



WASHINGTON, D.C. February 29, 2008

TO: NCSJ Leadership and Interested Parties

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

In Brief: Russian Presidential Election; Around Half the World and Back in 17 Days

Dear Friend:

This weekend, as Russian voters go to the polls to elect a new president, there is little suspense as to who will succeed Vladimir Putin. During my brief trip to Moscow last week, most Russians I met with wanted to discuss the American presidential election rather than their own. The real drama begins after Dmitry Medvedev assumes the presidency and determines what type of power-sharing arrangement he will have with Vladimir Putin. Whatever happens, the new leadership will confront the same challenges as the previous regime: how best to utilize their ever-growing revenue surplus from oil and natural gas sales. Also, they will be tested by both domestic and international concerns such as health and environmental issues, Iran, missile defense, Kosovo and NATO expansion. In this week's update there are several stories related to the election and the future direction of Russia.

As you may remember from the previous two weekly updates, NCSJ participated in a number of events and conferences in Georgia, Russia and Israel. It is good to be home after 17 days of intensive meetings and discussions on issues affecting American, Russian and Israeli Jewry. I want to share with you some observations about the trip that I didn't report on in the last two updates.

During our visit to Tbilisi and Moscow, the issue of Kosovo independence dominated much of the attention of both the Georgians and Russians. Kosovo independence impacts many other regions of the world, including disputed territories in Georgia and Russia. We arrived in Moscow when the decision on independence was announced in Priština. Needless to say, the international and Russian media was almost exclusively focused on this monumental decision. The Russian government sided with Serbia and expressed outrage at western support for Kosovo independence. The question of nationalism will continue to be a major issue in 2008.

Tbilisi is a city on the move. Construction cranes dot the city, and despite the anti-government demonstrations there was air of optimism about the country's future. Georgia faces serious problems – economic and political – but the new government's youthful enthusiasm is contagious. President Mikheil Saakashvili has surrounded himself with a cadre of bright and energetic civil servants committed to addressing their country's needs.

Georgia's Jewish community is well-integrated. We had the opportunity to visit two Jewish day schools with almost 200 students. The Georgian government has established a strong, positive relationship with the State of Israel. President Saakashvili gave an impassioned speech in support of Israel's security needs

during his meeting with the Conference of Presidents delegation.

In Moscow, NCSJ Chairman Ed Robin and I were briefed by the U.S. and Israeli Embassies on Russia's current political situation. We also had the opportunity to speak to a number of different Jewish community leaders at the Federation of Jewish Communities of Russia (FEOR) 10th anniversary celebration. Ed addressed the opening ceremony, on behalf of NCSJ and the organized American Jewish community, congratulating FEOR for their achievements in helping Russian Jews.

After the Presidents Conference mission was completed, NCSJ President Lesley Israel and I participated in a two-day conference on global anti-Semitism sponsored by the Israel Foreign Ministry. The conference focused on the rise of a new form of anti-Semitism that attempts to delegitimize and demonize the State of Israel as well as on the traditional anti-Semitism found in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union. More than 250 people representing over 35 countries participated in the conference. I presented a "best practices" case study in confronting anti-Semitism, showing how NCSJ worked with the Ukraine's government and Jewish community to counter a rash of anti-Semitic incidents in the summer and fall of 2007. I wish I could tell you that we found a magic solution to the overall problem, but at the very least the rise in anti-Semitism is not going unchallenged.

I finished my trip to Israel by joining with a number of other international and Israeli organizations to discuss the upcoming United Nations Durban Review Conference scheduled for April 2009. Canada has already announced that it will not participate in the conference, and Israel has announced that it also will not participate, unless certain conditions are met. You may remember what a disaster the first Durban Conference was in 2001; a conference that was supposed to focus on racism turned into a hate fest against Israel. In our meetings, there was much discussion on whether or not Jewish NGOs should participate in the 2009 meeting; should we encourage our own governments to stay away or should there be a strong Jewish presence to prevent another hijacking by Palestinians and their supporters? I will keep you informed as developments unfold.

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 29, 2008

-----INDEX OF ARTICLES-----

1. *Here's why*
Editorial
THE JERUSALEM POST, February 25, 2008
2. *Gov't forum against anti-Semitism looks to become int'l coalition*
Haviv Rettig
THE JERUSALEM POST, February 24, 2008
3. *Israel breaks ranks on Kosovo*
By Anshel Pfeffer
The Jewish Chronicle, February 22, 2008
4. *Russian ambassador: Security of Israel is important to Russia*
Haviv Rettig
THE JERUSALEM POST, February 25, 2008
5. *Russian Jews outraged by `revision` of WWII outcomes*
Interfax, February 25, 2008
6. *Vladimir Putin's Russia*
Editorial
New York Times, February 27, 2008
7. *Olympics host building shul, Jewish center*
JTA Brief, February 26, 2008
8. *Jewish studies shuttered in Russia*
By Grant Slater
JTA, February 26, 2008
9. *Kremlin Rules: Putin's Iron Grip on Russia Suffocates Opponents*
By CLIFFORD J. LEVY
New York Times, February 24, 2008
10. *Holding Medvedev to His Words*
By Jackson Diehl
Washington Post, February 25, 2008
11. *Who will rule Russia after March 2?*
By Matt Siegel
JTA, February 24, 2008

12. *Russia's Medvedev faces anti-Semitic attacks*
By Amie Ferris-Rotman
Reuters, February 26, 2008
13. *Medvedev Foe Plays Anti-Semitism Card*
By ANGELA CHARLTON
AP, February 27, 2008
14. *Russian neo-Nazis charged in vandalism*
JTA Brief, February 25, 2008
15. *Russian Candidate Denounces Kosovo*
By C. J. CHIVERS
New York Times, February 26, 2008
16. *Nevzlin being tried for murder*
JTA Brief, February 26, 2008
17. *Estonia's President Sounds the Alarm*
By Nikolaus von Twickel
The Moscow Times, February 26, 2008
18. *Belarus Imposes New Controls on Foreign Religious Workers*
By Jeremy Reynolds
Crosswalk, February 25, 2008
19. *Armenia head threatens action as opposition rallies*
By Margarita Antidze
Reuters, February 23, 2008
20. *Out of Armenia, something new?*
The Economist, February 21, 2008
21. *Chief Rabbi of Ukraine Meets with State Committee Representative on Religious affairs*
FEOR, February 26, 2008
22. *Lithuania investigating Holocaust historian*
JTA Brief, February 27, 2008
23. *War looming for once-Jewish city?*
By Matt Siegel
JTA, February 27, 2008

#1

Here's why

Editorial

THE JERUSALEM POST, February 25, 2008

"I've read countless books on the subject, and no one has been able to explain the persistence of anti-Semitism," Supreme Court Justice Elyakim Rubinstein said this week, at the Foreign Ministry-hosted Global Forum for Combating Anti-Semitism.

It is, indeed, difficult to explain the phenomenon, which seems to persist among vastly different ideologies and political movements. The racist Nazis had a mystical vision of the Jews as poisoners of Western purity and civilization while the egalitarian communists saw them as "ideological immigrants."

The Jews don't have a monopoly in suffering others' bigotry, but they may be the most experienced at it. Why?

The Jewish people is uniquely strange. They are defined at once through biology - one is Jewish merely by being born of a Jewish mother, regardless of belief - and ideology - one joins the people by adopting a specific faith. They call themselves a slew of disconnected words, from "culture" and "faith" to "tribe" and "nation."

A typical American Jew may believe his Jewish identity is a religious one while supporting passionately the Israeli project of a Jewish ethnic nation-state. An important Jewish leader could (though not without criticism) be a Buddhist, and one cannot stop being Jewish (according to Jewish law, at least) merely by choosing to become something else.

To say they can be described but not defined is to ignore the fact that most Jews - those not engaged in modernity's "Who is a Jew?" controversies - do not feel Judaism is incoherent. They know what they are, but do not have the word - perhaps because it does not exist - for their idea-based (but not wholly ideological) ethnic identity. They are "Am Yisrael," the people of Israel, whatever that may be. Their identity, with all its confusions, is a product of ancient experience. The inner life, the Jewish bookshelf, which defines this people is vast and profound. Their strangeness is part and parcel of their inheritance.

And so, in every generation, in almost every society in which they are a minority, the Jews are quintessentially and permanently different.

Perhaps this is the reason that anti-Semitism has become what the Canadian jurist and MP Irwin Cotler has called "the canary in the coal mine of evil," always heralding a more pluralistic hatred. A nation's treatment of the Jews - a group that is not slightly different, but almost always deeply so - is the barometer of its capacity for accepting real difference.

The Global Forum ended on Monday after two days of discussions and meetings that produced dramatic announcements for worldwide efforts to combat "the longest hatred."

These included the establishment of an international coalition of activists, parliamentarians and NGOs to combat anti-Semitism worldwide - a coordinating force that has been markedly missing - and an association for scholars of anti-Semitism to be based at Yale University.

These efforts are important and welcome, particularly when the world experiences a rise of street violence against Jews from Paris to Vladivostok which forces them to trade their kippot for baseball caps when walking down the street, and when government-sponsored anti-Semitic media and even official Holocaust denial are heard all too often in Teheran, Kiev, Caracas and in many Arab countries.

But these initiatives are not likely to dramatically increase activism against or awareness of anti-Semitism in the near future. Announced in Israel at an event put on by the Jewish state's Foreign Ministry, they will generally be regarded, like most efforts to eradicate anti-Semitism, as Jewish efforts to deal with a Jewish problem.

In that context, a "tentative" invitation issued at the summit of activists, scholars and parliamentarians is highly appropriate. British MP John Mann offered to have next year's Forum hosted in London. Such a move, received with approval by Israeli officials, could mark the beginning of a more international campaign.

From London, a demand to the Kremlin to take Iran to task over its nuclear plans and Holocaust denial may resonate more widely. In London, the bitter experiences of one minority may be seen more readily as an international symbol for the oppression experienced by all minorities, and acted against with more alacrity.

A world stage, in short, is the place to fight bigotry in all forms, starting with the oldest and most destructive of prejudices.

#2

Gov't forum against anti-Semitism looks to become int'l coalition

Haviv Rettig

THE JERUSALEM POST, February 24, 2008

The Foreign Ministry hopes that the Global Forum for Combating Anti-Semitism, whose latest conference is being held this week in Jerusalem, will transform into an active coalition of governments and groups that will deal with anti-Semitism issues as an active, coordinated and international body.

This year's forum, to take place at the Foreign Ministry on Sunday and Monday, will bring together representatives from over 40 countries, along with dozens of groups, academics and journalists, to examine anti-Semitism worldwide, develop a better understanding of the phenomenon and discuss governments' and organizations' responses to it.

There is discussion of "having the forum wander the world, and take place in other countries," according to Aviva Raz-Shechter, director of the Foreign Ministry's Department for Combating Anti-Semitism and organizer of the parley.

"The goal is clear to the participants," she says, "and the fact that they came together already counts as a coalition. Now the question is how the coalition functions and whether it becomes relevant and active in the field. It's possible that because of the serious participation in the current forum we'll see a more active body develop."

The forum, chaired by Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni and Minister for Diaspora Affairs and Combating Anti-Semitism Isaac Herzog, will meet to discuss phenomena associated with different types of anti-Semitism and what can be done about them worldwide.

Some 300 participants include representatives from over 40 countries. In attendance will be Maqsood Ahmed, senior advisor on Muslim communities in the Department for Communities and Local Government of the UK; Gregg Rickman, special envoy who deals with Anti-Semitism at the US State Department; German MP Petra Pau, vice president of Germany's Bundestag, and many others.

Jewish community leaders will also attend from all over the world, including Germany, France, the UK, Russia, Holland, the US and Canada, and even Venezuela.

The conference will focus heavily on legal issues, with Supreme Court Justice Elyakim Rubinstein; Canadian MP and law professor Irwin Cotler; UK legal scholar Anthony Julius and Hungarian Supreme Court president Dr. Zoltan Lomnici, among others, expected to speak.

#3

Israel breaks ranks on Kosovo

By Anshel Pfeffer

The Jewish Chronicle, February 22, 2008

Israel will not be recognising Kosovo's independence in the next few weeks, out of concern for the implications that recognition might have both on negotiations with the Palestinians and relations with Russia.

Israel's main Western allies — the United States, Britain, France and Germany — all rushed to accept Kosovo's independence following the announcement by the Kosovar government on Sunday. But Israel is being reticent, despite Foreign Ministry officials and politicians privately voicing a general sympathy towards the Kosovar cause.

One of the main reasons is that Israel is anxious not to encourage a precedent whereby the populations of disputed regions act unilaterally in such a fashion.

On Wednesday, Yasser Abed Rabbo, senior adviser to Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas, told Reuters that if the current negotiations “wouldn’t proceed towards ending settlement-building and a serious and continuing negotiation, we will have to take the step and declare independence unilaterally”.

Mr Rabbo cited Kosovo’s example and said, “Kosovo is not better than us. We are worthy of independence before them and we ask for backing from the United States and European Union.”

The idea of a unilateral declaration has been raised before within the Palestinian leadership and turned down on the grounds that it would be meaningless and only harm negotiations.

Still, Israel is wary of the precedent and, like other countries dealing with minorities in disputed regions, such as Spain with the Basques, is not rushing to recognise Kosovo. A larger concern is the future of Israel’s relations with Russia, whose leadership is adamantly opposed to Kosovar independence.

“While relations between Israel and Russia have never been better,” an Israeli diplomat who deals with the issue told the JC, “these relations are still fragile, especially at a time like this, two weeks before the presidential elections in Russia. This could be the worst time to rock the boat.”

Israel sees Russia as the crucial link in any sanctions regime against Iran’s nuclear programme. It assiduously cultivated a relationship with outgoing President Vladimir Putin. Despite ongoing ties between Mr Putin and the Iran, and the supplies of nuclear fuel, no official Israeli spokesperson has criticised Mr Putin or his government.

An additional concern is the welfare of the Russian community. Despite still high levels of antisemitism, Israeli diplomats and local leaders have praised Mr Putin for fighting antisemitism.

Dmitry Medvedev, Mr Putin’s handpicked successor expected to win elections next month, is also thought to be close to the community, and visited the headquarters of the Federation of Jewish Communities in Moscow three days before announcing his candidacy.

Some of nationalist parties are claiming that Mr Medvedev is Jewish and disloyal to the Russian people. “This is the worst possible time to draw attention with a new dispute,” said a senior figure in the community in Moscow, “both for Israel and for Russian Jews.”

#4

Russian ambassador: Security of Israel is important to Russia

Haviv Rettig

THE JERUSALEM POST, February 25, 2008

It goes without saying that Israel's existence and security are important to Russia and to all the international community, Russian ambassador to Israel Peter Stegny told the Jewish Agency Board of Governors on Sunday.

In a historic first meeting between the Russian ambassador and the Jewish Agency leadership, the ambassador said that the historic "obstacle" between Israel and Russia - aliya of Russian Jews - "is seen as resolved," according to sources who were in the meeting.

Asked about Russian assistance for Iran's nuclear reactor at Bushehr and Russian talks with Hamas, the ambassador said the Iranian reactor was civilian in nature and that "there is no alternative to political negotiations" with Hamas, said the sources.

#5

Russian Jews outraged by `revision` of WWII outcomes Interfax, February 25, 2008

The Federation of Jewish Communities of Russia (FJCR) has called on the Russian and international public to "properly judge in moral terms the facts of rehabilitation of the Nazi ideology and its henchmen" in certain countries.

"Without any doubt, the revision of the outcomes of World War II in order to please a group of politicians seeking to gain political advantage on the tide of nationalism could have the most negative consequences not only for the future of the countries in which they make their statements but also for the entire world," says one of the resolutions the FJCR passed at its congress in Moscow on Tuesday.

The events of the past years have brought the problem of revisionism of history "to the forefront," it says.

Estonia is desecrating and demolishing monuments to those who fought against Nazism, "but it is erecting monuments to SS hangmen instead; President Viktor Yushchenko in Ukraine has granted the title of Hero of Ukraine to an UPA [the Ukrainian Insurgent Army] leader, Roman Shukhevych, who fought on the side of the Nazis and who is responsible for genocide of the Jews, and Iranian President Ahmadinejad's regime has made the denial of Nazi crimes and the Holocaust one of the central points of his propaganda," it said.

"The Jewish community in Russia is outraged by this revision of history, which leads to the denial of the World War II outcomes and insults the memory of the Nazis' victims and the memory of the great victory of the peoples of the entire world over Nazism," it says.

The FJCR also expressed its concern over the spread of illegal drugs in Russia, especially among the young people.

#6

Vladimir Putin's Russia Editorial New York Times, February 27, 2008

The eight years of Vladimir Putin's presidency have faithfully reflected his formative years in the Soviet secret police. Mr. Putin's term ends this spring, but he is nearly certain to become prime minister. That means, we fear, that little will change. The next American president will have to deal with a Russia that is not only nuclear-armed but increasingly wealthy and increasingly authoritarian.

Mr. Putin has not tried to reimpose the bankrupt Communist economic system or reopen Stalin's Gulag Archipelago. He has used the Kremlin's full powers to quash all serious political opposition, recreating a virtual one-party state. That was the depressing message reported this week by our colleague Clifford J. Levy in an account of December's parliamentary election contest in Nizhny Novgorod, a city once synonymous with Russia's brightest hopes for democratic renewal.

It was there that an elderly Andrei Sakharov emerged from internal exile to wage his final campaign of speaking truth to power and urging those who held power to finally tell the Russian people the truth. And it was there that Boris Nemtsov, one of the most promising leaders of a new generation of Russian reformers, tried to build a new model of democratic governance.

Things are very different these days in Nizhny Novgorod. Mr. Putin's allies have used threats of physical harm and other tactics — chillingly reminiscent of Soviet days — to crush rivals. A foreman warned workers that they risked punishment if they did not vote for Mr. Putin's party. Children were told by their teachers that their grades could suffer unless they encouraged their parents to vote correctly.

Mr. Putin's party would have triumphed without these tactics. The goal was to create a climate of permanent political intimidation. How like the credo Mr. Putin learned in his old K.G.B. days.

President Bush, and soon his successor, will have to come to terms with the authoritarian Russia that is — not the democratic Russia that recent American administrations had hoped would take root after Communism. They will have to deal pragmatically with the realities of Russian power, as the Nixon and George H.W. Bush administrations once did, seeking cooperation when possible over issues like Iran, Kosovo and arms control.

And, as in the Carter and Reagan administrations, America will need to champion Russia's persecuted democrats, journalists and other embattled minorities: amplifying their voices and calling international attention to the very real dangers they face. Descending back into cold war rhetoric and reflexes will not help anyone. But neither will pretending that Mr. Putin and his allies are people of good will and democratic intentions.

#7

Olympics host building shul, Jewish center
JTA Brief, February 26, 2008

A new Jewish community center and synagogue will be built in the Russian city hosting the 2014 Winter Olympics.

According to the AEN news agency, the announcement to build the center in Sochi in addition to the new synagogue, which already had been agreed upon, was made following a meeting between the city's chief rabbi, Ari Edelkopf, and Semyon Weinstock, the head of the state corporation charged with developing the city's infrastructure for the games.

"We love Russia and the city in which we live, and bless the state corporation and Mr. Weinstock for the accomplishment of all the tasks set forth by President Putin to continue to making this the best in the history of Olympic villages," Edelkopf said.

Some had expressed concern that one synagogue might not be capable of providing adequate facilities for the athletes and tourists visiting Sochi, a resort city of nearly 400,000 along the Black Sea.

#8

Jewish studies shuttered in Russia
By Grant Slater
JTA, February 26, 2008

Russia's only graduate program dedicated to Jewish studies is caught in the crossfire between its parent university and St. Petersburg city officials, who closed the university last week over fire code violations.

Critics say the closure was a politically motivated response to a university course in election monitoring.

The European University at St. Petersburg received a court order to close its doors on Feb. 21 after city fire inspectors found 52 violations during a January inspection. A city court denied the university's appeal, prompting speculation that the city's decision had political motives.

After the school was shuttered, the university temporarily moved classes to a local school.

But the Jewish studies program, Petersburg Judaica, remains very much in limbo. Courses will continue, but the program's exhibition hall, auditorium and main office are off limits.

"The situation for the whole university, in principle, and for us, in particular, is absolutely far from a normal situation," said Valery Dymshits, a Petersburg Judaica professor and head of the program's exhibitions. "We can go on like this for several weeks, or for a month, but for no longer."

The university came under scrutiny in February 2007 when it introduced a course on training Russians in election monitoring. After inquiries from St. Petersburg's municipal science committee, university officials canceled the course on Jan. 30, university president Nikolay Vakhtin said at a news conference Feb. 22.

The course was funded by a grant from the European Union for about \$1 million.

Last June, a deputy from the Russian Parliament's committee on higher education said European University had violated its charter by engaging in overtly political activities.

Opened in 1994, European University at St. Petersburg is one of the leading independent universities in the city, with strong ties to Western academia.

The instructor for the course on election monitoring, Grigory Golosov, said there was no political motive behind the course. Its intent was not to train election observers but to exchange best practices on the election process, he said.

The subject of election monitoring has been a point of friction between Russia and the West since parliamentary elections last December. Both then and in the run-up to Sunday's presidential vote, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, the OSCE, canceled its observer missions, citing Russian government obstruction of its election-monitoring activities.

A spokesman for the St. Petersburg's governor's office told JTA the city would not comment on the closure of European University and directed inquiries to the city's fire safety office. A man who answered the phone at the fire safety office on Tuesday said no one was available to comment.

Meanwhile, the university's president has played down the political undertones of the university's closure, saying the administration will focus on fixing the fire code violations.

Until then, the future of Petersburg Judaica, which already has had to put one planned exhibition on hold, is unclear.

Petersburg Judaica was founded in 2000 and incorporated into European University in 2004 to help bolster Slavic Jewish studies, the youngest and most underdeveloped branch of the humanities in post-Soviet Russia.

The study of Jewish folklore, settlement and culture flourished in the wake of the Soviet Union's Perestroika reforms and gained more prominence with the fall of the Soviet Union in the early 1990s.

Today, the program at Petersburg Judaica serves as a center of gravity and a clearinghouse for foreign scholars seeking to do fieldwork in the shtetls of Belorussia, Ukraine and the Pale of Settlement, according to Dymshits.

On top of its research activities, the interdepartmental program teaches Jewish ethnography to students throughout the university. Over the past three years, it has played host to American students and foreign professors interested in doing fieldwork in Slavic Jewish communities.

The program's five full-time professors sought to play down the political implications of their university's closure. In an open letter to colleagues, they said their main focus was seeing the program return to its normal operations.

"If something happens to the European University, it will be a very, very dangerous situation for Jewish studies in Russia," Dymshits said.

#9

Kremlin Rules: Putin's Iron Grip on Russia Suffocates Opponents

By CLIFFORD J. LEVY

New York Times, February 24, 2008

NIZHNY NOVGOROD, Russia — Shortly before parliamentary elections in December, foremen fanned out across the sprawling GAZ vehicle factory here, pulling aside assembly-line workers and giving them an order: vote for President Vladimir V. Putin's party or else. They were instructed to phone in after they left their polling places. Names would be tallied, defiance punished.

The city's children, too, were pressed into service. At schools, teachers gave them pamphlets promoting "Putin's Plan" and told them to lobby their parents. Some were threatened with bad grades if they failed to attend "Children's Referendums" at polling places, a ploy to ensure that their parents would show up and vote for the ruling party.

Around the same time, volunteers for an opposition party here, the Union of Right Forces, received hundreds of calls at all hours, warning them to stop working for their candidates. Otherwise, you will be hurt, the callers said, along with the rest of your family.

Over the past eight years, in the name of reviving Russia after the tumult of the 1990s, Mr. Putin has waged an unforgiving campaign to clamp down on democracy and extend control over the government and large swaths of the economy. He has suppressed the independent news media, nationalized important industries, smothered the political opposition and readily deployed the security services to carry out the Kremlin's wishes.

While those tactics have been widely recognized, they have been especially heavy-handed at the local level, in far-flung places like Nizhny Novgorod, 250 miles east of Moscow. On the eve of a presidential election in Russia that was all but fixed in December, when Mr. Putin selected his close aide, Dmitri A. Medvedev, as his successor, Nizhny Novgorod stands as a stark example of how Mr. Putin and his followers have established what is essentially a one-party state.

Mr. Putin's Russia is not the Soviet Union. For most Russians, life is freer now than it was in the old days. Criticism of the Kremlin is tolerated, as long as it is not done in any broadly organized way, and access to the Internet is unfettered. The economy, with its abundance of consumer goods and heady rate of growth, bears little resemblance to the one under Communism.

Still, as was made plain in dozens of interviews with political leaders, officials and residents of Nizhny Novgorod over several weeks, a new autocracy now governs Russia. Behind a facade of democracy lies a centralized authority that has deployed a nationwide cadre of loyalists that is not reluctant to swat down those who challenge the ruling party. Fearing such retribution, many of the people interviewed for this article asked not to be identified.

The government has closed newspapers in St. Petersburg and raided political party offices in Siberia. It was hardly unusual when in Samara, in the nation's center, organized crime officers charged an opposition campaign official with financial crimes shortly before the December parliamentary elections and froze the party's bank accounts.

Here in this historic region on the Volga River, Mr. Putin's allies now control nearly all the offices, and elections have become a formality. And that is just as it should be, they said.

"In my opinion, at a certain stage, like now, it is not only useful, it is even necessary — we are tired of democratic twists and turns," said the leader of Mr. Putin's party in Nizhny Novgorod, Sergei G. Nekrasov.

“It may sound sacrilegious, but I would propose to suspend all this election business for the time being, at least for managerial positions.”

Mr. Putin, who intends to remain in power by becoming prime minister under Mr. Medvedev, has in recent days declared that Russia has a healthy democracy, a renewed sense of national pride and a prominent role on the world stage. His supporters in Nizhny Novgorod point to his high approval ratings as evidence that his policies work.

A refrain often heard here and across Russia is that the distressing years right after Communism’s collapse left people craving stability and a sturdy economy far more than Western-style democracy. These days, they care little if elections are basically uncontested as long as a strong leader is in charge.

“There is some hope for us now,” said Nina Aksyonova, 68, a Nizhny Novgorod resident, explaining Mr. Putin’s popularity.

Propaganda Onslaught

Nizhny Novgorod, an industrial center with 1.3 million residents, was known as Gorky during the Communist era, when it was closed to foreigners and was home to the dissident physicist Andrei D. Sakharov, who was sent into internal exile here. After the Soviet Union’s collapse, it became a hotbed of liberalism, earning international recognition after officials sought to jettison the old sclerotic economic structure and embrace what were considered far-sighted political reforms.

Today, authority flows from the Kremlin to a regional governor appointed by Mr. Putin, who abolished the election of governors in Russia in 2004. The governor, Valery P. Shantsev, was brought in from Moscow and is charged with running the region and ensuring that Mr. Putin’s party, United Russia, wins elections. The lines between the government and party have become so blurred that on election day in December, regional election commission members wore large United Russia badges.

Boris Y. Nemtsov became a political star in Russia and the West as governor of Nizhny Novgorod and deputy prime minister in the 1990s, but in recent months he and his opposition party have taken a battering here. Regional and national television stations, controlled by the Kremlin and its surrogates, have repeatedly attacked him — calling him everything from a corrupt bureaucrat to a traitor.

“His career has been accompanied by scandals,” went a typical report on the popular Channel One right before the December elections. “It was the elderly who were the first to feel the results of the work of Nemtsov’s government on their purses. Pensions dropped to the lowest level in all Russia’s history. Boris Nemtsov used to gather the press just to say that he did not care who the pensioners, deprived of money, would vote for. According to the plans of young reformers, only the strongest were supposed to live until the next century.”

Meanwhile, a different kind of propaganda war was being waged on the streets. Russia has relatively conservative attitudes toward homosexuality, and all autumn long Nizhny Novgorod was blanketed with tens of thousands of leaflets saying that Mr. Nemtsov’s liberal, pro-Western opposition party, the Union of Right Forces, ardently favored gay rights and employed canvassers with AIDS. Neither was true.

The leaflets often included the name and phone number of a leader of the party’s regional candidate slate, Andrei Osipenko. Some had condoms attached and announced offers to send supporters to a gay-pride event in Amsterdam.

Intimidation and violence came next. Businesses cut off donations after receiving threats from government officials, said Sergei Veltishchev, an organizer for the Union of Right Forces. Someone obtained the confidential list of party members — the party officials say they suspect that it was the security services — and hundreds of menacing phone calls were made to volunteers, saying they or their families would be hurt if they helped the party.

The party was refused advertising space on everything from billboards to newspapers to television. When Mr. Nemtsov tried to campaign in Nizhny Novgorod in the fall, no one would rent him a hall. In November, the party headquarters were ransacked and spray-painted with profanities and graffiti that called it the "Party of Gays."

A few weeks before the elections, Mr. Osipenko gave up, renouncing his party at a news conference that was heavily covered on state-controlled television and had the feel of the Stalinist-era public confessions that followed show trials. Other party officials did the same.

The party's remaining candidates in the region were too fearful to campaign.

"You begin to think: you have a family, you have a business, and you may value this significantly more than a political career," said Artur Nazarenko, an official with the Union of Right Forces. The party, once a regional power, received only 1 percent of the vote in the parliamentary elections, both in the Nizhny Novgorod region and nationally.

Other opposition figures in Nizhny Novgorod have been treated just as harshly over the past year. Leaders of a loose coalition called Other Russia have been repeatedly arrested, with some charged with inciting terrorism. When the group held a demonstration here last March, local television stations tried to scare away the public, labeling the event a gathering of either racist skinheads or gay rights advocates.

"Now about the so-called opposition, though there is a big doubt that it exists at all in the country," an announcer asserted on the Seti NN channel. "They have been acting in violation of the law."

The mayor of Nizhny Novgorod, Vadim Bulavinov, a United Russia leader, said the opposition had failed because it was poorly organized.

"If an organization is weak because people do not want to work for it or to help it, why should United Russia be blamed for that?" the mayor said. "I think that if the opposition parties want to find out who is guilty, they need to look in the mirror."

Attacks on the Press

With the opposition suppressed in the months before the December elections, anti-Kremlin activism coalesced around independent newspapers and nonprofit groups, making them another target of the security forces.

In August, police officers broke down the door to the local offices of Novaya Gazeta, an opposition paper that had criticized Governor Shantsev and Mayor Bulavinov. Investigators accused the paper of using unlicensed software and hauled away its computers, shutting down the paper until after the elections.

Prosecutors also closed or prevented the distribution of two other regional newspapers, Leninskaya Smena and Trud, and conducted aggressive inquiries into the finances of several others. "It is a demonstration of force: 'If you behave wrong, we will punish you,'" said Zakhar Prilepin, Novaya Gazeta's editor in Nizhny Novgorod.

The regional prosecutor, Valery Maksimenko, did not respond to several requests for comment.

On the day of the Novaya Gazeta raid, the police removed computers from the offices of the Foundation to Support Tolerance, a nonprofit group that has been harassed for four years after criticizing the Kremlin and the war in Chechnya.

The authorities seem especially distrustful of the foundation because it receives money from the National Endowment for Democracy, an American nonprofit group financed by the United States government. The

Kremlin has blamed Western pro-democracy groups for fomenting popular uprisings in Ukraine, Georgia and elsewhere in recent years, and vowed that that sort of thing would never happen in Russia.

The Federal Security Service, known by its initials in Russian, F.S.B., has interrogated the tolerance foundation's workers, family members and friends. Its leaders, Stanislav Dmitriyevsky and Oksana Chelysheva, have received death threats. And as part of a smear campaign, the Volga regional television station showed Russian soldiers being beheaded in Chechnya and said the group had justified such killings.

In October, when the foundation held a memorial for Anna Politkovskaya, an opposition journalist killed in 2006, several foreign human rights advocates were arrested in Nizhny Novgorod. The police again raided the foundation's offices, and the authorities froze its bank accounts, saying it supported terrorism.

"The ruling elite nowadays has no ideology," Ms. Chelysheva said. "Their only aim is to obtain as much power as possible, to keep this power, by whatever means, and to profiteer off this power. In this respect, these people, who are so cynical, are much more dangerous than was the Communist Party of the U.S.S.R."

The group had been called the Russian-Chechen Friendship Society, and it focused on exposing what it deemed human rights violations in the Russian war against separatists in Chechnya. But it ran afoul of the Kremlin, which deemed its work as little more than collaboration with the enemy.

Prosecutors accused the society of extremism and shut it down after it republished letters from two Chechen separatist leaders. Mr. Dmitriyevsky was convicted of inciting ethnic hatred and received a suspended prison sentence.

A Push for Legitimacy

While the Kremlin has succeeded in discrediting and stifling opposition parties, it has nonetheless faced a predicament of its own making. Elections draw little public interest now that they are essentially noncompetitive, and leaders of the governing party fear a low turnout. If relatively few people vote, then Mr. Putin's claim to a widespread following could be called into question. So the authorities have also focused their energies on getting people to the polls.

Though Mayor Bulavinov and Mr. Nekrasov, the United Russia leader, said residents were not compelled to support the party, numerous interviews in the city and a review of municipal records indicated otherwise. It was clear that strong-arm tactics were common before the December elections in Nizhny Novgorod, and the opposition said it expected them again before the presidential election on March 2.

At the GAZ vehicle factory, known for its Volga sedan, workers were not only ordered to vote and then phone in from the polling place afterward: some had to obtain absentee ballots and fill them out in front of their bosses.

"If you don't vote for United Russia, it will be very bad," a worker named Aleksandr recalled, characterizing the pressure on the rank and file.

The coercive voter drive clearly had the desired effect, in the Kremlin's view at least. After the election, the GAZ president, Nikolai Pugin, who is a senior United Russia leader and a regional lawmaker, announced that nearly 80 percent of his workers had voted, far higher than the city's overall turnout, 51 percent. The Kremlin rewarded Mr. Pugin by making one of his workers a deputy in the federal Parliament.

Asked this month about the high turnout, Mr. Pugin said in an interview that his workers had voted freely. "People see positive changes and as a result, they express their opinion," he said.

The public schools also were caught up in the campaign. Parents at some schools were ordered to attend mandatory meetings with representatives of United Russia, and the children were used to drag their parents to the polls.

"It was the same scenario at all the schools," a teacher said. "And it was all from the city's leadership. The school directors were given instructions, and they carried them out."

Regional officials were vigilant about developments at local universities, particularly two of the largest, Lobachevsky State and Volga State. Students said they were warned not to join marches sponsored by the Other Russia coalition. And they said that before the elections, administrators issued a threat: if you do not vote for the ruling party, you will be evicted from your dorms.

"Everyone was frightened, and our group, in full, went and voted, like a line of soldiers marching," said a Volga State student.

Administrators at both universities said the students' statements about pressure were false.

Yet it did not stop with the voting.

Shortly after election day, several hundred Lobachevsky students were told that they were being bused to Moscow, but the university would not say why. When they were let off near Red Square, they found themselves among a huge throng of people.

It was only then that they realized that they had become unwilling participants in a rally sponsored by Nashi, a fiercely pro-Kremlin youth group, to celebrate United Russia's triumph and to congratulate Mr. Putin.

#10

Holding Medvedev to His Words

By Jackson Diehl

Washington Post, February 25, 2008

Dmitry Medvedev, the man Vladimir Putin has appointed to be elected as Russia's president next Sunday, is so slavishly devoted to his patron that he has begun imitating his physical quirks. That includes "how he lays his hands on the table or how he stresses key words in speeches," not to mention walking with "fast and abrupt steps," according to the Reuters journalist Oleg Shchedrov.

Medvedev presumably won't be exercising his power as president to dismiss the prime minister -- the position Putin is about to assume -- anytime soon. Yet the diminutive 42-year-old former law professor has been making some interesting statements the past couple of weeks. For example: "Russia is a country of legal nihilism. No European country can boast such a universal disregard for the rule of law."

Or: "Freedom is inseparable from the actual recognition by the people of the power of law. The supremacy of the law should become one of our basic values." Or: "One of the key elements of our work in the next four years will be ensuring the independence of our legal system from the executive and legislative branches of power."

It's hard to believe that Medvedev could mean this. After all, the man he is to succeed has, according to estimates by Russian and Western analysts, accumulated a \$40 billion fortune while in office, ranging from shares in Russian energy companies to an apartment in Paris. On his watch, 14 journalists -- almost all of them Kremlin critics -- have been murdered, but none of the killers has been brought to justice. Relations with Britain are icy, thanks to Putin's refusal to act on Scotland Yard's case against the former KGB agent it says poisoned a Putin critic in London.

But criminality isn't limited to the Kremlin; it may be Russia's single greatest problem. Average citizens are frustrated by everything from the bribes necessary to obtain simple services to the extortion practiced by

police and the susceptibility of judges to payoffs, as well as political orders. Promising the rule of law -- even if he doesn't apply it to Putin and his circle -- may be the juiciest pre-election promise Medvedev can make.

In any case, his pledge was seized upon by Lev Ponomarev, the courageous and pragmatic leader of the Russian movement For Human Rights, which is fighting an uphill battle to retard the country's return to Soviet-style lawlessness. Ponomarev was in Washington this month to lobby the Bush administration and the presidential campaigns; as he explained it, Russia's presidential transition offers a rare opportunity for outsiders to press Moscow to adhere to basic international standards.

"I don't have any big illusions," Ponomarev told me. "I think Mr. Medvedev is just another face of Mr. Putin. On the other hand it provides an opportunity to follow up on the rhetoric about the rule of law. If Mr. Medvedev says A, maybe it is possible to pressure him to say B. What can B be? It can be specific steps for restoring and enforcing legal norms."

Ponomarev said that President Bush and his successor can start by pushing Medvedev to stop using the law as an instrument of political repression. That would mean ending such practices as the prosecution of liberal academics on bogus espionage charges; the involuntary commitment of opposition activists to psychiatric wards, or their draft into the military; and the campaigns against human rights and other civil society groups based on supposed tax violations or breaches of local ordinances.

Next comes what Ponomarev called "the torture camps": a re-emerging gulag of some 50 prison colonies, closed to the outside world, where prisoners are subjected to systematic violence and abuse. Ponomarev's group has documented these practices in photographs and videos smuggled out of the camps, many of which are controlled by the same officials or clans that managed them in the Soviet era.

Finally, there is the legal persecution of those who report such truths. On Friday, state prosecutors brought criminal charges against Ponomarev himself, claiming that he had slandered Gen. Yuri Kalinin, the head of the prison camp system. Ponomarev's travel documents were also revoked; his lawyers believe he is being punished for speaking out in the United States.

"It seems to me that a country that is a member of the G-8," the group of rich democracies that Russia was allowed into a decade ago, "cannot afford to have political prisoners and to have torture in its prison camps," Ponomarev said to me. It also shouldn't be allowed to prosecute human rights activists who try to promote the rule of law. Medvedev ought to be asked by President Bush and other Western leaders to explain how his talk of ending "legal nihilism" squares with the charges against Ponomarev -- before the new president gets his first invitation to a G-8 summit.

#11

Who will rule Russia after March 2?

By Matt Siegel

JTA, February 24, 2008

Although it's hard to tell by the unusually bare streets here, it's still winter in Russia. This year, however, instead of piles of snow, the streets of the Russian capital have been blanketed by election posters.

In every public space, posters extol Russians to cast their ballots on March 2 in a presidential campaign derided by observers and most voters as a *fait accompli*.

In one poster, a smiling family is pictured sledding down a white hill with the message, "Everyone in the family to vote, together!" Even metro cards have been stamped with the Russian national emblem and a reminder to riders to do their civic duty.

It's not much of a contest, however.

With Russia's popular but term-limited president, Vladimir Putin, having anointed First Deputy Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev as his successor, Medvedev is all but assured a landslide victory.

Part of this is due to Putin's enormous popularity. Indeed, even some of the regime's harshest critics concede that Russians' standard of life has improved significantly during Putin's eight years in the Kremlin.

With Russia's tiny opposition largely being excluded from the process -- no major opposition candidates have even been allowed to register -- the carefully stage-managed vote for Putin's successor is being seen as a referendum on Putin's rule.

Putin has declared that he will head the Medvedev government as prime minister -- an indication that he doesn't plan to cede power.

So while there is little question about the election's outcome, there are many unanswered questions about the transition of power, such as it is, its long-term impact on Russia and, for Russia's Jews, its impact on their community.

In many ways the fate of Russia's Jewish community over the past eight years generally has mirrored that of Russians. No comparable period in Russian history has had as much security, stability and growth of Jewish communal life. Life for Jews here has improved even as political dissent has become more treacherous in Russia.

Michael Savin, a spokesman for the Russian Jewish Congress, praised Putin for helping restore Jewish communal life but refused to answer any political questions.

"The diversity of Jewish life in Russia serves as a proof that the policy of state-directed anti-Semitism has vanished into the past," Savin said.

The main questions facing Russians -- Jews and non-Jews -- is how power will be divided between Putin and Medvedev, and will the Russia that Putin has forged survive without him at the helm?

During his tenure Putin "accumulated both formal and informal authority," said Masha Lipman, an analyst at the Carnegie Center in Moscow. "Now that he's handing over the formal authority to Medvedev, what happens to the informal part?"

Under the Russian constitution, the president is commander in chief of the Russian armed forces and responsible for setting the direction of foreign and domestic policy. The role of prime minister traditionally has been quite weak, but Putin himself has made clear he intends to wield significant influence from his new post.

Putin will be leaving office at the pinnacle of his popularity and power. According to a recent poll by the Levada Center, an independent Moscow-based research organization, Putin's approval rating in January was 86 percent.

Although Medvedev enjoys high approval ratings, too, little is known about him. Medvedev's main appeal seems to stem from Putin's endorsement and the tremendous resources thrown behind his campaign by the state.

"Right now Medvedev is certainly not his own man; his nomination is not due to his own political campaign," Lipman said. "It's due to the fact that Putin hand-picked him and offered him to the public and to the elite as his choice. This is the way that people perceive him."

Medvedev has made almost no major policy speeches during the election cycle, and coverage of him on state-controlled media is constant, glowing and vague. The 42-year-old law professor is said to be a

reformer, but on foreign policy issues he has uttered little more than vagaries about increasing cooperation with the West.

Russia's election campaign has been widely criticized in the West both for the use of state-controlled media to advance the party of power's candidate and the exclusion of opposition figures.

For the second time in four months, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe announced that its monitors will boycott a Russian election due to restrictions on the number of observers allowed in the country and the duration of their stay. In December, the OSCE did the same with elections for Russia's Duma.

"The restrictions that were imposed on us by the Russian authorities basically forced us not to send an observation mission for the upcoming elections," said OSCE spokesperson Jens-Hagen Eschenbaecher.

Medvedev will face three opponents in the election, none of whom is capable of mounting a serious challenge. Communist leader Gennady Zyuganov, perennial also-ran Vladimir Zhirinovskiy and the little-known Democratic Party's Andrei Bogdanov were the only candidates allowed to register. Former Prime Minister Mikhail Kasyanov, a strong critic of the Kremlin, was disqualified for allegedly submitting forged signatures.

The don't-rock-the-boat message from the Kremlin seems to have been picked up in the Jewish community as well. Of Russia's three major Jewish communal organizations, only the Chabad-led Federation of Jewish Communities of Russia, which has thrived here due to what many see as its leaders' connections in the Kremlin, was willing to discuss the political situation with JTA.

The federation's Rabbi Berel Lazar praised Putin for combating anti-Semitism, promoting interfaith dialogue and strengthening the country. Asked about Putin's supposed rollback of democracy and human rights, Lazar blamed the West.

"I think that the West in general doesn't really understand Russia all the way," he told JTA.

"I'm not saying that everything here is the best, but the country needs a different kind of leadership and not necessarily the kind you have in America today," Lazar said. "To try to apply the same standard to Russia is not a good idea."

#12

Russia's Medvedev faces anti-Semitic attacks

By Amie Ferris-Rotman

Reuters, February 26, 2008

Allegations by nationalists that Vladimir Putin's chosen successor, Dmitry Medvedev, has Jewish roots have brought anti-Semitism to the surface on the margins of Russia's presidential election campaign.

The first deputy prime minister, who is all but assured of victory on Sunday because he has Putin's support, has said he belongs to the Russian Orthodox faith.

But some nationalist groups say his mother's maiden name, Shaposhnikova, is Jewish, and that he is unfit to be president because of this.

Medvedev's campaign staff declined to confirm or deny he has Jewish roots. The Kremlin condemns all forms of anti-Semitism.

Medvedev's faith has not been raised by mainstream media but has been widely discussed on far-right Internet discussion groups in postings that are a reminder of the discrimination and persecution Jews in Russia have faced for hundreds of years.

"It's common knowledge. Medvedev never hid his sympathy towards Judaism," Nikolai Bondarik, who heads the nationalist Russian Party in Medvedev's home town of St Petersburg, told Reuters.

"A president ought to be related by blood with his people. Imagine if Japan was run by a Chinese president," he said.

Moscow's chief rabbi said the suggestions that Medvedev has Jewish roots offered a new take on a well-worn theme among Russian nationalists.

"In the '90s groups said (President Boris) Yeltsin was Jewish. The same has been said of (U.S. President) George Bush," said Pinchas Goldschmidt, who is also Chairman of the European Conference of Rabbis.

"Anyone who is against xenophobia and racism is seen by some circles as 'internationalist', or 'somewhat Jewish', he said.

Other political figures have been targeted by far-right groups. A video montage on the www.youtube.com Internet site shows a photograph of one election rival, Andrei Bogdanov, covered with a large Star of David.

Anti-Kremlin campaigner Garry Kasparov, a former world chess champion, is part-Jewish. One far-right website said he was not qualified to criticise a pro-Kremlin politician because of his origins.

HISTORY OF DISCRIMINATION

Leaders of Russia's Jewish community say there are about one million Jews living in the country, a quarter of them in Moscow. They are no strangers to discrimination.

Under empress Catherine the Great, Jews were confined to the Pale of Settlement in western Russia. In 19th century pogroms in such western provinces, Jews were beaten, raped and had their villages burnt down, forcing many to flee.

Russia's Soviet rulers were suspicious of the Jewish community's links to the West through the world Jewish movement. Thousands of Jews had to conceal their identity and about one million fled to the West and Israel in the 1970s and 80s.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, much of the anti-Semitism focused on the "oligarchs" -- businessmen who made huge fortunes almost overnight from the privatisation of state property. Many of them are Jewish.

One far-right group, the Movement Against Illegal Immigration, has a forum on its Internet site where dozens of users debate Medvedev's roots, many using pejorative slang words for Jews.

One viewer posted pictures of two Russian Jewish oligarchs, Roman Abramovich and Boris Berezovsky, asking surfers to compare facial features with Medvedev.

There were about 20 recorded attacks last year on Jewish people and property in Russia, according to the National Conference on Soviet Jewry (NCSJ), a U.S. non-governmental organisation.

They included graffiti on Jewish gravestones saying "Holocaust 2007", a vandalised synagogue in the far eastern port of Vladivostok and an assault on a visiting rabbi from Canada.

But thousands of Jews who left the Soviet Union and moved to the West are coming back to Russia, many of them attracted by jobs and opportunities in the country's booming economy.

#13

Medvedev Foe Plays Anti-Semitism Card

**By ANGELA CHARLTON
AP, February 27, 2008**

Dmitry Medvedev has faced little public criticism as he coasts toward Russia's presidency. But a fringe extremist group is trying to stir up voters to turn against him in Sunday's election with claims the candidate might have Jewish roots.

The bid to tap into Russian anti-Semitism is attracting attention but not many backers, as even other nationalist groups distance themselves from it. Medvedev, a deputy prime minister who enjoys the support of the hugely popular President Vladimir Putin, isn't commenting.

Nikolai Bondarik, who heads a group calling itself the Russian Party, says Medvedev's mother is Jewish, citing what he calls her Jewish maiden name, Shaposhnikova, and information from unidentified friends of hers. He offers no solid proof, but says voters should be informed.

"It has nothing to do with anti-Semitism," he said by telephone Wednesday from St. Petersburg. "I just think Russia's president should be Russian."

Russian nationalists have persecuted Jews for centuries, from pogroms that wiped out whole Jewish villages under the czars to systemic discrimination that pushed many Jews to flee the Soviet Union. There have been occasional but persistent attacks on Jews and Jewish graves in recent years.

In a recent magazine interview, Medvedev, 42, talked of his mother's forebears in provincial western Russia. He gave their names and professions — one sewed hats, another was a blacksmith — but said nothing about their ethnic or religious background.

His mother's family name could be Jewish or ethnic Russian. She reportedly lives in Moscow, but officials in his campaign refused to provide information for contacting her. His father died in 2004.

Medvedev, who has described choosing to be baptized in the Russian Orthodox Church at age 23, in the formally atheist Soviet Union, has spoken out against anti-Semitism, saying the government must stamp out anti-Semitic and other xenophobic propaganda. He met with Jewish leaders during Hanukkah.

Russia's Federation of Jewish Communities shrugged off Bondarik's campaign, which spokesman Borukh Gorin called an "attempt to play the Jewish card."

He said that despite continued anti-Semitism in Russia, the claim was not denting widespread support for Medvedev, who is expected to handily beat three other candidates in Sunday's ballot.

Bondarik's claims have generated excited slurs on virulent nationalist Web sites, but they have been ignored in the mainstream, state-controlled media that most Russians rely on for information.

Larger Russian nationalist movements, including the National Bolshevik Party, apparently wary of incurring charges of violating extremism laws, said they refused to take part in a joint march with Bondarik in St. Petersburg last weekend.

"This anti-Semitic 'brand' that he tried to put forward didn't find any support," said Alexander Belov of the Movement Against Illegal Immigration, a well-known group whose Web site is rife with xenophobic commentary. "He looks like a clown."

Belov and others even suggested the Jewish roots "revelation" was a Kremlin plot — but couldn't agree on whether it was aimed at helping Medvedev or hurting him.

One theory is that Medvedev's enemies within the current administration hope to discredit a man viewed by many Russians as too friendly to the West. Russian nationalists have long equated Jews with Western influences they view as dangerous.

Political analyst Stanislav Belkovsky, however, suggested aides for Medvedev may have leaked questions about his mother's background to burnish the candidate's image in the West, casting him as a tolerant figure bravely resisting attack by extremists.

"People (in the West) accuse Putin of being totalitarian and nationalist. To better support Medvedev, they can give this image that he is fighting anti-Semites," Belkovsky said.

Bondarik denies any Kremlin involvement in his claims.

Similar rumors circulated in the past that Putin and other Russian leaders had Jewish roots, also with little effect. Another presidential candidate, Vladimir Zhirinovskiy, is a flamboyant ultranationalist who was once openly anti-Semitic — until he revealed his father was Jewish.

#14

Russian neo-Nazis charged in vandalism JTA Brief, February 25, 2008

Nineteen members of a Russian neo-Nazi group were charged with vandalizing Jewish and Muslim cemeteries.

Prosecutors in Tver, a city of more than 400,000 about 140 miles from Moscow, also charged members of the group Russian National Unity with murder motivated by ethnic hatred and assault, according to a report Monday by the Russian Jewish Web site Jewish.ru.

On Aug. 5, 2005, the suspects allegedly desecrated approximately 50 Jewish gravestones at the Dmitrovo-Cherkassy cemetery, and in October 2006 they allegedly damaged and painted swastikas on some 200 Jewish and Muslim gravestones at the Pervomayskoe and Dmitrovo-Cherkassy cemeteries.

The suspects left leaflets calling for the murder of non-Russians, Jewish.ru reported.

The report had no details about the other charges.

#15

Russian Candidate Denounces Kosovo By C. J. CHIVERS New York Times, February 26, 2008

Dmitri A. Medvedev, Russia's first deputy prime minister and the presumptive successor to President Vladimir V. Putin, on Monday committed the Kremlin to long-term support for Serbia against an independent Kosovo.

Mr. Medvedev appeared in Belgrade, the Serbian capital, with Prime Minister Vojislav Kostunica. It was Mr. Medvedev's first significant foreign-policy appearance since he became the front-runner for Russia's highest office, and he restated Mr. Putin's position and made clear that it would be his own.

"We proceed from the understanding that Serbia is a single state with its jurisdiction spanning its entire territory, and we will stick to this principled stance in the future," he said in remarks reported widely on news broadcasts in Russia.

"Serbia," he added, faces "conditions of illegitimate actions to unilaterally recognize Kosovo."

The United States reacted quickly to Mr. Medvedev's statements, restating its own support for Kosovo, and made clear that its break from Serbia was final, in Washington's view.

"We are going to continue to try to work with both the Russians and the Serbs on this, but I think that it ought to be clear to everybody at this point that Kosovo is never going to be a part of Serbia again," Tom Casey, a State Department spokesman, told reporters, according to The Associated Press.

Mr. Kostunica said Monday that state-sponsored protests against Kosovo's declaration would continue until foreign governments that had recognized Kosovo changed their position.

Kosovo, a province of Serbia that had been under United Nations administration since 1999, declared its independence on Feb. 17. Russia had long objected to Kosovo's intention to seek independence and has called the declaration illegal and a threat to international stability.

The Kremlin has also complained bitterly about Western governments' recognition of Kosovo, warning that it could increase its support for separatist regions in Georgia and Moldova.

In his brief visit, Mr. Medvedev struck notes emphasizing the traditional and continuing ties between Serbia and Russia. He visited the Cathedral of St. Sava in Belgrade with President Boris Tadic, and an oil refinery as well.

Mr. Medvedev, who is also chairman of Gazprom, Russia's natural gas monopoly, signed an agreement to build a section of the South Stream gas pipeline through Serbia. The line will carry Russian gas through the Balkans to the Mediterranean Sea.

Mr. Medvedev has used his presidential campaign to cast himself as a progressive who wants to promote freedom in Russia. His speeches have raised questions about whether he might soften some of Russia's image and ease some of the state's grip on political life. His remarks on Monday, however, overlapped with those of his primary sponsor, Mr. Putin.

At one point, for example, he blamed the West for the unrest that has followed Kosovo's declaration, and any future repercussions. "It is absolutely obvious that the crisis that has happened and is the responsibility of those who have made the illegal decision will unfortunately have long-term consequences for peace on the European continent," he said.

#16

Nevzlin being tried for murder JTA Brief, February 26, 2008

The former president of the Russian Jewish Congress is being put on trial in Russia for murder.

Proceedings against former Yukos co-owner Leonid Nevzlin, who now lives in Israel, are scheduled to begin March 4 in Moscow, according to the Web site Jewish.ru.

The Jewish businessman and philanthropist is being charged with the ordering of multiple murders committed between 1998 and 2002, including those of Moscow businesswoman Valentina Korneyeva and Nefteyugansk Mayor Vladimir Petukhov.

"Preliminary hearings in the matter will be put forth next Tuesday," said Anna Usacheva, head of the press service of the Moscow City Court. "In accordance with the law, those preliminary hearings will take place in a closed courtroom."

Nevzlin's defenders say the charges are baseless and the trial is politically motivated.

Nevzlin, who fled Russia in 2003 as the Kremlin was beginning what many observers said was the politically motivated prosecution of his Yukos partner Mikhail Khodorkovsky, is expected to be tried in absentia. In Israel, Nevzlin is considered one of the country's wealthiest citizens.

The Russian Jewish Congress refused to comment on the trial.

#17

Estonia's President Sounds the Alarm

By Nikolaus von Twickel

The Moscow Times, February 26, 2008

Estonian President Toomas Hendrik Ilves warned that Russia on the eve of its presidential election might be sliding into dictatorship, as Germany did in the 1920s.

"There is a mentality of being stabbed in the back that reminds me of the Weimar republic," Ilves said in an interview, describing the current atmosphere in Russia.

"The Weimar mentality ... is so similar that I really hope that we do not go off in the wrong direction," he said, speaking by telephone from the Estonian capital, Tallinn.

He refused to discuss the March 2 presidential vote specifically, saying that he would not comment on another country's domestic affairs during an election campaign.

Estonia is a vocal critic of Moscow and saw that difficult relationship embark on a collision course last year when it moved a Soviet war memorial in Tallinn, triggering riots among its Russian minority.

Ilves spoke on the eve of the 90th anniversary of Estonia's Feb. 24, 1918, declaration of independence. In weekend celebrations, Ilves conferred awards on Western scholars who have researched communist crimes, including U.S. journalist Anne Appelbaum and historians Robert Conquest, Anthony Beevor and Norman Davies.

A Kremlin spokesman declined to immediately comment on Ilves' remarks late last week and asked that questions be put in writing. He had not replied by Monday.

Moscow refuses to admit responsibility for injustices committed during the Soviet era and maintains that the Red Army liberated Estonia and the other Baltic states from Nazi Germany in 1944.

But Ilves, who was born to Estonian refugees in Stockholm, said it mattered little that he grew up in the United States and not in his homeland because Estonia had been occupied. "This is not ... what we consider part of our culture," he said.

The president rejected the notion that his country was obsessed with its communist past and accused Moscow of continued denial of Stalinist crimes. He said four major reports had recently come out in Russia denying Soviet involvement in the 1940 massacre of 22,000 Polish officers in the Katyn forest. In contrast, he said, denial of the Holocaust is illegal in Europe, and Germany has come to terms with its Nazi past. "Why is it that Germany is a respected country today?" he said.

Moscow, however, has seethed over attempts by Estonia and Latvia to rehabilitate some of its anti-Soviet resistance forces, who fought with the Germans during the war. Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov in January accused both countries of glorifying such collaborators.

Ilves also criticized the Kremlin's notion of sovereign democracy, formulated in response to Western criticism of deficits in political freedom.

He said Estonia and other former Soviet republics offered proof that democracy was possible in post-Soviet societies. "The color revolutions give the lie to the concept of sovereign democracy," he said, referring to the changes toward pro-Western governments in Georgia and Ukraine.

He said Moscow tended to have friendly relations with undemocratic countries. "Why is difficult to have good relations with countries that have come out of communism and are strong liberal democracies? Why is it that despotic post-communist countries are friends, and those that are not despotic are enemies? It doesn't make sense," he said.

Ilves flatly denied that there was any particular reason that Estonia and Russia had especially bad relations. Rather, he argued, Estonia had probably become a "whipping boy" at a time when the Kremlin needed a foreign enemy. "It's convenient to have small little neighbors that you can kick," he said.

He said that the situation reminded him of "Wag the Dog," a 1997 film about a Washington spin doctor who orchestrates a fake war against a small, obscure country to distract voters from a presidential sex scandal.

Ilves suggested that it did not actually matter what foreign policy Estonia followed. "That's why I personally advocate a policy of benign neglect. Until things settle, there isn't really anything we can do. We are the current whipping boy," Ilves said.

Estonia, he said, should care less about Russia and instead focus on the West. "Ninety-five percent of my interest is the European Union, maybe even more," he said, adding that he wanted to make his country of just 1.3 million people "a player" in the 27-member union, focusing on shaping a common foreign policy.

Estonia has come under criticism from other EU members for its critical stance toward Moscow, and they have advocated a more pragmatic course.

But Ilves insisted that Tallinn was not obstructing a more pragmatic policy toward Moscow. "Estonia's foreign policy has been fairly acquiescent," he said, pointing out that his country had not supported Poland's recent veto against talks for a new Partnership and Cooperation Agreement between the EU and Russia.

Plans to get negotiations under way for a new long-term treaty to replace the current one, which dates from 1997, have been postponed several times as relations with Moscow worsened.

Ilves accused the Kremlin of protectionist economic policies hostile to European interests. "The problem is that the behavior on the other side is not improving," he said, stressing that economic relations were far more sensitive than politics.

Moscow has been flexing its muscles by repeatedly shutting off or diverting energy supplies to other former Soviet republics, decisions that have been described as punishment for their steps away from Moscow's sphere of influence.

Ilves complained that kilometer-long truck lines at Estonia's borders were due mainly to the slow handling of customs on the Russian side and said this jeopardized his country's efforts to set up lucrative trading ports.

Prime Minister Viktor Zubkov last week blamed corruption in customs for the gridlock.

Ilves said port deals provided evidence of his country's competitive edge. "This shows the advantages of having an uncorrupt country and integrity of your ports. People want to trade through your ports and not through other ports," he said. Last month, China's Ningbo Port signed a deal to build a \$220 million container terminal in the port of Muuga.

Within the EU, Estonia should strive to play a strong role, he said, citing Luxembourg as a role model. "It does not really matter whether you come from a small country or from a large one. ... What matters is that you come up with good ideas," he said.

As an example, he singled out strengthening legislation in cross-border crime and cyber crime.

During the dispute over the relocation of the Soviet memorial in Tallinn last year, Estonia said government and corporate web sites were attacked by Russian hackers, including some that it linked to the Kremlin.

The Kremlin has denied involvement.

#18

Belarus Imposes New Controls on Foreign Religious Workers

By Jeremy Reynalds

Crosswalk, February 25, 2008

BELARUS -- Belarus has tightened its already strict regulations on foreign religious workers.

Belarus is located in Eastern Europe, east of Poland.

According to a story by Geraldine Fagan on Forum 18 News Service, the changes – which shadow elements of the restrictive 2002 Religion Law – come as Catholics, Orthodox and Protestants prepare to submit over 50,000 signatures petitioning for changes to that Law to the state authorities.

Forum 18 reported that the country's top religious affairs official now has sole discretion in deciding whether religious work by foreign citizens is necessary, according to a new Council of Ministers decree. The Plenipotentiary for Religious and Ethnic Affairs, currently Leonid Gulyako, also has the right not to give reasons for refusing a foreign religious worker's visit.

Forum 18 reported that the Gulyako can also shorten the visit “if the period of time required for realization of the aims for which the foreign citizen is invited does not correspond to that requested.”

In line with the Religion Law, Forum 18 reported the Jan. 30 2008 decree states that only registered religious associations have the right to invite foreign religious workers. These consist of ten or more communities, at least one of which must have functioned in Belarus for 20 years.

The new decree's application procedure for inviting foreign religious workers is much more detailed than its 1999 predecessor, amended most recently in 2006. If invited to teach religion, for example, Forum 18 said a foreign citizen's work experience and the timetable and syllabus of the religious educational institution in question must be submitted.

According to Forum 18, foreign citizens must also now show knowledge of Belarus' state languages (Belarusian and Russian) in order to perform religious work. The only types of religious work not requiring such knowledge, or work experience, are making contact with religious organizations, and “participation in charitable or other mass events by religious organizations whose primary aim is the fulfilment of citizens' religious needs.”

In other ways, however, Forum 18 reported that the Jan. 30 decree duplicates the earlier one. Foreign citizens may conduct religious work for up to a year at a time – but only within houses of worship belonging to or premises continuously rented by an association's affiliate organizations. The transfer of a foreign religious worker from one religious organization to another – such as between parishes – still requires state permission, even for a single worship service.

A Polish Catholic priest was detained after celebrating Mass in breach of this rule while passing through Minsk in Sept. 2006.

The new decree “differs significantly” from its predecessor in the view of Vladimir Lameko, assistant to the Plenipotentiary for Religious and Ethnic Affairs. The application procedure has become stricter, Forum 18

said he told the news service, with different documents now required when requesting permission for various types of religious activity.

Not stated previously, Forum 18 said he claimed, “different places could make different demands.” And while national religious affairs officials used to rely on the reasoning of their regional colleagues when issuing refusals, Forum 18 reported he said, “we are more responsible for decisions now – locally they could make mistakes.”

Rejecting an invitation to a foreign religious worker without explanation could happen previously, however, Lameko assured Forum 18. “There are always reasons – it isn't down to the whim of the Plenipotentiary. But they might be serious - related to state secrets. This is usual in many states.”

Belarus' National Security Concept, signed by President Aleksandr Lukashenko on July 17 2001, includes “the activation of the activity of foreign religious organizations and missionaries to monopolize the spiritual life of society” among fundamental factors posing a threat to national security in the humanitarian sphere.

It also calls, Forum 18 reported, for the counteraction of their “negative influence.” Two Protestants were expelled in 2007, after being accused of harming national security.

Forum 18 commented that “national security” is not an acceptable reason to restrict freedom of thought, conscience or belief under either the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights or the Universal Declaration of Human Rights - both of which Belarus is party to.

Minsk-based religious rights lawyer Dina Shavtsova similarly suggested to Forum 18 that curtailing or refusing a visa without explanation is a generally accepted practice. However, she agreed that whereas previously Belarus did give reasons for refusals – albeit weak – the new decree's provision specifically authorizing the Plenipotentiary for Religious and Ethnic Affairs to refuse invitations without explanation will bolster such initiatives.

Shavtsova told Forum 18 the more detailed invitation procedure, particularly the different documents required for activities such as teaching or studying religion, or acting as a cleric, are the main reason for the decree.

In line with a general trend in Belarusian law over the past five years, Forum 18 said she suggested that a lack of precision in the new detail will result in more selective application. “The decree doesn't define necessary knowledge of state languages. And what is a cleric? Different religions have different criteria; some require theological qualifications, others don't. There is great potential for entirely subjective decisions.”

The Catholic Church is particularly vulnerable to controls on foreign religious workers as more than half of its approximately 350 clergy in Belarus are foreign citizens. Father Alyaksandr Amyalchenya, press secretary to the Catholic Bishops' Conference of Belarus, suggested to Forum 18 that the Jan. 30 decree simply gathers elements already present in different laws, however.

Forum 18 reported that the Jewish community is the only other faith confession with a significant contingent of foreign religious workers. Vladimir Malinkin, who heads Belarus' Hassidic Union of Jewish Religious Communities, told Forum 18 that the new decree combines existing provisions in various laws. Identifying one new element as the requirement that proof of education be translated into one of Belarus' state languages and notarized, he said this was already requested in practice.

According to Forum 18, Malinkin's Union currently has six rabbis from Israel, the USA and France working in Belarus. Previously based in Bobruisk, a seventh ended up leaving the country in early 2007 after his permission to conduct religious activity was not extended, Malinkin confirmed. Israeli rabbi Borukh Lamdan is not barred from Belarus, however, and his Union's chairman is hopeful that he will be able to return to his post. Bobruisk currently has no rabbi.

Lamdan told Forum 18 that his permission for religious work was not renewed in Sept. 2006 on the grounds that he was conducting commercial activity – a charge he denies.

Foreign religious workers invited by local religious communities of various confessions are increasingly being banned.

Father Grzegorz Chudek, the most recent Polish Catholic priest forced to leave the country, did so before Christmas, according to a Catholic source in the south-eastern city of Gomel. Unable to overturn the decision not to extend his religious work permit, she told Forum 18 the Catholic Church has replaced him with another Polish priest not previously in Belarus.

Forum 18 said that Father Chudek originally had to leave by Dec. 2007, apparently due to his criticism of Belarus' social problems in the Polish press. Although he obtained a two-month visa extension, this did not include the right to work in his parish of the Holy Trinity in Rechytsa. The decree controlling religious work by foreign citizens is separate from the visa regime.

Ten Polish Catholic priests and five nuns have been forced out of Belarus since late 2005. Vice-premier Aleksandr Kosinets told a Sept. 19 2007 round table of Belarus' religious leaders that the Catholic Church should end the use of foreign clergy over the next few years.

Shortly after the new decree's publication, "the largest non-political, civil campaign in Belarusian history" - a petition to change the 2002 Religion Law - reached its target of 50,000 signatures, Protestant lawyer Sergei Lukanin told Forum 18. Campaigners now intend to hand copies of the petition over to President Aleksandr Lukashenko, parliament and the Constitutional Court.

Catholics, Orthodox and Protestants began collecting signatures for the petition in late April 2007. Nineteen campaigners were detained for doing so last summer. Forum 18 said that Vice-Premier Kosinets has previously categorically rejected calls led by the petition campaign to change the Religion Law, which is the most repressive law of its kind in Europe.

#19

Armenia head threatens action as opposition rallies

By Margarita Antidze

Reuters, February 23, 2008

Armenia's president won the support of top security and army chiefs on Saturday for tough action against opposition supporters protesting this week's election, which they say was rigged.

Crowds of opposition supporters gathered for a fourth straight day in the capital's central Freedom Square, demanding authorities annul the results of the Feb. 19 presidential election won by Prime Minister Serzh Sarkysyan.

Sarkysyan, who is 53 and is an ally of incumbent President Robert Kocharyan, won nearly 53 percent of the vote compared with 21.5 percent for his nearest rival, former President Levon Ter-Petrosyan, according to official results.

Ter-Petrosyan's supporters say the election was rigged and charge ballot stuffing and intimidation.

Saturday's rally in the Caucasus mountains country, which lasted for about five hours and was attended by around 35,000 people, was the largest opposition protest since the election.

"Robert Kocharyan characterised the events taking place in Armenia as an attempt to seize power by illegal means," the presidential press service said in a statement issued after Kocharyan's meeting with top police officers.

"Our actions will be resolute and tough, they will be directed towards safeguarding stability and the country's constitutional order," the statement quoted Kocharyan as saying.

Kocharyan then met the chiefs of the army and national security service. "The nation's stability should in no case become a bargaining chip," he told senior security officials.

Ter-Petrosyan shrugged off the threats.

"Our struggle will continue as before, by lawful means," he told Reuters. "Our rallies will go on, just as well as marches and picketing," he added.

"They (the authorities) themselves are the ones who violated the country's constitutional order."

"Levon is the president!" chanted the rally. "Victory!" and "We will fight till the end", shouted the protesters.

An opposition tent camp will continue its night vigil in central Yerevan.

Armenia, an ancient Christian nation of 3.2 million, lies in a region that is emerging as a key route for pumping Caspian Sea oil and gas to world markets, though Armenia has no pipelines of its own.

Western election monitors said the ballot was broadly in line with the country's international commitments but further improvements were necessary.

Kocharyan and Sarksyian are both natives of Nagorno-Karabakh, a region over which Armenia and neighbouring Azerbaijan fought a war in the 1990s. Some analysts say that still-unresolved conflict could flare again into violence.

Turkey closed its border with Armenia and froze diplomatic relations in solidarity with Turkic-speaking Azerbaijan.

Relations with Ankara are also complicated by the massacre of Armenians by Ottoman Turks during World War One, viewed by Yerevan as genocide, a charge Turkey strongly denies.

Turkey congratulated Sarksyian on his election win and said it hoped for better ties with the Christian neighbour.

#20

Out of Armenia, something new? The Economist, February 21, 2008

ELECTIONS in former Soviet republics rarely yield surprises. The incumbent wins; the opposition cries foul; it takes to the streets. The presidential vote in Armenia on February 19th ran true to form. Serzh Sarkisian, the prime minister, won 53% of the vote, enough to avert a runoff with his main rival, Levon Ter-Petrosian, with 21%. Mr Ter-Petrosian, a former president, said Mr Sarkisian had stolen the vote even before ballots were counted. Independent observers talked of ballot stuffing and intimidation.

Yet, as thousands of demonstrators gathered in central Yerevan, monitors from the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe opined that the election was "mostly in line with the country's international commitments", even though the vote count in 16% of stations was "bad or very bad". That verdict makes it more unlikely that the opposition can overturn the result.

Assuming Mr Sarkisian does get the top job, he will have his work cut out. Small and landlocked, Armenia has been blockaded by Azerbaijan and Turkey since it won a vicious war in 1994 for possession of Nagorno-Karabakh, a province of Soviet Azerbaijan that was mostly populated by Armenians. Russian

troops patrol some of its borders and, though economic growth has been fuelled by a building boom and dollops of aid from America and the Armenian diaspora, much of the recent wealth is concentrated in the hands of oligarchs. Russia has a huge stake in the economy.

Like the outgoing president, Robert Kocharian, Mr Sarkisian is from Nagorno-Karabakh. Both men were commanders in the war. But unlike his hawkish predecessor, Mr Sarkisian is "a pragmatist, a skilled manager, and receptive to new ideas," argues Tigran Mkrtchyan, a foreign-policy expert in Yerevan. As defence minister, Mr Sarkisian oversaw Armenia's adherence to a NATO scheme for former Soviet colonies. This week Mr Sarkisian told your correspondent he was ready to make peace with Azerbaijan so long as it was "an honourable one". This might include ceding some of the conquered territories outside Nagorno-Karabakh. On Turkey, he struck a more hawkish note, calling Turkey's pre-conditions for establishing diplomatic ties "unacceptable". Yet long-stalled unofficial talks between the two countries are expected to resume once Mr Sarkisian takes over.

What transpires between Armenia, Turkey and Azerbaijan is not up to Mr Sarkisian alone. Clearing the government of corruption is. One test will be the number of allegedly crooked ministers he boots out of the cabinet. Should he flunk this, Mr Ter-Petrossian's talk of "criminal rule" will ring ever more true.

#21

Chief Rabbi of Ukraine Meets with State Committee Representative on Religious affairs FEOR, February 26, 2008

Chief Rabbi of Ukraine Azriel Chaikin held a meeting with the Chairperson of Ukraine's State Committee on Ethnic and Religious Affairs, Alexander Sagan, where they discussed a series of issues of common interest. This was Mr. Sagan's first meeting with the Jewish leader since coming to this position. Chief Rabbi Chaikin took this occasion to congratulate the official on his appointment and expressed optimism that his actions would assist in fortifying inter-ethnic and inter-religious relations in Ukraine.

Chief Rabbi Chaikin explained that a coordination (steering) committee will soon be founded amongst representatives of Ukraine's leading Jewish religious organizations in order to reach a unified position with respect to the repatriation of Torah scrolls. To this day, there are many that remain in the holdings of various archives, museums and other state institutions.

In his turn, Alexander Sagan expressed support for the Jewish community in stating that a legal mechanism for the scrolls' return is currently being developed. For this to happen in a systematic manner, the two leaders agreed that it would be necessary to amend current legislation. Such a bill has already been put forward by one Deputy, Alexander Feldman. "At last, such a legal act may effectively resolve this sensitive issue," explained Chief Rabbi Azriel Chaikin.

The conversation also addressed the issue of anti-Semitism in Ukraine, the activities of the Chief Rabbinate of Ukraine and of the Federation of Jewish Communities of Ukraine. Additionally, the two leaders discussed several new projects that the State Committee on Ethnic and Religious Affairs will be introducing in the near future.

#22

Lithuania investigating Holocaust historian JTA Brief, February 27, 2008

Lithuania is investigating a former chairman of Yad Vashem on suspicion that he murdered civilians during the Holocaust.

Yitzhak Arad, a noted historian and partisan fighter who served 21 years as the chairman of Israel's national Holocaust museum, is suspected by Lithuanian prosecutors of being involved in the wartime killing of

Lithuanian civilians. The issue came to light when Lithuanian authorities sought to question Arad, a request Israel has refused.

On Wednesday, the current chairman of Yad Vashem, Avner Shalev, delivered a written protest of the matter to visiting Lithuanian Foreign Minister Petras Vaitiekunas. Shalev urged the minister to bring the matter to a speedy resolution.

"It is clear that initiating criminal proceedings into Dr. Arad's involvement in Lithuanian partisan activity during World War II is tantamount to a call for an investigation into all partisan activity," Shalev wrote. "Any attempt to equate those actions with illegal activities, thereby defining them as criminal, is a dangerous perversion of the events that occurred in Lithuania during the war."

#23

War looming for once-Jewish city?

By Matt Siegel

JTA, February 27, 2008

Shuffling cautiously along the snow-packed road that cuts through the heart of the demilitarized zone, the soldiers take to joking around, asking about a visitor's provenance.

"Siegel. That's like Steven Seagal the actor, right?" inquires one Kalashnikov-wielding soldier.

He seems disappointed but nonplused when the visitor answers in the negative, pointing out that Seagal is probably not a Jewish last name.

"No, he must be Jewish," the soldier responds. "He seems like such a nice guy."

Everyone has a good laugh while a few make kung fu gestures. Further down the hill, the city of Tskhinvali hangs in ghostlike suspense, as though the last decade never happened.

Tskhinvali is a treasure trove of Jewish history, with the crumbling houses of the old Jewish quarter and its centerpiece, a grand synagogue from the 19th century.

But as the capital of the de-facto government of the Republic of South Ossetia, Tskhinvali is also another kind of treasure -- one that seems ready to tear this region apart once again.

South Ossetia is one of two breakaway provinces of Georgia with Abkhazia, which is autonomous but remains part of Georgia.

A cease-fire since 1992 has prevented Georgia from waging war to hold onto South Ossetia, which has quasi-autonomous status as a conflict zone under the tripartite stewardship of Russia, Georgia and the rebels.

But with Russia, the main patron of the rebel government in South Ossetia, incensed over Western recognition of Kosovo's recent declaration of independence from Serbia, that soon could change.

If, as some here believe, a war is on the horizon, Tskhinvali and what remains of its rich Jewish heritage again will fall directly in the line of fire.

Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov suggested recently that Russia might recognize the independence of the breakaway regions of Georgia, a country whose government has tilted toward the United States and away from Russia in recent years.

Georgia's attempts to cozy up to the West -- it has applied for NATO membership and is a member of the World Trade Organization -- have heightened tensions with Russia, its traditional patron. In October 2006,

four Russian servicemen were expelled from the country for spying. That prompted a Russian embargo, with 70 percent of the country's export market disappearing overnight.

The sudden talk about possible Russian recognition of the two breakaway provinces has ratcheted up the rhetoric on both sides, prompting Georgia's leaders to warn that they will not tolerate the loss of the provinces.

On Feb. 14, during a speech in the Georgian capital of Tbilisi to the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations, Georgian President Mikhail Saakashvili said his country "does not have one kilometer of land to spare."

In 1989, fighting between ethnic Ossetians and Georgians began in Tskhinvali. Although Soviet troops were able to maintain some semblance of order, it fell apart after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, when South Ossetia declared independence and the region descended into civil war.

From the hills above Tskhinvali, the Georgian army rained down artillery shells by night and sniper fire by day. The Jewish quarter was the most heavily damaged area of the city.

Standing in front of her crumbling home, 69-year-old Sonya Gagloeva, an ethnic Ossetian, pointed to homes that used to belong to Jews.

"This whole neighborhood was Jewish," she said, gesturing with her arm. "That street was Jewish and so was that one. They were all Jewish."

Gagloeva worked at the synagogue for 20 years. She spoke fondly of her neighbors and recalled with sorrow the circumstances under which they left.

"They were very religious. Twice a day they would come to pray in the synagogue," she said. "At the time of the war they had to leave. There were explosions and shooting everywhere."

The few Jews who remained in Tskhinvali after the collapse of the Soviet empire appear to have fled completely. Some settled in Tbilisi, while many others moved to Israel. Eventually the civil war accomplished what decades of Soviet repression could not: It ran the Jews out of Tskhinvali.

Today the battle scars of that war are all too visible. Under the de facto control of the rebels since the shaky '92 cease-fire, Tskhinvali has atrophied. Homes observant Jews occupied for centuries -- several local Ossetians and Georgians recall being paid to light their stoves on Shabbat -- are little more than rubble. They are a reminder, frozen in time, of why the Jews fled.

Tskhinvali once was one of the most Jewish cities in the country. There was even a yeshiva here, Gagloeva and others said.

But the real treasure of Tskhinvali is its historical significance as a nexus of Jewish learning and a place for the blending of Jewish traditions.

In 1891, an Ashkenazi rabbi named Avraham Khvolis moved to Tskhinvali from Lithuania, where he had studied at the Slabodker yeshiva. In Tskhinvali, Khvolis founded a school and synagogue, and he taught European rabbinical thought to Georgian Jews.

Jewish life flourished under Khvolis, and Tskhinvali remained a major communal center until the war in the early 1990s.

In recognition of the late rabbi's importance, the Georgian government issued a stamp in his honor in 2006 - the first stamp in a former Soviet republic honoring a rabbi.

Today the synagogue Khvolis founded sits abandoned on a desolate street with what appears to be a hole from an artillery shell in its facade. On Sundays, according to a translator for the local government, Baptist services are held there.

The government of Georgia is uncompromising in its position on South Ossetia. Saakashvili has said he won't consider Georgia free until Jews are allowed to return to worship in Tskhinvali.

Temur Iakobashvili, the newly appointed minister for reintegration, who is Jewish, said the government would use force to accomplish that goal should Russia recognize South Ossetia.

If Russia goes ahead with recognition, "there is only one choice to take," he said. "Georgians will think to regain their territory by other means."

Pressed to elaborate, Iakobashvili is terse.

"Military. It doesn't have to be elaborated," he said. "It's the only choice that's left."

While South Ossetia's independence is not recognized by any country, the de facto government in Tskhinvali draws at least some inspiration from an unlikely source: the State of Israel.

"You're Jewish," Minister of Information Irina Gagloeva tells a visiting reporter, "so you should understand our position."

It's still unclear whether Russia will follow through on its threat to recognize South Ossetia and whether that indeed would prompt another war with Tskhinvali in the crosshairs.

Despite the looming dangers, some in Tskhinvali hope the Jews one day will return here.

"I remember when [the Jews] left," said Irina Gagloeva, no relation to Sonya Gagloeva. "God willing, someday they'll return."