ban on imports of Georgian wine, ostensibly for health reasons but in fact owing to a souring of political relations between the countries. Russia also bans imports of Georgian mineral water and citrus fruits.

Ukraine, however, will take a different tactic, Irina Gerashchenko, a member of Parliament from Mr. Yushchenko’s Our Ukraine party, said in a telephone interview.

Mr. Yushchenko’s support of Russia’s membership, Ms. Gerashchenko said, was aimed at ushering Russia into the group as quickly as possible so that Ukraine can avail itself of the W.T.O.’s dispute resolution mechanisms to resolve the conflicts over milk, steel and sugar.

At the signing ceremony in Geneva, Mr. Yushchenko said specifically that he would support Russia’s membership.

For Ukraine, he said, membership in the W.T.O. would raise Ukraine’s gross domestic product and bring in additional billions in foreign investment.

To take effect, the agreement must be ratified by the Ukrainian Parliament, or Rada, by July 4,. All major Ukrainian political parties except the Communist Party support membership, but that may not guarantee an easy ride through the chamber.

Earlier Tuesday, Mr. Yushchenko was forced to cancel his state of the union speech in Parliament because opposition lawmakers physically occupied the rostrum where Mr. Yushchenko would have stood; others hung posters on the walls protesting the president’s support for joining another Western group, NATO. The speaker removed the state of the union speech from the day’s agenda, and the presidential press service said it would be rescheduled. Mr. Yushchenko then flew directly to Geneva to sign the trade pact deal without delivering the speech.

#18

New Europe, Old Russia

By Robert Kagan

Washington Post, February 6, 2008

Russia and the European Union are neighbors geographically. But geopolitically they live in different centuries. A 21st-century European Union, with its noble ambition to transcend power politics and build an order based on laws and institutions, confronts a Russia that behaves like a traditional 19th-century power. Both are shaped by their histories. The supranational, legalistic E.U. spirit is a response to the conflicts of the 20th century, when nationalism and power politics twice destroyed the continent. But Vladimir Putin’s Russia, as Ivan Krastev has noted, is driven in part by the perceived failure of “post-national politics” after the Soviet collapse. Europe’s nightmares are the 1930s; Russia’s nightmares are the 1990s. Europe sees the answer to its problems in transcending the nation-state and power. For Russians, the solution is in restoring them.

So what happens when a 21st-century entity faces the challenge of a 19th-century power? The contours of the conflict are already emerging -- in diplomatic stand-offs over Kosovo, Ukraine, Georgia and Estonia; in conflicts over gas and oil pipelines; in nasty diplomatic exchanges between Russia and Britain; and in a return to Russian military exercises of a kind not seen since the Cold War.

Europeans are apprehensive, with good reason. They bet, massively, in the 1990s on the primacy of geoeconomics over geopolitics, a new era in which a huge and productive European economy would compete as an equal with the United States and China. They cut back on defense budgets, calculating that soft power was in and that hard power was out. They imagined that the world would come to replicate the European Union, and that when it did, the European Union would be a postmodern superpower.

For a while, it seemed to work. With Russia prostrate, the magnetic attraction of Europe, along with the promise of the American security guarantee, pulled just about every nation in the east into the Western orbit. The appeal of what Robert Cooper called Europe's "voluntary empire" seemed without limit.

Today, however, European expansion has slowed and perhaps halted, and not just because Europeans balk at taking in Turkey. They also fear resurgent Russia. They realize that by enlarging eastward, Europe acquired a new Eastern problem. Or, rather, the old Eastern problem, the centuries-old contest between Russia and its near neighbors.

It wasn't a problem when Russia was weak and poor and eager to integrate itself into the West. But Russia is back on its feet, rich and resentful, seeking not to join Europe but to take a special path back to great-power status. Putin laments the fall of the Soviet Union and seeks to regain predominant influence in the Baltic states and Eastern Europe, as well as over Ukraine, Georgia, Moldova and the rest of what Russians call their "near abroad." But the former are now formally part of Europe, and the latter are what Europeans call their "new neighborhood."

And so the nations of the European Union find themselves embroiled in a very 19th-century confrontation. After a decade of voluntary retreat, Russia now pushes back against Europe's powerful attractive force, using traditional levers of power. It has imposed a total embargo on trade with Georgia. It has episodically denied oil supplies to Lithuania, Latvia and Belarus; cut off gas supplies to Ukraine and Moldova; and punished Estonia with a suspension of rail traffic and a cyber-attack on its government's computer system in a dispute over a Soviet war memorial. It supports separatist movements in Georgia and keeps its own armed forces on Georgian territory and in Moldova. It has effectively pulled out of the Conventional Forces in Europe Treaty, freeing it to deploy forces wherever necessary on its western flank.

Polls show Europeans increasingly take a dim view of their large neighbor. French President Nicolas Sarkozy observed last year that "Russia is imposing its return on the world scene by playing its assets, notably oil and gas, with a certain brutality." Even the Finnish defense minister worries that "military force" has once again become a "key element" in how Russia "conducts its international relations."

But Europe may be institutionally and temperamentally ill-equipped to respond. Can it bring a knife to a knife fight?

It is not hard to imagine the tremors along the Euro-Russian fault line erupting into confrontation. A crisis over Ukraine, which wants to join NATO, could bring confrontation with Russia. Conflict between the Georgian government and Russian-supported separatist forces in Abkhazia and South Ossetia could spark a military conflict between Tbilisi and Moscow. What would Europe and the United States do if Russia played hardball in Ukraine or Georgia? They might well do nothing. Postmodern Europe can scarcely bring itself to contemplate a return to confrontation with a great power and will go to great lengths to avoid it. In the United States, any fundamental shift in policy toward Russia will have to wait for the next administration. Nevertheless, a Russian confrontation with Ukraine or Georgia would usher in a brand-new world, or perhaps a very old world. Many in the West still want to believe this is the era of geoeconomics. But as one Swedish analyst has noted, "We're in a new era of geopolitics. You can't pretend otherwise."

#19

Chechen Warns of Islamic Extremism

Appeal of Militant Ideology Is Spreading in North Caucasus, Rights Activist Says

By Nora Boustany

Washington Post, February 6, 2008

A Chechen human rights researcher is warning that militant Islamic ideology is gaining currency in the Russian separatist region of Chechnya and broadening its appeal elsewhere in the tense North Caucasus.

Ousam Baysaev, 43, an author and former journalist who has made a career of chronicling human rights abuses in Chechnya and surrounding republics, presented his conclusions in a lecture in Washington last month at the National Endowment for Democracy. Such findings are likely to cause new anxiety among U.S. and European policymakers already concerned by the unrest in a region strategically important to the United States because of its proximity to Iran, Turkey and Afghanistan.

Russia has fought two post-Soviet wars against separatist rebels in Chechnya, including one in 1999 that helped propel Russian President Vladimir Putin to power. While fighting declined in Chechnya a few years ago after the Russian military established a Kremlin-supported government there, turmoil and strife in the wider North Caucasus have spread.

In recent weeks, there have been protests in the neighboring, mostly Muslim republic of Ingushetia in response to a government crackdown on political opposition.

The demonstrators have risen up against official corruption and the republic's president, Murad Zyazikov, a close ally of Putin. On Monday, Putin visited a military unit stationed in the hills of Dagestan, another restive republic on Chechnya's eastern border.

"In those republics, there are metastasizing rebel movements," said Miriam Lanskoj, a senior program officer for Central Asia and the Caucasus at the National Endowment for Democracy, who moderated Baysaev's talk. "They come to Chechnya, fight for a week or two, and go home having more credibility and status."

Lanskoj, who is completing a book on the Caucasus, said Chechen rebels who subscribed to the strict Wahhabi strain of Islam fought secular nationalists in 1998 for control of the separatist movement. The battles, she said, tilted in favor of the secular wing of the movement.

That changed, she said, when the secular rebel leaders tried to flee Grozny, the Chechen capital, ahead of a Russian assault in 2000. Many were exiled or killed, including a dozen top rebel commanders who died in a minefield.

In his lecture, Baysaev showed a slide of a wall to illustrate the shift from secular to Islamic influence within the separatist movement. One slogan that had been sprayed on the wall graffiti-style read: "Freedom or Death." Beneath it was a more recent one declaring: "Chechnya is the Province of Allah."

"They perceive themselves as having no outlet," Baysaev said of the rebels, adding that they would probably "take the fight to a broader area" that would include Ingushetia, Dagestan and other nearby republics.

A former correspondent for Radio Free Europe, Baysaev has documented human rights abuses in Chechnya since 1999, when the second phase of the war began. He is a founding member of Memorial, a nonprofit organization devoted to monitoring atrocities, war crimes and other human rights violations.

Baysaev first became involved in human rights work in 1995, when Human Rights Watch came to his village of Zamashke during the first Chechen war. The following year, Russian soldiers arrived, searching for

rebels, and ordered residents out of their homes. He said the soldiers then opened fire, wounding his entire family and others in the village.

In recent years, Baysaev and a small staff in Grozny and Ingushetia have been putting together "A Chronicle of Violence," a record of abuses during the most recent Chechen war.

"Chechnya became the greatest humanitarian disaster and one of the greatest cases of human rights violations in Europe," he said.

Baysaev became known outside the Caucasus when he spoke at a conference in Stockholm in the fall of 2006 and caught the attention of Anna Politkovskaya, a prominent Russian journalist. She was, he said, particularly interested in his claim that Russian security services were working with Chechen criminal rings against the rebels.

"I gave names of concrete killers who are now in power in Chechnya," Baysaev said. Politkovskaya pleaded with a reluctant Baysaev to allow her to print his findings in her publication under a different name, which she did. Two days later, on Oct. 7, 2006, Politkovskaya was shot and killed in her apartment building in Moscow. Baysaev is uncertain whether the publication of his material led to her murder.

"She feared absolutely nothing," he said. "She had one great quality. When she wrote about someone, she did not forget him or her. So even when people felt disillusioned, people were willing to talk to her."

Baysaev said it is now up to the Chechens to make sure they are not forgotten.

"Our own history has to be written by us," he said.

#20

Putin's Jewish Anomaly Comes as a Surprise

By Vladimir Shlapentokh

The Moscow Times, February 6, 2008

Josef Stalin and President Vladimir Putin epitomize the type of leader who is ready to sacrifice the country's interests to maintain his power. Of course, Stalin and Putin used ideologies extensively for propagandistic purposes and for the legitimization of their personal power. But given the fact that they were concerned only about personal power, these two leaders were extremely flexible and open to the idea of changing the country's ideological course in any direction.

Though Putin respects Stalin as a great leader, he has condemned Stalinist repression. For example, many took note of Putin's October visit to Butovo, in the south of Moscow, where more than 20,000 people were killed during the peak years of Stalin's terror in 1937 and 1938.

Another area where Putin differs from Stalin is his policy toward Jews.

If Putin were a dogmatic leader, he would have included anti-Semitism in his public ideology. Anti-Semitism was introduced as official Soviet state ideology during Stalin's reign in the late 1930s. Jews were barred from high positions in virtually all spheres. In the media, literature and films, they were almost never shown in a positive light.

The open propaganda against Jews ran counter to Lenin's heritage and internationalism. For this reason, the Soviet authorities replaced the term "Jews" with "Zionists." Since Zionism was a "legitimate" enemy of socialism, it was easy to carry out an anti-Semitic campaign under the guise of the fight against this movement. Soviet propaganda tended to describe Zionism as a greater evil than the United States, suggesting that U.S. imperialism was merely a tool used by the Jews to conquer the world. The anti-Zionist campaign continued until the last days of the Soviet Union.

Traditional anti-Semitism, honed by Stalin over many years, was seen by his successors as a fundamental element of the Russian psyche. In Nikita Khrushchev's four-volume memoir, "Time, People, Power," he wrote a lot about Stalin's anti-Semitism. He did not, however, risk even indirectly mentioning Stalin's anti-Semitic policy in his public reports to the Party congresses in 1956 and 1961, when he harshly denounced his former boss.

The same was true about Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev. From the beginning of glasnost to the end of his rule, he was almost never critical of his predecessors' state policy toward Jews. Gorbachev continued to keep his distance from any involvement in the "Jewish question" and did not appoint Jews to any significant position in his administration, continuing the old Party tradition.

When Putin came to power and declared his affinity for certain elements of the Soviet empire and traditions, it was only natural to expect a gradual restoration of state anti-Semitism. During the Soviet period, there was a strong link between anti-Americanism and anti-Semitism, and Putin started his harsh anti-U.S. campaign in earnest in 2005. Furthermore, Putin's professional background strengthened the pessimistic expectations about the revival of a state anti-Semitic policy; since the late 1930s, the KGB was indeed a bastion of anti-Semitism.

But, contrary to what many expected, Putin has been very supportive of Jewish issues and concerns. Hence, his so-called Jewish anomaly. Taking into account all of Putin's publications, meetings and speeches since 2000, he has said more positive words about Jews than all the Russian leaders before him except Lenin. In his memoir, Putin did something that no other Russian or Soviet leader had done. With a high degree of warmth, he described a Jewish family that shared a communal apartment with his family in Leningrad. He talked about his Jewish wrestling coach, Anatoly Rakhlin, as a person who "probably played a crucial role in my life." In a meeting with Russia's chief rabbi in June 2007, he promised to donate a month's salary for the construction of a Jewish museum of tolerance. Speaking in Krakow on Jan. 27, 2005, in connection with the 60th anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz, Putin urged other nations to consider the lessons learned from the Holocaust and warned against anti-Semitism, racism and xenophobia worldwide.

What's more, he also acknowledged the existence of anti-Semitism in Russia -- a statement that none of the Soviet leaders after Lenin dared to make. No Russian leader after 1945, including Gorbachev and Boris Yeltsin, even indirectly mentioned the Holocaust. Such a reference was forbidden in Soviet media. Moreover, Putin was also the first Russian leader to visit Israel.

Anti-Semitism in Russia today is lower than it has been in the past seven decades. Jews in Russia are much less inclined to hide their ethnic origin or their interest in Jewish culture and religion. Although Jews in Russia continue to feel some hostility, the government has never treated Jews as well as they treat them today. In fact, state anti-Semitism -- as opposed to popular anti-Semitism -- has almost completely disappeared from the political scene. Jews or so-called half Jews hold a large number of prominent positions in the state apparatus, including the government and leading state corporations.

To be fair, however, Putin has not fully risen to the level of a Western leader on the Jewish question with regard to one issue: Unlike Western leaders, he did not openly take a position against the two most outspoken anti-Semites of our time when he met them -- Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad and Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad.

In the end, Putin's refusal to incorporate anti-Semitism into his domestic and foreign policy reveals his inordinate flexibility as a politician, despite his poor record on democracy and human rights and as supporter of several heinous regimes in the world.

At the same time, however, we can only speculate about Putin's motivation on this Jewish issue. Putin's foreign policy combines deep hostility toward the West with a willingness to maintain a bridge with the United States and the European Union. His positive attitude toward Jews represents another part of his

dualism. By maintaining the image of a civilized ruler, Putin enhances his connection with the West and keeps many opportunities open for his future career.

If, however, the danger to Putin's elites from Russian nationalists increases, Putin could very well play the Jewish card. In this case, the Kremlin, without any compunction, could deprive its opponents of their powerful weapon, anti-Semitism, and resort to moving the regime even closer to that of Stalin. In any case, the West is dealing with a very flexible and pragmatic Russian leader.

#21

Putin, Medvedev, and Israel

By Mark N. Katz

Middle East Times, February 6, 2008

Russian President Vladimir Putin's hand-picked successor, Dmitry Medvedev, is set to be elected president of Russia on Mar. 2. Immediately after taking office, he is expected to appoint his mentor, Putin, as prime minister. Who, though, will actually be in charge – especially over foreign policy? A sign that Putin's influence may be waning may come if there is a change in Russian foreign policy toward Israel.

Just like his predecessors in the Kremlin stretching back to Nikita Khrushchev, Putin has assiduously pursued good relations with Arab governments. Putin himself has paid visits to Egypt, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Algeria, Morocco, and Tunisia. He also visited Israel's nemesis, Iran, just this past October.

Putin, though, has also pursued good relations with Israel. This is very different from his predecessors who were either antagonistic toward it or lukewarm at best. Although reviled in much of the world, Putin had a close relationship with former Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon (who spoke Russian fluently). And although Russian-Israeli relations deteriorated after Putin sold sophisticated missiles to Syria, the Russian-Israeli relationship remains strong. Trade between them is flourishing, and there is even security cooperation between the two countries. Shortly after his recent trip to Tehran, Putin received Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert in the Kremlin.

One Israeli diplomat I spoke to in Washington indicated that Putin's concern for the Jewish state – and the many Russian speakers living in it – appears quite genuine. At a time of rising xenophobia in Russia, Putin has also gone out of his way to denounce anti-Semitism. His sympathy for Jews has been traced back to close relationships he formed with several of them during his childhood in what was then Leningrad.

Putin, though, is definitely an outlier in this regard. As that same diplomat also told me, while Israeli officials have been warmly received by him, their reception by others in Moscow has been distinctly colder. Although there are a surprising number of Russian journalists who are sympathetic toward Israel, the bulk of the foreign policy, defense, and security service establishments have a strong preference for the anti-American regimes of the Middle East. They also see moderate Arab disapproval of American support for Israel as an opportunity for Moscow to improve ties with traditionally pro-American regimes.

In addition, there is a strong domestic political imperative for Moscow to favor the Arabs over Israel: Russia's Jewish population is only a few hundred thousand whereas its Muslim population numbers close to 15 million – over a tenth of the country's population.

In other words: Without Putin, Moscow would probably not have the close relationship with Israel that it has had under his leadership. So if Moscow downgrades its ties to Israel after he steps down from the presidency, this will be a sign that Putin's influence is waning.

Indeed, if a power struggle between Putin and Medvedev does emerge, one way for the latter to curry favor with the security services would be for him to promote the more pro-Arab and anti-Israeli foreign policy that they prefer.

But would Medvedev challenge Putin like this? It is possible, but does not seem likely. Medvedev's statements so far indicate that, if anything, he will pursue a more pro-Western policy than Putin. And worse relations with Israel would not promote improved relations with the United States.

If Russian relations with Israel do deteriorate after Putin steps down from the presidency, then, it may not be because he is becoming weaker vis-à-vis Medvedev, but that both of them are becoming weaker vis-à-vis the security services – who would also oppose the more pro-Western policy that Medvedev appears to be advocating at present.

On the other hand, if Russian-Israeli relations remain at the same level as now after Medvedev becomes president, this will be a strong indication that Putin remains fully in charge of Russian foreign policy.

#22

'Jews' Parade on the Streets of Vilna

By Michael Casper

Forward, February 6, 2008

Vilnius, Lithuania - Last week, a samba group in Rio de Janeiro caused an international furor when it announced its intention to participate in the city's Carnival event on a float depicting Holocaust victims. After outcries from the Brazilian Jewish community, a judge banned the group from using the float.

Although less well known, a similarly questionable effort to celebrate the same holiday takes place in this city, once known as the Jerusalem of Lithuania because of the breadth and piety of its Jewish community. During Carnival — or Uzgavenes, as it is known in Lithuania — Catholics from around the world congregate for a feast of foods prohibited during Lent. The festival usually involves a parade or circus, with attendees in masks and costumes. But in Vilnius — commonly known to Jews as Vilna — participants traditionally dress and act “as Jews,” a feat that generally calls for masks with grotesque features, beards and visible ear locks and that is often accompanied by peddling and by stereotypically Jewish speech.

Perhaps even more shockingly, the “festivities” extend beyond the parade itself and into a Halloween-style trick-or-treating. When Simonas Gurevicius, the 26-year-old executive director of the Jewish Community of Lithuania, opened the door to his house during last year's Uzgavenes, he was greeted by two children dressed in horns and tails, reciting a song that translates as, “We're the little Lithuanian Jews/We want blintzes and coffee/If you don't have blintzes/Give us some of your money.” (It rhymes in Lithuanian.)

“They understand it as Halloween, a time to have fun and adventures,” Gurevicius said. “On one hand, it is important to respect the traditions of the country. On the other hand, psychologically it stays in their brain: The image of the Jew will be closely associated with the image from the festival.”

Jewish history in Lithuania, centuries long and distinguished by a profusion of yeshivas and Torah scholars, nearly ended when most of the country's Jewish community was murdered during the Holocaust. Today, the small but close-knit community hosts school groups at its center for educational sessions on Jewish life.

But according to Gurevicius, members of the Jewish community do not speak out against the parade, because they wish to avoid conflict with Lithuanians. “For sure, the Jewish people don't like so much the way Jews are shown with the other creatures,” he said. But, “someone could say we don't understand the humor. People think it's normal.”

Diana, a 20-year-old Jewish medical student from Vilnius who did not wish to give her last name, was surprised to learn that Lithuanians dress as Jews during Uzgavenes. “It's not the most pleasant thing, but it could be worse” she said, adding that “they could be smashing menorahs” — a reference to protests surrounding the erection of a large menorah in the Lithuanian town of Siauliai last December.

Last Saturday, hundreds gathered in front of city hall in the capital to celebrate. The Web site of the Vilnius City Municipality promised that during Uzgavenes, which is an official holiday in Lithuania, “creatures

wearing different masks — devils, witches, deaths, goats, Gypsies, and other joyful and scaring characters — hang around.” Claiming to be dressed as a Jew, one woman tried to convince spectators to buy dirty handkerchiefs.

Although typical costumes include farm animals and monsters, masquerading is sometimes broadly referred to as “eiti zydukais,” or “going as Jews,” regardless of how one dresses.

The Roma do not fare better. Participants who masquerade as “Gypsies” wear gaudy makeup, hold babies and ask bystanders for money.

Last Friday, Vilnius’s Center of Ethnic Activity hosted an exhibition of Uzgavenes masks and screened archival footage of past celebrations. Masks of Jews were displayed between those of witches and animals, and shown with no apparent compunction to cultural delegates from Latvia and Denmark. In a video shot in Vilnius last year, a man dressed as a Jew carrying a briefcase full of toilet paper haggled with cab drivers as he led a group of people made up as beasts through the streets.

“From my point of view,” said Svetlana Novopolskaja, director of the Roma Community Centre of Vilnius, “Lithuanians like to dress as Roma, like their music and habits, but don’t like Roma as people. They accept them as personages from fairy tales — as hobbits, for example — and are surprised and afraid when they meet real Roma.”

Ethnologist Inga Krisciuniene, who works at the Centre of Ethnic Activity, led the event, explained how she believed that in earlier times, Jews and Gypsies dressed alike. Revelers wore the same mask on Uzgavenes to depict them, so that the characters were distinguishable only by performers’ actions. When asked whether it could be seen as offensive to mock these minorities, Krisciuniene replied, “No one has ever complained.” The intent, she said, is humorous.

“Besides,” she added, “it’s true that Gypsies steal.”

#23

U.S.-Backed Russian Institutes Help Iran Build Reactor

By Matthew L. Wald

New York Times, February 7, 2008

The Energy Department is subsidizing two Russian nuclear institutes that are building important parts of a reactor in Iran whose construction the United States spent years trying to stop, according to a House committee.

The institutes, both in Nizhny Novgorod, gave American officials copies of sales presentations that listed the Bushehr reactor, which Russia has agreed to fuel, as one of their projects. One institute is providing control systems, including control room equipment, and the other, hundreds of pumps and ventilation fans.

The Energy Department is subsidizing the institutes under the Initiatives for Proliferation Prevention, a program set up in 1994, after the collapse of the Soviet Union. The program was intended to prevent newly impoverished scientists and their institutions from selling expertise to states or terrorist groups that want nuclear weapons.

The United States supplements the salaries of scientists and pays overhead at those institutes, according to the House Oversight and Investigations subcommittee.

It was not immediately clear whether the Energy Department was contributing to the salaries of the very scientists involved in the Bushehr reactor project. Two Michigan Democrats — Representatives John D. Dingell, chairman of the House Committee on Energy and Commerce, and Bart Stupak, chairman of that committee’s Oversight and Investigations subcommittee — asked that question in a letter sent on Wednesday to Energy Secretary Samuel W. Bodman.

“What policy logic justifies D.O.E. funding Russian institutes which are providing nuclear technology to Iran?” the letter asked. “How does this advance our non-proliferation goals?”

Mr. Bodman is supposed to testify on Thursday before the Energy and Commerce Committee in a hastily scheduled hearing to explore the issue.

Mr. Dingell, in a telephone interview, pointed out that the State Department has accused Iran of using the Bushehr reactor as a cover for obtaining nuclear technology useful in a weapons program. And, he said, “We’ve got a bunch of federal laws that impose sanctions on U.S. companies that develop Iran’s oil.”

But under the nonproliferation program, he said, “We’ve got U.S. money providing assistance to help develop a reactor that we’re busy denouncing.”

Mr. Dingell said the committee would also pursue whether the Energy Department was subsidizing any institutes that worked with North Korea, Syria or other countries that are developing nuclear weapons or may be seeking to do so.

But the Energy Department said in a statement Wednesday evening, “We are confident that none of the projects cited by the House committee, or any of the department’s scientist engagement projects with Russia, support nuclear work in Iran.”

The statement added, “We take all measures necessary to ensure that neither money nor technology falls into the hands of countries of concern.”

Individual projects are cleared by the Defense Department, the State Department and intelligence agencies, according to the Energy Department.

An Energy Department official said, “What we’re doing is very important to engage these scientists as part of a nonproliferation goal.” The official requested anonymity because his response had not gone through official channels.

The Energy Department has approved projects with the two institutes worth \$4 million, according to the letter sent by the committee chairmen to Mr. Bodman on Wednesday, but the Energy Department official said that sum included a \$1 million project that might have been canceled.

Because of the design of Bushehr, a civilian electric power plant, it would be cumbersome to recover the plutonium that is the byproduct of its operations. In addition, Russia has announced that it will take back the spent fuel from the plant, thus making the plutonium unavailable to Iran.

But the United States has looked with some alarm at Iran acquiring nuclear expertise. Iran wants to build a plant to enrich uranium and make its own reactor fuel, saying it wants to do so for civilian purposes. American officials complain that the enrichment technology could also be used to make warheads.

Mr. Dingell said, “Only this administration would complain about proliferation in Iran, as part of President Bush’s axis of evil, and then finance it with American taxpayer dollars.”

Mr. Stupak called it “schizophrenic foreign policy.”

“We should not be doing business with institutes that help promote Iran’s nuclear ambitions,” he said.

The United States pays for a variety of projects at numerous “institutes” in Russia and other former Soviet countries. For example, at the Scientific Research Institute of Measuring Systems in Nizhny Novgorod, which is making control room equipment for Bushehr, the United States is paying \$1.15 million for a project for radar mapping of geological structures, which could be used to locate underground mineral deposits.

A study of the American program by the Government Accountability Office released last month found that while the program was intended to provide support for former Soviet weapons scientists, many of those receiving benefits had done no weapons work, and some were not old enough to have worked as scientists during Soviet times.

An Energy Department official testifying before Mr. Stupak acknowledged at a hearing on Jan. 23 that parts of the program may have outlived the original intent.

The Bushehr reactor has had a long, involved history. In 1975 the shah of Iran ordered twin reactors from a German firm, Kraftwerke-Union, but work stopped after he was overthrown in 1979. The two units were bombed by the Iraqis in the Iran-Iraq war that began in 1980.

In 1995, the Iranian government contracted with Russia to finish the first unit, a major challenge because the standard Russian design was substantially different from the German design.

The reactor is supposed to begin producing power this year, Iranian officials said.

#24

European Group Cancels Mission to Observe Russian Election, Citing Restrictions

By C. J. CHIVERS

New York Times, February 8, 2008

The principal election-observation organization in Europe said Thursday that it would not send observers to monitor Russia's presidential campaign and election on March 2, citing severe restrictions imposed on its work by the Russian government.

The cancellation, announced by the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights, or O.D.I.H.R., was not a surprise. But it formalized the intense differences between the way Russia's nominal democracy is viewed abroad and the way the Kremlin and its state-controlled news media seek to portray it.

The issue is especially delicate here. President Vladimir V. Putin, whose second term is ending and who cannot legally seek a third term, is carefully managing his succession in a process that includes, at least formally, an election by popular vote.

Further, the Kremlin has been deeply wary of independent observers, and has blamed detailed reports of rigged elections in other countries for fomenting public unrest and even revolutions.

The cancellation signals another impasse between the West and the Kremlin, which, flush with oil money and renewed confidence, has shown a willingness to shed the international and diplomatic commitments it made after the Soviet Union's collapse.

"We made every effort in good faith to deploy our mission, even under the conditions imposed by the Russian authorities," Christian Strohal, the organization's director, said in a statement from Warsaw, where it is based. He added, "The Russian Federation has created limitations that are not conducive to undertaking election observation."

Russia reacted angrily to the decision, but the United States signaled its approval.

"We support O.D.I.H.R.'s decision," David J. Kramer, a deputy assistant secretary of state whose bureau covers Russia, said by telephone. "Countries should be accustomed to the fact that respected international organizations come in and observe and monitor their elections. Russia should not be exempt from that; it is part of developing into a normal democratic society."

Mr. Kramer and other diplomats said the conditions imposed by Russia on observers had made a full and honest assessment of the election process impossible.

The limitations, diplomats have said in recent weeks, include Russia's refusal to allow a typical set of long-term observers access to the country; these observers monitor candidate registration, news media content, the government's use of state resources and conduct during the campaign period.

Russia has also barred a much larger set of short-term observers, who typically monitor government conduct on election day, as well as voting and vote-counting. Instead, it has invited only a small mission for a limited time.

As recently as 2004, Russia permitted more than 400 monitors to its elections, and allowed long-term observers to arrive several weeks before the vote.

For this presidential election, which has been tightly scripted by the Kremlin and lacks a serious opposition candidate, Russia invited 70 monitors from the organization. It had said they could not begin work in the field until a few days before the election.

In negotiations between the Central Election Commission in Russia and the monitors this week, Russia offered to let the observers begin their work on Feb. 20, less than two weeks before the vote.

Diplomats at the monitoring organization said that Russia's second offer was insufficient and that the monitors needed to begin work on Feb. 18 to achieve even a diminished mission.

Russia refused to allow them access that early, and the negotiations broke down.

Mr. Strohal, normally restrained in his public remarks, spoke in critical terms. "What is true for every election is also true for this one: transparency strengthens democracy; politics behind closed doors weakens it," he said. "I regret this development and hope that the Russian authorities can find their way back to unimpeded cooperation with the O.D.I.H.R."

The Russian government, which still struggles to portray itself as democratic even as it has suppressed open elections, news media content and public dissent, reacted angrily.

"We profoundly regret their position," Mikhail Kamynin, a spokesman for the Foreign Ministry, said, according to the Interfax news agency.