



WASHINGTON, D.C. March 21, 2008

TO: NCSJ Leadership and Interested Parties

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

In Brief: Student Mission to Moscow

Dear Friends:

This past week, I led an American University Hillel student delegation on an NCSJ mission to Moscow. We were joined by a group of Moscow Hillel students for the eight day Student Leadership program, organized by NCSJ in conjunction with AU Hillel, Moscow Hillel, and the Hillel International Center, the program received support from the Jewish Federation of Greater Washington.

Modeled on previous successful programs, in Moscow and in Dnepropetrovsk, Ukraine, the purpose of the program was to train young activists and leaders to work together to improve Jewish life, build a strong civil society in Moscow, and to create awareness of the unique relationship that exists between the Jewish communities of Washington and Moscow.

The program paired the American and Russian students as roommates for the week and provided them with an intensive schedule of meetings and experiences which included the American and Israeli Embassies, the Russian Ministry of Regional Development, Echo Moskvoy Radio Station, the Human Rights Commissioner of Russia, NBC News in Moscow, as well as meetings with a broad range of Russian Jewish leadership.

Meetings were held with Chief Rabbi Berel Lazar and Rabbi Avram Berkowitz, of the Federation of Jewish Communities of the CIS; Rabbi Pinchas Goldschmidt, Chief Rabbi of Moscow; representatives from the Euro-Asian Jewish Congress, Russian Jewish Congress, American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee, and the Jewish Agency for Israel. We also visited a number of the organizational partners who participate in the Jewish Federation of Greater Washington's Washington-Moscow Connection. These included the Lipman School, Chesed Chamah, Meod Jewish Community Center and the Nikitskaya Jewish Community Center.

Our focus was on understanding the Jewish community in Russia today and the role the American and Russian Jewish communities can play in helping to develop a civil society there. The program included discussions on strategies for combating anti-Semitism and for strengthening the rule of law and religious freedom in this fledgling democracy.

The group toured and shopped together, celebrated Shabbat, enjoyed home hospitality, discussed politics, and developed close friendships. There were painful discussions about experiences with anti-Semitism, some disagreements about the role of government in monitoring international human rights, interesting perspectives presented on freedom of the press, and less serious conversations about music and college life. In the coming weeks I will share with you some of the student's reflections on their experience as well as a DVD of the program.

Sincerely,

Lesley Weiss
Director of Community Service and Cultural Affairs



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

NCSJ WEEKLY NEWS BRIEF
Washington, D.C. March 21, 2008

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

1. *Russian Ire at U.S. Missile Plan Seems to Ease After Talks*
By CLIFFORD J. LEVY
New York Times, March 21, 2008
2. *U.S. rights report shows double standards: Russia*
By Dmitry Solovyov
Reuters, March 14, 2008
3. *Authorities Announce List Of Organisations To Be Liquidated*
Itar-Tass, March 12, 2008
4. *U.S. is Russia's friend despite disagreements - David Kramer, U.S. diplomat*
Interfax Russia
5. *Level of anti-Semitism in Russia has decreased, while Ukraine has it growing - Lazar*
Interfax Religion, March 18, 2008
6. *The Return of Soviet Dissidents*
By Leon Aron
The Moscow Times OpEd, March 19, 2008
7. *Good Policies Should Make Good Neighbors*
By Fyodor Lukyanov
The Moscow Times OpEd, March 19, 2008
8. *Super Spy Agency in the Works*
By Matt Siegel
The Moscow Times, March 19, 2008
9. *2 Presidents' Last Chance to Make History*
The Moscow Times OpEd, March 20, 2008
10. *Medvedev Says Civil Society Needs Policy Oversight Role*
By Oleg Shchedrov
Reuters, March 20, 2008
11. *Russian Jews suspend Muslim dialogue after mufti comment*
World Jewish Congress, March 21, 2008

12. *Activist's Computers Seized in Police Raid*
The Associated Press, March 21, 2008
13. *Russia Plans Mideast Forum*
Reuters, March 21, 2008
14. *OSCE, CE call on Ukraine to further development of free media*
Unian, March 18, 2008
15. *Bush to visit Ukraine ahead of NATO summit*
AFP, March 13, 2008
16. *Trust Ukraine scholars*
Editorial
Kyiv Post, March 13, 2008
17. *Jewish politicians bolster ties in Kyiv*
By Anna Poludenko
Kyiv Post, March 13 2008
18. *Hundreds march in Latvia to commemorate Waffen SS unit*
The Associated Press, March 16, 2008
19. *Lithuania shamed by skinhead march in capital, president says*
AFP, March 20, 2008
20. *U.S. signs Latvia, Estonia visa deals, EU glowers*
By Patrick Lannin
Reuters, March 12, 2008
21. *OSCE Striving To Defuse Armenia's Post-Election Crisis*
By Jean-Christophe Peuch
Eurasianet, March 14, 2008
22. *UN Calls for Armenian Pullout From Karabakh*
By Edith M. Lederer
The Associated Press, March 17, 2008
23. *Georgian leader refuses to rule out force against separatists*
AFP, March 17, 2008
24. *U.S. Cuts Off Visas in Minsk in a Dispute With Belarus*
By MICHAEL SCHWIRTZ
New York Times, March 21, 2008
25. *US ambassador to Belarus meets with EU officials in Brussels*
Belorusskie Novosti, March 15, 2008
26. *Uzbekistan is Looking West, Turkmenistan East*
By Sergei Arbenin
Ferghana.ru, March 14, 2008
27. *MOLDOVA SEEKS GREAT-POWER ENDORSEMENT OF ITS NEUTRALITY*
By Vladimir Socor
Eurasia Daily Monitor, March 14, 2008

#1

Russian Ire at U.S. Missile Plan Seems to Ease After Talks

By CLIFFORD J. LEVY

New York Times, March 21, 2008

In the wake of high-level talks between the United States and Russia, the Kremlin appears to be expressing somewhat less hostility toward the Bush administration's plan for a missile defense system in Poland and the Czech Republic.

In an interview published Thursday in the newspaper Izvestia, the Russian foreign minister, Sergey V. Lavrov, said the American side had presented proposals that could assuage some Russian concerns. The proposals were offered during a visit this week to Moscow by Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice and Defense Secretary Robert M. Gates.

The exact details of the proposals have not been disclosed by either side. President Vladimir V. Putin said at the talks that a letter from President Bush containing the proposals was "a very serious document." Mr. Putin seemed to adopt a more conciliatory tone than he had at earlier such meetings.

Still, the two countries are not close to an agreement on the missile defense system, and the White House has made clear that it will press ahead no matter what.

In the Izvestia interview, Mr. Lavrov said the Americans had promised that the Russians could monitor the system in Eastern Europe.

"The American side is prepared to offer us a whole series of confidence-building measures so we can be convinced that the system does not work against us," Mr. Lavrov said. "The idea of these measures boils down to the following: we will have an opportunity to watch what the radar is doing and what the real condition is of the base for interceptor missiles, using both human and technical means."

The Bush administration wants to put tracking radar in the Czech Republic and 10 missile interceptors in Poland, both intended to counter missile attacks from Iran. Mr. Putin has opposed the plan, saying that it could threaten Russia. The Kremlin also appears to be angry because the system would be in former Soviet satellites that are now part of NATO.

The White House has repeatedly emphasized that the system was not intended to be used against Russia, but the Kremlin has not relented.

On Thursday, Ms. Rice and Mr. Gates told Mr. Bush that their meetings in Moscow had been "good and constructive," said Dana M. Perino, a White House spokeswoman.

In an interview on Wednesday with Radio Farda, an American-financed Persian-language station, Mr. Bush said he was "cautiously optimistic" about the negotiations.

"I don't know whether we can find common ground," he said. "But we are trying to find common ground, and that's what's — that's the first step, is to make the attempt."

#2

U.S. rights report shows double standards: Russia

By Dmitry Solovyov

Reuters, March 14, 2008

Russia on Wednesday poured scorn on the United States annual report on human rights, which accused Moscow of corruption and electoral abuse, as an "opus" that showed Washington's "mentoring tone and double standards".

The report, issued by the U.S. Department of State on Tuesday, detailed alleged rights violations in Russia in 2007, including harassment of the media and reported killings and torture by the security forces.

It also criticized the centralization of power in the Russian executive branch and restrictions on opposition parties during elections.

"The report became yet another proof of 'double standards' in U.S. policy on human rights," Russia's Foreign Ministry said in a statement.

"It is obvious the human rights issue is being distributed for external and internal consumption," it said.

"How else can one explain the fact that the United States, having de facto legalized torture and handing capital punishment to minors, denying responsibility for war crimes and massive human rights abuses in Iraq and Afghanistan ... gives a distorted interpretation of the situation in other countries?"

In a gesture likely to annoy human rights groups, the State Department did not include Russia's economic and political partner China among the world's worst offenders, although Beijing's record was described as "poor".

Moscow said that it had never expected an objective assessment of its human rights record by Washington, describing the report sarcastically as an "opus".

U.S.-Russian relations have hit rocky times, even though both sides have cooperated on areas such as policy over Iran's disputed nuclear program.

The White House said Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice and Defense Secretary Robert Gates would go to Moscow next week for talks on missile defense, non-proliferation and counter-terrorism.

In examining human rights in more than 190 countries in 2007, the State Department also criticized Cuba, Iran, Pakistan, Afghanistan, North Korea, Sudan, Nepal, Syria and Zimbabwe -- frequent targets in the past.

#3

Authorities Announce List Of Organisations To Be Liquidated

Itar-Tass, March 12, 2008

MOSCOW -- Russia's Federal Registration Service has for the first time published a list of public and religious organisations subject to liquidation.

"We have for the first time published a list of public, religious and other associations and organisations with regard to which we plan to file lawsuits for the termination of their activities as legal entities or for liquidation," a Federal Registration Service spokesman said.

In his words, the list includes public and religious organisations that had failed to provide any information about their activities. "By publishing the list we will allow them to do so," the official said.

There are 21 organisations on the list, including seven religious organisations (Moscow Higher Spiritual Islamic College, Biblical College of Evangelical Christians, Institute of Contemporary Judaism, Biblical Missionary Academy of Full Gospel Christians, Academy of the Union of Evangelical Churches, Theological Academy of Presbyterian Christians, and the Extramural Theological Institute of Christians of Evangelical Faith).

The list also includes 14 public organisations, such as the All-Russia Association of Law Enforcers, an all-Russia World War II veterans, the League of Support to Defence Enterprises, the cash collectors' trade union, the Federation of Film Clubs, the Russian Forestry Technical and Scientific Society, the Tunnel

Association of Russia, the International Association of Euro-Atlantic Cooperation, the All-Russia Federation of Weight Lifters, the Academy of Integration, and the National Youth Fund.

The most known organisation of all is the political party Democratic Choice of Russia.

#4

U.S. is Russia's friend despite disagreements - David Kramer, U.S. diplomat Interfax Russia

The United States is concerned about growing anti-American sentiment in Russia, David Kramer, deputy assistant secretary of state for European and Eurasian affairs, said in an interview with Interfax.

"We are aware of the growing anti-Western, but in particular anti-American, sentiment. I think it is much more directed at the United States than at the West in general. It's a serious cause of concern. And it is not something we want to see continued," the diplomat said.

"The United States is certainly a friend of Russia. We certainly can have disagreements and differences between our two governments, but that should not be the justification for calling for anti-American rhetoric," said Kramer, who is responsible for relations with Russia and countries of the Commonwealth of Independent States, and for nonproliferation issues.

"We work very well together in many areas and we worked together to pass the third resolution on Iran," he said.

"But we also have differences. Those include Kosovo. Those include the Conventional Armed Forces in Europe Treaty. We hope to bridge the differences we have on missile defense, where we can and should be working together. There are also differences on some other issues, including policy toward some of Russia's neighbors, and we also have our concerns about some of the domestic trends in Russia," Kramer said.

"But none of that, we hope, would provide the basis for anti-American views or anti-American sentiment, and we hope in particular that we see on media that is controlled by the state less of that kind of rhetoric," he added.

Kramer said the U.S. does not intend to impose an American development model on Russia, aware that Russia will develop its own way.

"We are not at all suggesting that there is just one path to follow, that it's the American model. It will be Russia's model for sure. But it is our view that there are some common features in these democracies in the world, particularly the countries of the G8. And that's why we are expressing our concerns," the U.S. diplomat said.

Speaking about Iran's nuclear problem, Kramer said that Russia and the United States have moved much closer in their positions on the issue over the past three years.

"We are concerned not only about the development of possible weapons of mass destruction but also about missile capability. And here too, I think, this should be an issue where Russia and the United States have common interest. We agree on the overall objective, which is to ensure that Iran not become a nuclear weapon state," he said.

The United States opposes weakening the political aspect of the OSCE's activities, the deputy assistant secretary of state said.

"As to reform in the [Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe] OSCE as a whole, I think we can have constructive discussions on that and we have had this kind of constructive discussions on that issue.

But I think there is also some concern that some countries are trying to weaken the political basket of the OSCE, putting more emphasis on security and economic baskets," Kramer said.

"I think it is important that we maintain the integrity of the political basket, as well. And that includes promoting reforms, election observation. That's an area where I think we can certainly have plenty of discussions in Vienna and look at ways that we can make OSCE a stronger institution," the U.S. diplomat added.

"The OSCE is an issue where we [Russia and the U.S.] have had some differences," the U.S. assistant secretary of state said.

"We regret that the OSCE election monitoring arm, ODIHR, felt it was not able to send observer missions both to the [Russian State] Duma elections in December and the presidential election in March, because of restrictions that the authorities imposed on the terms: the size of the mission, as well as the timing of the mission," Kramer said.

"We hope that in the future the ODIHR will be able to decide those things, as it does elsewhere, in other countries where it sends observer missions," the U.S. diplomat said.

Washington backs the idea of establishing Russian non-governmental organizations (NGO) in the United States and expects that U.S. NGOs will receive a similar treatment in Russia, he said.

"I know that Russia has plans to set up an Institute for Democracy. We welcome that. It is critically important to promote understanding between our two countries," he said.

It was reported earlier that Russia's Institute for Democracy was opening offices in the United States and France to monitor the human rights situation in the West.

"We want to welcome Russia's efforts to establish an NGO presence in the United States, just as we would hope we would receive similar treatment in Russia," the U.S. diplomat said.

Speaking about the U.S. reaction to the Russian Institute for Democracy opening an office in New York, Kramer said: "Let's give it a chance to do its job." And "it is up to them to decide what kind of mission they want to carry out," the diplomat added.

Kramer expressed regrets that "some NGOs have been targeted unfairly" in Russia. "And I have in mind in particular the unfortunate situation with the British Council, which is not quite a NGO," he said, adding that he believes "Internews has done a terrific job, promoting the training and development of journalism in Russia and has also ran into problems."

On Russian-Ukrainian relations the diplomat said that that gas controversies would be sorted out.

The United States does not think Russia should subsidize the Ukrainian economy, but it fears that Ukraine could be destabilized, Kramer said.

"We also know that gas controversies have been a problem between Ukraine and Russia. We hope that this will be sorted out in a way that leads to greater transparency that leads to elimination of middleman companies which tend to make transparency more difficult," Kramer said.

"We do not support continued subsidization by Russia of Ukraine for energy," the diplomat said. On the other hand, the U.S. is "also wary that [] subsidies could run a risk of destabilizing the Ukrainian economy," Kramer said.

"So we hope there will be a way to work out a more equitable energy relationship for both Russia and Ukraine," the U.S. assistant secretary of state said, adding that "It is not in Russia's interests to continue subsidizing Ukraine."

Speaking about Ukraine's NATO aspirations, Kramer said: "The United States does not want to push Ukraine in any direction."

Washington believes that "that closer relations between the United States and Ukraine need not come at Russia's expense. No one should view relations in zero sum terms," Kramer said. "We want to deepen relations between our two countries [the U.S. and Ukraine], but we also want to maintain the strongest ties with Russia," the diplomat said.

#5

Level of anti-Semitism in Russia has decreased, while Ukraine has it growing - Lazar Interfax Religion, March 18, 2008

Russia's Chief Rabbi Berel Lazar said the number of anti-Semitic acts in the country had reduced, but still considered it important to fight it.

"If we speak about the so-called "post-Soviet space", unfortunately, today anti-Semitism is widely spread in Ukraine, the number of anti-Semitic manifestations has increased there, while it has reduced in Russia," the rabbi said in his interview to Interfax-Religion.

"It doesn't mean that Russia is through with anti-Semitism. Unfortunately, such cases still take place and there's a danger of new attacks," he noted.

The interviewee of the agency further said that the Jewish community was "determined to reveal all incidents against Jews," and "lead uncompromising struggle with anti-Semitism." "But it's not correct to say that Russia looks negative in this aspect on the back of other democratic countries," he stressed.

According to Lazar, today the attackers "are more often found than before", "the sentences for nationalistic crimes have become more rigorous."

"Not long ago such criminals were tried only for "disorderly conduct", now more serious enactments are applied in the majority of cases, for extremism, for instigation and etc", he said.

The chief rabbi feels "certain shifts" in a struggle against extremist papers and publishing houses that issue instigating literature, "though there are things to work on". He said that the most revealing was that during recent Duma and presidential elections "no one tried to play nationalistic card".

"What does it mean? It proves that authoritative actions on isolation of aggressive nationalism have not only become more rigorous, they are indeed fruitful. Anti-Semitism in Russia doesn't bring popularity which shows it doesn't reach any significant layers of society," Lazar said.

#6

The Return of Soviet Dissidents By Leon Aron The Moscow Times OpEd, March 19, 2008

Earlier this month, the American Enterprise Institute hosted a panel discussion with leading members of the opposition in Russia -- Boris Nemtsov; Vladimir Ryzhkov; Oleg Buklemishev, the deputy manager of Mikhail Kasyanov's presidential campaign; and Vladimir Kara-Murza, the manager of Vladimir Bukovsky's presidential bid.

This event was unusual for the AEI, and we decided to hold it because it is becoming increasingly difficult to hear their voices. They are banished from state-controlled television and have been pushed out of national and local politics. In addition, their rallies and demonstrations are routinely prohibited, and when they do protest on the street, they are attacked by riot police and Nashi thugs, who are paid from government funds.

Their colleagues are harassed in their homes and on the streets. They are detained on bogus criminal charges, sometimes beaten unconscious and in a few cases thrown into psychiatric wards. Owners of halls and conference centers are afraid of giving them space for meetings and debates, and many advertising agencies refuse to produce their campaign materials. The police break into their headquarters and take away their computers, leaflets and posters, and the Kremlin-friendly courts never rule in their favor.

In short, Nemtsov, Ryzhkov, Kasyanov and Bukovsky are becoming more like dissidents in the Soviet sense than a normal opposition force that you would find in Western democracies.

This transformation is bound to have profound implications for Russia and the world. Governments without opposition are doomed to falter. The blunders of a nuclear superpower drunk on oil and gas revenue are bound to be enormous.

Competitors are "partners" in the political process, even when they actively criticize the government. Without an opposition, the center of political gravity is raised all the way to the top, making the vehicle of national politics unstable -- one without shock absorbers or brakes. Free of the need to explain themselves, the ruling elite begin to believe in their own infallibility.

We have already seen the first signs of the country's institutional debility when the government monetized social benefits to pensioners a few years ago. The law, which affected tens of millions of people and cost trillions of rubles, was adopted by the rubber-stamping State Duma after only a few hours of debate. Monetization of benefits is just the tip of the iceberg, however. Without a genuine debate and participation from the opposition, the government is unable to develop solutions to the huge problems in education, healthcare, pensions and corruption.

Moreover, without opposition as a check and balance, the government is given a virtual carte blanche. Take, for example, the borrowing spree of state or state-sponsored companies -- in particular, Gazprom and Rosneft, which together owe \$85 billion and clearly hope for the state to bail them out. This also applies to Moscow's huge exports of modern weaponry to China, a serious geopolitical rival that will be armed to the teeth with Russian weapons and know-how, and to Moscow's support of uranium-enriching Iran. Could these policies have been adopted so easily if the opposition had an opportunity to engage the government in a true debate -- in the parliament, on television or in the newspapers -- exposing millions of Russians to the perils of these flawed policies?

Of course, the Putin's crackdown on the opposition is still a far cry from the repression under the Soviet Union. The four members of the opposition who spoke at the AEI on March 10 and thousands of their colleagues are still far better off now than Andrei Sakharov, Alexander Ginzburg or even Bukovsky were in the 1970s. The Union of Right Forces and Yabloko parties, although marginalized, are still legal. Moreover, the Internet is far more efficient than samizdat, although it now essentially plays the same role in the country's political discourse. And a handful of small-circulation newspapers and magazines that are not afraid to publish articles critical of the Kremlin can still find publishers and distributors. But we don't know how long this will last.

In the meantime, the West should continue to help sustain Russia's new dissidents by giving them a platform and an opportunity to engage in a free debate. Far from "undermining" Russia, this solidarity can best ensure that Russia's democratic evolution will be nonviolent -- similar to the period from 1989 to 1991. Let's hope it is not too late for this.

#7

Good Policies Should Make Good Neighbors

By Fyodor Lukyanov
The Moscow Times OpEd, March 19, 2008

At his first news conference following his election victory, President-elect Dmitry Medvedev touched upon only one foreign relations topic. He said Moscow's priority was the Commonwealth of Independent States, and he promised that his first state visit would be to one of the CIS countries.

That would have not have been such a noteworthy remark were it not for the interesting events that are unfolding in the CIS countries, altering the region's political landscape once again.

The former republics of the Soviet Union for the most part have completed the process of becoming independent states. These countries have achieved full-fledged statehood and are not at risk of losing that status in the foreseeable future.

The post-Soviet states are entering a new stage of development. During the first phase, each tried to decide which ideological stance would be most advantageous. That is now giving way to a more pragmatic approach. In other words, these countries are reconsidering the previous stereotype that Russia is the bogeyman and that Europe is some kind of paradise.

In the 1990s these countries were focused on resolving problems of basic survival and could not look far beyond their borders. Once that was accomplished, the political elite, comprising nationalist and nomenklatura elements, have turned their attention to finding a place for their countries in the greater political picture.

The Orange Revolution in Ukraine in 2004 was a turning point in the policies of all post-Soviet countries. Moscow's aggressive stance during that period turned out to be so counterproductive that it decided to switch tactics.

From the spring of 2005, the Kremlin took the following approach: Inasmuch as it was powerless to change the political situation in the countries along its borders, there was no point in trying to do so. But it would not lift a finger to help any state that departed from the approved path. Further, those states would automatically be given "least-preferred" status and would not be able to count on economic or other indulgences from Moscow.

From that point on, the Kremlin distanced itself from the passions simmering in neighboring states. Although this did not protect Moscow from getting blamed for every misdeed -- the result of its dominating role in the region -- it did enable it to save resources and lower tensions.

Naturally, Russia's mercantilist approach did not make it very popular in the world community, especially among the former Soviet states, which hope for a more benevolent and promising patron.

But Moscow's new course has clearly highlighted the objective limits to these opportunities -- to both the CIS countries and their would-be benefactors on both sides of the Atlantic. A host of former Soviet republics has felt deeply dependent upon Russia. And the politicians of the European Union, for example, have demonstrated that their readiness and desire to actively participate in transforming these newly independent states is fairly limited.

That realization forced each country to make a choice.

The first option available to each country is to continue distancing itself from Russia and gradually move into the orbit of a different global power, as Georgia is doing.

The second option is to try to follow a separate and independent course -- a viable option only for countries blessed with abundant natural resources.

The third option is to strengthen relations with Moscow and to use its help in solving domestic problems, as Moldova has done.

Ukraine serves as a unique example. During the last gas crisis, the two leading players of the Orange Revolution tried to draw Russia into the role of refereeing their mutual disagreement. Ukrainian President Viktor Yushchenko and Prime Minister Yulia Tymoshenko have butted heads over the role of Gazprom and intermediaries in the natural gas trade, which have been stigmatized for interfering in the affairs of Russia's sovereign neighbors.

Changes were also brought about by another external factor -- the West. Elections have become a national pastime in many countries. Wherever there is the slightest degree of political freedom, the opposition accuses the authorities of widespread election fraud. But until now, it has been an unwritten rule that the arbiters in such disputes are election observers from international organization, such as the Organization of Security and Cooperation in Europe. When OSCE observers express doubt regarding an election's fairness and validity, this mobilizes opposition forces to organize an election campaign against the ruling elite. In some cases, this results in a change of leadership. If, however, the observers certify that an election meets democratic standards, efforts to contest the results quickly lose steam.

The recent presidential election in Armenia proved an exception to this rule. International observers confirmed that the election met European standards. But the opposition, led by former Armenian President Levon Ter-Petrosyan, ignored their verdict and continued to demand that his "stolen victory" be returned.

The OSCE's reputation also suffered in Georgia, where the observers' mission made a quick initial conclusion that the vote had been honest, then expressed some doubts, and finally confirmed the original opinion. By the way, the final verdict released a few days ago, which was more critical in tone than the one issued immediately after the election, strengthened the impression that conflicting motives were behind the group's evaluation. The result is that the Western standard no longer appears as unbiased as it was before.

The primary question of post-Soviet regional politics in the coming years will be how each of the CIS member countries defines its relationship to Moscow.

If Russia is interested in expanding its influence, it will have to make corrections to the course it has been following since 2005. Countries that are willing to develop closer relations with Moscow will be more responsive if the Kremlin offers attractive economic and political incentives.

There are already signs that Moscow is making efforts toward change. These include a willingness to sell arms at domestic prices to members of the Collective Security Treaty Organization and a clear change in Russia's approach to Abkhazia and South Ossetia -- threatening to apply the Kosovo precedent on the one hand and developing a settlement plan for the Transdnestr territorial problem on the other.

But Russia's policy should be based on well-defined principles and should be designed not for short-term effect, but for creating long-term, partnership relations with other countries. For that, Russia might have to renounce some short-term gains, but pragmatism, after all, does not always mean maximizing profits.

#8

Super Spy Agency in the Works

By Matt Siegel

The Moscow Times, March 19, 2008

The government is close to creating a centralized body along the lines of the FBI in the United States, as part of a major restructuring of the investigative departments of multiple state security and law enforcement agencies, a report said Tuesday.

The new Federal Investigative Service, or FSR, will absorb the investigative arms of the so-called power agencies -- a plan with a long history -- to streamline the chaotic and often counterproductive process of conducting multiple criminal investigations, RBK Daily reported.

"The decision to create the FSR was simply settled and passed down after the presidential elections," an Interior Ministry source told the newspaper. "The remaining organizational details will be finalized in the summer, and the new agency will emerge by September."

The idea has been bandied about for nearly a decade, since at least 1999, when Dmitry Kozak, then a member of the presidential administration, proposed similar reforms. At present, many bodies within the security apparatus maintain their own investigators, creating friction and conflicts of interest.

Some of the agencies reportedly being brought into the new body are the Investigative Committee of the Interior Ministry, the Federal Security Service and the Federal Drug Control Service.

The FSB, Prosecutor General's Office and the Investigative Committee all refused to comment for this article.

While the decision has reportedly already been made, the question of who will head the agency remains open. Names being floated include Alexander Bastrykin, the current head of the Investigative Committee of the Prosecutor General's office, and the Interior Ministry's chief investigator, Alexei Anichin.

Andrei Soldatov, an independent expert on the Russian security services, expressed doubts about the plan's likelihood for success. The groups within the security apparatus stand to lose too much, he said, and are fearful of surrendering turf, especially during a time of political transition.

#9

2 Presidents' Last Chance to Make History The Moscow Times OpEd, March 20, 2008

The failure of U.S. and Russian foreign and defense ministers to come up with a compromise on long-contested U.S. plans to deploy elements of a global missile-defense shield in Eastern Europe is regrettable but widely expected.

Prior to the arrival of U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice and Defense Secretary Robert Gates on Monday, officials in Washington openly acknowledged that the delegation would have no new proposals to offer the Russian side. Hopes, however, were raised on the first day of the visit that Moscow and Washington could resolve differences not only on missile defense, but also on other points of contention on arms control. President Vladimir Putin announced during a meeting with Rice and Gates that President George W. Bush had sent him a letter that offered a chance to improve relations. He gave few details other than calling it a "very serious document." A Pentagon spokesman said the letter laid out priority areas for long-term discussion.

It quickly became clear Tuesday that a compromise would not be reached soon. Rice and Gates again agreed to disagree with their Russian counterparts on whether and how elements of the U.S. missile defense should be deployed in Eastern Europe.

Both sides must attempt to go the extra mile to reach a compromise on the issue, because a lack of agreement will deal a serious blow to the already dented and increasingly fragile international arms control regime. The regime has already been undermined by the United States' abrogation of the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty and Russia's moratorium on the Treaty on Conventional Armed Forces in Europe. Frustrated by the Bush administration's reluctance to reach compromises on these and other issues of arms, Russia is also threatening to withdraw from the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty, which bans the deployment of medium-range missiles.

Next year, the Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty will expire unless Moscow and Washington agree to prolong the accord. START is one of the remaining cornerstones of strategic arms control, providing a verification regime for arms cuts stipulated in another pact, the Moscow Treaty.

The expiration of START I and nullification of INF may send the entire international architecture of strategic arms control crumbling.

If outgoing Presidents Bush and Putin hope to avoid entering history as leaders who oversaw, if not provoked, the emasculation of strategic arms controls, they should order their top diplomats and defense chiefs to hammer out a compromise, first on missile defense and then on the entire range of arms control issues, before they meet at the NATO summit in Bucharest next month.

The summit will be their last opportunity to make history together as heads of state before their presidential terms expire.

#10

Medvedev Says Civil Society Needs Policy Oversight Role

By Oleg Shchedrov

Reuters, March 20, 2008

Civil society groups should have a bigger role in forming policy and holding the government to account, President-elect Dmitry Medvedev said Wednesday.

Medvedev has promised to continue the policies of his mentor, outgoing President Vladimir Putin. But some observers have predicted the next president may adopt a more consensual style.

"Our task is to create a system that would allow civic structures to participate in working out state policy and appraising its quality," Medvedev told members of the Public Chamber.

Putin's rule has brought growing restrictions on nongovernmental organizations, especially those focusing on human rights and funded from abroad.

Medvedev said the opinion of minority groups represented by public organizations and professional unions should be taken into account.

"The voice of such groups should be heard in our society," Medvedev said. "There should be a practical mechanism for defending their rights and interests. Only in this way can our society become truly harmonious."

Medvedev told the Public Chamber he wanted civil society groups to scrutinize legislation before it came into force.

Medvedev, a 42-year-old former lawyer elected on March 2, said a mature civic society was essential if Russia was to achieve the target set by Putin of modernizing its economy.

"Our actions should be focused on switching the economy and social life to a new, innovative mode," he said.

Some Kremlin-watchers predict that Medvedev's policies will be more liberal and market-oriented than under Putin.

Skeptics point out that Putin will remain a strong influence and that Medvedev, as chairman of Gazprom, has played a key role in returning private energy assets to Kremlin control.

Gazprom has also acquired control over NTV, once the country's biggest private television station, and the head of a subsidiary has bought the newspaper Kommersant, fueling accusations that free speech in Russia is under threat.

#11

Russian Jews suspend Muslim dialogue after mufti comment World Jewish Congress, March 21, 2008

The Chabad-led Federation of Jewish Communities of Russia (FJC) has suspended its contacts with the Council of Muftis of Russia, the representative organization of Russian Islamic leaders. The move follows a statement by the co-chairman of the council, Mufti Nafigulla Ashirov, who referred to Zionism as fascism and said Zionism was a "cancerous tumor." The FJC has accused Ashirov of insulting all Jews and called on the Council of Muftis to condemn the activities of its co-chairman because they were provocative and undermine good relations between the Muslim and Jewish communities.

The chairman of the Congress of the Jewish Religious Organizations and Associations of Russia, Zinovy Kogan, said he would raise the issue at the next session of the Russian Interreligious Council. Commenting on the decision by the FJC to suspend contacts with the Council of Muftis, Kogan said that, "before deciding to freeze relations, meetings should be held to discuss the disputable aspects." At the same time Kogan said he fully supported the FJC 's condemnation of Ashirov.

The Russian Orthodox Church is reportedly also concerned about the conflict, according to the 'Izvestiya' newspaper. The deputy head of the church's international relations department of the Moscow Patriarchate, Bishop Mark of Yegoryevsk, reportedly called the situation unprecedented.

#12

Activist's Computers Seized in Police Raid The Associated Press, March 21, 2008

Investigators seized computer servers of rights activist Stanislav Dmitriyevsky on Thursday -- the latest in a series of searches and criminal investigations against the longtime critic of human rights abuses in Chechnya.

Dmitriyevsky said police officers also seized his cell phone during the two-hour search at his office in Nizhny Novgorod.

He said prosecutors told him that the search was connected to an investigation into purported extremism involving opposition coalition The Other Russia, which has organized the Dissenters' Marches against President Vladimir Putin.

But Dmitriyevsky said officials were likely looking for copies of a forthcoming book about political prisoners that his organization, the Nizhny Novgorod Fund for Tolerance, was involved in publishing. Prosecutors told him that the servers could be returned in a few weeks.

The regional prosecutor's office could not immediately be reached for comment.

Extremism laws have been expanded in recent years, and activists have warned that they could be used as a political tool against opposition groups.

Investigators also searched the apartments of several activists with The Other Russia, including two who are connected with Dmitriyevsky's fund.

Dmitriyevsky's previous organization, the Russian-Chechen Friendship Society, was ordered to close by the Supreme Court last year for purportedly promoting extremism. He was also convicted in 2006 of extremist

activity for publishing articles petitioning the Chechen government to end the conflict and given a two-year suspended sentence.

Prosecutors later opened a new investigation into Dmitryevsky's organization on suspicion that it used pirated computer software.

#13

Russia Plans Mideast Forum

Reuters, March 21, 2008

Russia is preparing to host a Middle East peace conference this year that will try to restart talks between Israel and Syria about the occupied Golan Heights, Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov said Thursday.

"We have not issued invitations, but we're working out how to incorporate various suggestions," Lavrov told reporters after meeting President Bashar al-Assad.

The conference would be a follow-up to a U.S.-hosted meeting in Annapolis in November, which resumed peace talks between Israel and the Palestinian administration, led by President Mahmoud Abbas, Lavrov said. He had announced plans to host the next Middle East peace conference after the Annapolis talks. He said Thursday that everyone in Annapolis had agreed to the Moscow conference.

Lavrov also met members of the exiled leadership of the Palestinian militant group Hamas in Damascus before flying to Israel.

Sergei Kiprichenko, Russia's ambassador to Syria, said Lavrov's meetings in Israel would try to nail down a more specific date for the conference.

#14

OSCE, CE call on Ukraine to further development of free media

Unian, March 18, 2008

The OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media, Miklos Haraszti, and representatives for the Council of Europe and the European Commission, called on Ukraine today to continue efforts to create a free press and a media law in line with OSCE principles and Council of Europe standards, according to the information of the OSCE office in Kyiv.

In a statement issued after an OSCE-organized High Level Policy Meeting on media legislation reform, the representatives said that state regulatory bodies tasked with creating a free and transparent media environment needed to be strengthened, and that an independent public service broadcaster needed to be created. Other recommendations included promoting transparency in media ownership, better access to public information and de-nationalizing mass media.

Representatives of governmental institutions regulating media policy and responsible for media legislation reform in Ukraine, and representatives of the country's NGO sector also participated in the meeting, which aimed to analyze the progress made by Ukraine in bringing its legislation into line with European standards and co-ordinate future efforts.

"Ukraine has played an avant-garde role among the OSCE participating States with its early reform to decriminalise defamation. I hope that the country will continue to fulfil this pioneering role and carry out the reform process in media legislation areas as well.

The OSCE is ready to support Ukraine in this important endeavour," Haraszti said.

For the OSCE Project Co-ordinator in Ukraine, the meeting marks the conclusion of a project that aimed to improve mass media legislation. The Denmark-based NGO "International Media Support" helped implement the project, which was financed by the Danish government.

Todd Becker, a Senior Project Manager at the OSCE Project Co-ordinator in Ukraine, added that the topics discussed at the meeting had been on the agenda for several years.

#15

Bush to visit Ukraine ahead of NATO summit AFP, March 13, 2008

US President George W. Bush will visit NATO aspirant Ukraine on March 31 on his way to a NATO summit, the Ukrainian president's office said Thursday, in a move that could heighten tensions with Russia.

"US President George Bush... will visit Ukraine between March 31 and April 1. US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice will be part of the delegation," an official from the president's office told AFP.

Ukraine is hoping to get approval from the Western military alliance for its membership action plan (MAP), seen as signalling that a country is a formal applicant, at NATO's summit in Bucharest on April 2-4.

Ukraine's bid to join the NATO has angered Russia, while President Vladimir Putin last month warned Russia might be forced to aim missiles at Ukraine if it hosted Western military facilities.

#16

Trust Ukraine scholars Editorial Kyiv Post, March 13, 2008

Just as Ukrainians suffered greatly on their native land, Jews have a significant history of persecution here too.

That Russian-speaking Jews from throughout the world wished to hold their first parliamentarians' conference in Kyiv, and that they felt comfortable doing so, says a lot about how Ukraine has progressed since independence.

In the past, numerous conference participants called for President Viktor Yushchenko to rescind his Hero of Ukraine award given posthumously to Ukrainian General Roman Shukhevych.

Prior to leading the Ukrainian Insurgent Army, which fought both the Nazi Germans and the Soviets during the Second World War, Shukhevych led the Nachtigal battalion, a western Ukrainian military unit formed by the Wehrmacht's famous Brandenburg regiment.

A widely held view is that any degree of collaboration with the Nazi Germans was an evil act, whatever the ultimate goal. Shukhevych's defenders claim Ukraine's fledgling army needed to gain Nazi military expertise and assistance in order to fight the Soviets, gain independence and thwart Communism.

Certainly, Yushchenko giving Shukhevych Ukraine's highest honor last year served to divide Ukraine further rather than create unity.

But what is now beyond doubt is that no evidence currently exists that Shukhevych or any of the 300 Nachtigal troops engaged in any mass killing of Jews during its brief combat tour in July and August 1941.

Prominent Ukrainian historians Ihor Yuhnovskiy and Volodymyr Viatrovych recently returned from the Yad Vashem memorial in Jerusalem, confirming it has no evidence of Jewish persecution committed by

Shukevych or his command, as had been alleged several times by Yosef Lapid, chair of the Yad Vashem Council.

While Shukhevych's status as Hero of Ukraine is certainly questionable, it's time the worldwide Jewish community, known for its high standards in scholarship, quit being pawns of the Soviet, and now Russian, propaganda machine.

Much of the Soviet propaganda against the Ukrainian independence movement, currently exploited by Russia's authoritarian government and Russian-oriented parties in Ukraine, has turned out to be lies and fabrications.

In echoing these distortions, Yad Vashem dented what had been an impeccable reputation.

Instead of over-relying on Russian scholarship, distorted by Soviet nostalgia and post-Soviet nationalism, Jewish scholars should consider Ukrainian scholarship, and that of other post-Soviet satellite states, as a more reliable and objective record of events during those horrid days.

It is still conceivable that somebody has clear evidence of crimes committed by Nachtigal and its leader. If so, make them publicly available.

#17

Jewish politicians bolster ties in Kyiv

By Anna Poludenko

Kyiv Post, March 13 2008

Since the Soviet Union's collapse, Russian-speaking Jews have gained significant influence in business and politics throughout the world.

The first session of the Parliamentary Club of the World Congress of Russian-Speaking Jewry (WCRJ) was held in Kyiv on March 6 and 7, attended by 16 Russian-speaking Jewish politicians, most of them members of parliament (MPs), from Ukraine, the Russian Federation, the US, Israel and Germany.

Russian-speaking Jews have unique concerns distinct from their Jewish counterparts in the West, organizers said, particularly in the socio-economic, cultural and languages spheres.

"We want to make sure that those who, for example, immigrate to the US will remain Jewish, because it is very hard for them to remain as religious and ethnic as when he arrived for the first time as a Russian descendant," said Alec Brook-Krasny, a member of the New York State Assembly from Brooklyn.

The Club includes nine Israeli Knesset MPs, two New York state assemblymen, two Russian State Duma MPs and one Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine MP.

Sergey Lagodinsky, a prominent political commentator and observer, arrived from Germany where he is active in the Social Democratic Party.

The politicians discussed improving relations between Russian-speaking Jews and shared ways to resolve social and political concerns facing Jewish communities.

"I think that a parliamentary club uniting legislators from leading countries may become a new instrument of dialogue and cooperation," said Boris Shpigel, president of WCRJ and a deputy in the Russian Federation's parliament.

In addressing their concerns, the politicians will be able to recruit other communities in lobbying their interests, Brook-Krasny said.

Incidentally, though the meeting was held in Kyiv, no one represented the Association of Jewish Organizations and Communities of Ukraine.

The only Ukrainian MP present was Tymoshenko Bloc deputy Oleksandr Feldman, an influential Kharkiv businessman who initiated, organized and financed the event.

“We know Feldman is the most Jewish parliamentarian in Ukraine,” said Matvey Chlenov, deputy executive director of the WCRJ.

“As for others, they may have Jewish surnames, maybe they have Jewish identities, but they are not interested enough in this matter.”

The Congress' biggest financier is the Federation of Jewish Communities of Russia, said Iosif Zisels, chairman of the Association of Jewish Organizations and Communities of Ukraine.

“At first, we liked the idea of this congress as it was: to gather Jews from the USSR and help them keep their identity,” Zisels said. “We split with them as they became less democratic.”

Among the sponsors, Zisels said, was the Russian organization Compatriot (Sootechestvennik), which is financed by the Institute of Eurasian Research, launched with support from Russian President Vladimir Putin.

“The good idea of a congress turned into one more lever of influence and as a result, broke one of our main rules of non-interference” with national affairs, he said.

“If Ukraine’s Jewish community saw that it couldn’t do something by itself, then it would ask for help, but not from Russia.”

The organization’s financial management became questionable, Zisels said, referring to it as “diversification of investments.”

Chlenov dismissed any financial management, or the notion the Congress is related to the Russian government, pointing out Feldman, a member of a political force not liked by the Kremlin, financed the first session.

“We have different private sponsors and several sources of investments,” Chlenov said.

“To have just one donor is very unstable. In Moscow and every branch of the World Congress, we have sponsors from foundations. The more sponsors you have the better.”

During the session, the politicians met with Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs Yuriy Kostenko, requesting visa-free travel to Israel for Ukrainian citizens and pensions for Ukrainian citizens who live in Israel.

“In Israel, there are about half a million Jews from Ukraine,” Chlenov said.

“Most of them worked hard to lift the Ukrainian economy before they immigrated to Israel. So we think that would be just if they receive pensions from the Ukrainian government. Russia is already paying.”

Israeli Knesset MP Marina Solodkina met with First Lady of Ukraine Kateryna Yushchenko the evening of March 7, said Maryna Antonova, the First Lady’s press secretary.

They discussed Ukraine 3000’s culture, medicine and education projects.

#18

Hundreds march in Latvia to commemorate Waffen SS unit

The Associated Press, March 16, 2008

Thousands marched through the capital Sunday under heavy police protection to honor countrymen who fought in a German combat unit during World War II.

Protesters jeered as the procession of some 3,000 people — a few surviving members of the Waffen SS unit known as the Latvian Legion among them — arrived at the Freedom Monument in downtown Riga.

March participants sang patriotic songs and waved Latvian flags before laying roses at the base of the monument as protesters chanted "Disgrace!" and "Hitler is dead!" in Russian and blew whistles to drown out the singing.

Thousands of police deployed to prevent unrest kept the two sides apart. No violence was reported.

Soviet forces occupied the Baltic states of Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia in June 1940, but were driven out by the Germans a year later. The Red Army retook the Baltics in 1944, and reincorporated them into the Soviet Union.

About 250,000 Latvians ended up fighting alongside either the Germans or the Soviets in World War II — and some 150,000 Latvians died in the fighting.

Veterans who fought on the side of Nazi Germany say they were simply fighting for their freedom against the Soviet menace. But many ethnic Russians, who comprise approximately one-third of the country's 2.3 million people, claim that the Soviet army liberated the Baltic state from fascism.

"We have to honor the dead," said Janis, a 64-year-old man who laid a flower at the monument and declined to give his last name. "Unfortunately, there are some people who want to prevent us from doing that."

Protesters said they were angry the march was being held in the city center.

"Let them go to the forest and lay flowers at the graves — not here," said Alexander, a 67-year-old ethnic Russian who also declined to give his last name.

Nearly 80,000 Jews in Latvia — 90 percent of the prewar Jewish population — were killed during the Nazi occupation. Thousands of Russian prisoners of war also died in Nazi prisoner of war camps.

Most Latvian Jews were killed in 1941-42, two years before the formation of Latvia's Waffen SS — which some Latvians claim shows the unit could not have played a role in the Holocaust. But an unknown number of Latvian Waffen SS soldiers may have been involved in the murder of Jews as auxiliary police, years before they entered the front-line unit.

Latvia remained under Soviet control until regaining independence in 1991.

#19

Lithuania shamed by skinhead march in capital, president says AFP, March 20, 2008

A march by extreme-right skinheads who yelled racist slogans in the heart of the Lithuanian capital has brought shame on the entire country, President Valdas Adamkus said Thursday.

"Such incidents must not be tolerated. A state which honours the law and calls itself a democratic country must uphold rights," Adamkus told reporters.

"Such incidents shame the whole of Lithuania," he added.

Around 200 skinheads paraded in the centre of Vilnius on March 11, an annual holiday during which Lithuania marks its 1990 declaration of independence from the crumbling Soviet Union.

Adamkus was indignant about the "sluggish" reaction of the police, his spokeswoman Rita Grumadaite said.

Participants carried banners showing fascist symbols, and chanted anti-Semitic and anti-Russian slogans -- Lithuania is home to a sizable Russian-speaking minority.

Inciting hatred is a criminal offence in Lithuania, but police did not take action against the marchers, arguing that only some of them were hurling abuse.

Lithuanian and international Jewish groups, as well as broader-based anti-racism organizations, have slammed the way the march was handled.

Adamkus on Thursday met with Interior Minister Regimantas Ciupaila and warned him that there should be no repeat of such events in the future, Grumadaite said.

After meeting with Adamkus, Ciupaila claimed such incidents "had not been and will not be tolerated".

Ciupaila said that police had launched an investigation and that two individuals had already been identified as suspects.

Inciting racial hatred can carry a two-year prison sentence under Lithuanian law.

#20

U.S. signs Latvia, Estonia visa deals, EU glowers

By Patrick Lannin

Reuters, March 12, 2008

The United States signed up Estonia and Latvia on Wednesday to bilateral deals that will lead to visa-free travel, risking further European Union ire a day ahead of tough EU-U.S. security talks.

U.S. Secretary for Homeland Security Michael Chertoff signed the deals in Estonia and Latvia a day before he was due to meet European Justice and Security Commissioner Franco Frattini in Slovenia.

The Czech Republic signed a similar deal last month, sparking much uproar within the EU. The executive European Commission and some EU states have accused the signatories of ignoring EU solidarity and the bloc's competence on visas.

Critics said that pact infringed on the EU's authority over visa and border policy and voiced fear that Washington may use such deals to hand over more intrusive personal data on air passengers. Prague says it acted legally.

Frattini said on Wednesday that Thursday's talks with the United States would be friendly but tough because of the signature of these individual pacts.

"The ministers agreed that memoranda already signed and to be signed by other member states should not be considered as operational documents (but) rather as political documents," Frattini told a news conference after a meeting of EU interior ministers in Slovenia.

Chertoff said Washington was not undermining EU powers, adding signatories would have to wait a long time for visa-free travel if they waited for a deal at the level of the whole EU.

"I have assured our European partners in Brussels that we have the utmost respect for EU law and EU competences," he told a news conference in Riga, Latvia's capital.

Most EU states have U.S. visa waivers, but not 11 of the 12 mostly ex-communist states that joined the bloc in 2004 and 2007, as well as older member Greece.

TWIN-TRACK

The accords spell out what Estonia and Latvia need to do to be allowed to join the visa waiver programme.

Frattini and a number of EU states wanted to negotiate the visa deals for the whole bloc at once, but some countries excluded from the visa waiver programme said they cannot not wait any longer.

EU diplomats agreed on Wednesday to defuse the intra-EU crisis by adopting a "twin-track" approach, Czech Deputy Prime Minister Alexandr Vondra told Reuters.

Vondra said this would allow talks on individual deals to go on while experts will work on a mandate for the EU executive, defining what exactly EU and national competences on visa waiver are. "We can proceed in our bilateral talks," Vondra said.

"Some issues need to be clarified, the area of shared competences ... but we are not ready to wait any more," he said in a telephone interview.

Latvian Foreign Minister Maris Riekstins his country should not wait until for visa-free deals with all other EU countries.

Poland, the biggest EU newcomer, is bitter that Washington refuses to include the country in the visa waiver scheme even though Polish troops have helped in the U.S.-led military campaign in Iraq.

Countries signing bilateral pacts do not get immediate visa-free status, but Washington will make access easier when they fulfil a number of security criteria, even if their visa rejection ratio is high.

In the Latvian case, this involves tight control on passport issuance, information sharing and, if direct flights begin, allowing armed air marshals on U.S. carriers to and from Latvia.

Estonia agreed to U.S. inspections at its border guard service, said Estonian Interior Minister Juri Pihl.

Hungary is expected to sign an agreement later this month.

Frattini hopes the EU and the United States could endorse the visa waiver programme for all 27 EU states at a joint summit in June and implement it by the end of 2008.

#21

OSCE Striving To Defuse Armenia's Post-Election Crisis

By Jean-Christophe Peuch

Eurasianet, March 14, 2008

The OSCE's diplomatic point man for handling Armenia's domestic crisis is not confident that political dialogue can restore a sense of stability in Yerevan.

Heikki Talvitie, the diplomatic troubleshooter designated by OSCE Chairman-in-Office Ilkka Kanerva to promote an end to the Armenian crisis, addressed the OSCE Permanent Council in Vienna on March 13, reporting on his talks with various Armenian political leaders.

In general, Talvitie did not sound overly optimistic about the prospects of the OSCE's mediation efforts. "Whether we will succeed in this, we will see in the near future," he told representatives of the organization's 56 participating states.

He said his own discussions with President Robert Kocharian, President-elect Serzh Sarkisian and the main opposition leader Levon Ter-Petrosian did not leave him with an impression that there was much common ground. "The government didn't see too many possibilities to open a dialog with Ter-Petrosian. On the other hand, Ter-Petrosian was also very reluctant to make any move towards the government at that point," Talvitie said.

During his presentation, Talvitie called for the quick lifting of a state of emergency in Armenia. At about the same time he was speaking in Vienna, Armenian President Robert Kocharian announced the lifting of media restrictions that had been imposed under a state of emergency on March 1.

Despite Kocharian's announcement, at least five independent news websites in Armenia that have been blocked since the start of the state of emergency – including A1+ and Haykakan Zhamanak – remained unavailable to readers on March 14.

As it strives to promote the return of political stability in Yerevan, the OSCE is intent on defending its own reputation as a democracy-building organization. Many opposition supporters in Armenia hold the OSCE and its Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights partly responsible for the crisis.

In an op-ed published in the March 5 issue of the "Washington Post," opposition leader Levon Ter-Petrosian blamed Western nations in general and ODIHR election observers in particular for turning a blind eye to what he described as successful government efforts to rig the election campaign.

"What surprised and dismayed us was the deafening silence from the West. What dismayed us even more was the technical report of the observer mission from the [OSCE,] which rubber-stamped [Sarkisian's] farcical claim of victory," Ter-Petrosian wrote.

In earlier comments, Ter-Petrosian had said he was holding the government and international election observers equally responsible for the alleged fraud.

The ODIHR-coordinated International Election Observation Mission concluded on February 20 that, despite a number of shortcomings, the presidential ballot had been "competitive" and "mostly in line with OSCE and Council of Europe commitments and standards."

While sticking to its initial statement, ODIHR subsequently gave a more nuanced assessment of the ballot. In its first post-election report, in early March, the mission said observers documented anomalies in a number of polling stations and territorial election commissions. Among the documented irregularities were flawed recounts, an "implausibly high voter turnout," results for Sarkisian "in excess of 99 percent," and discrepancies between the number of votes and the number of ballots issued to voters. The report also says the way Armenia's central election body handled complaints "raises concern about its commitment to ensure the protection of citizen's electoral rights."

How Kocharian's opponents interpret those conclusions is unclear. Under state of emergency restrictions, it was difficult for members of the opposition to gain access to news accounts of the election mission's post-vote findings.

#22

UN Calls for Armenian Pullout From Karabakh

By Edith M. Lederer

The Associated Press, March 17, 2008

The UN General Assembly approved a resolution Friday demanding that ethnic Armenian forces immediately withdraw from the disputed region of Nagorno-Karabakh in Azerbaijan, but the vote reflected widespread unease at UN interference in efforts to resolve the conflict.

Only 39 of the UN's 192 member states approved the resolution, which was sponsored by Azerbaijan, while seven voted "no" and 100 abstained.

Nagorno-Karabakh has been under control of ethnic Armenian forces since a six-year conflict that erupted in the waning days of the Soviet Union. Some 30,000 people were killed and about 1 million were driven from their homes before a cease-fire was reached in 1994.

Azerbaijan and Armenia remain locked in a dispute over the future of Nagorno-Karabakh, despite more than a decade of efforts by foreign mediators led by the U.S., Russia and France to help reach a resolution. Persistent gunfire along the Azerbaijan-Armenian border and in the regions near Nagorno-Karabakh has raised fears of a new war.

The United States, Russia and France voted against the resolution, stressing the importance of continued mediation efforts, and were joined by Armenia, Angola, India and Vanuatu.

The resolution, which is not legally binding, also reaffirms Azerbaijan's territorial integrity, the right of those driven from their homes to return, and support for the international mediation efforts. It urges UN members and international and regional organizations to help resolve the conflict.

Azerbaijan's UN ambassador, Agshin Mehdiyev, accused Armenia of trying "to solidify the results of aggression and ethnic cleansing." He cited a "dangerous" cease-fire violation by Armenian forces on March 5 that led to 5 Azeri casualties and 27 Armenian casualties.

Mehdiyev also expressed grave concern and alarm at "the lack of clear proposals" from the United States, Russia and France to solve the "vital issues of liberation of all the occupied territories and return of the Azeri population to Nagorno-Karabakh."

Armenia's UN ambassador, Armen Martirosyan, in urging UN members to vote against the resolution, said Azerbaijan never wanted to facilitate discussion but instead wanted "to get a piece of paper where their wishful, unrealistic, and unattainable outcomes are listed."

Despite Azerbaijan's push for a UN resolution, Martirosyan said, negotiations led by the foreign mediators "are moving forward," and there is a draft document addressing the fundamental issues, "security foremost among them."

He said Azerbaijan "risks sabotaging this process" by presenting a draft demanding the immediate and unconditional withdrawal of armed forces from Nagorno-Karabakh, which Martirosyan said would endanger the Armenian minority and leave them unprotected.

#23

Georgian leader refuses to rule out force against separatists AFP, March 17, 2008

Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili on Saturday refused to rule out the use of military force in the pro-Russian separatist republics of Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

"We have been told to sign a new agreement on the non-use of military force," Saakashvili told soldiers in a visit to a military base, according to television reports.

Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov had called for the protocol in January.

"(But) Georgia is a peaceful country and we have said on numerous occasions that we would like to resolve conflicts in a peaceful manner. I'm not sure who we are supposed to sign this agreement with," he said.

Russia gives protection to the breakaway provinces -- who last week asked Moscow for parliamentary recognition of their independence -- while opposing Georgia's bid to join NATO.

Saakashvili said such agreements signed in the 1990s backfired on his country, with the loss of control over these territories.

"We had lies stuffed down our throats for too long ... Nowadays, we are more experienced," he said.

Abkhazia and South Ossetia broke away from Georgia in conflicts in the early 1990s in which thousands of people were killed and hundreds of thousands of ethnic-Georgians were forced to leave their homes.

Both have called for international recognition of their self-declared independence, citing Kosovo's move to break away from Serbia as a precedent.

Saakashvili also praised military reforms carried out as part of his country's bid to join NATO, saying that a NATO assessment mission that visited in January issued "a brilliant report."

Georgia, along with other ex-Soviet Republic, Ukraine, hopes to become an official NATO membership candidate by acceding to the Membership Action Plan (MAP).

However, NATO heads of state, which are due to meet during the organisation's summit in Bucharest in early April, are divided on the issue, with Georgia's candidacy supported by the United States, Poland and Baltic countries, but opposed by Germany and France.

#24

U.S. Cuts Off Visas in Minsk in a Dispute With Belarus

By MICHAEL SCHWIRTZ

New York Times, March 21, 2008

The United States Embassy in Minsk has temporarily stopped issuing visas to citizens of Belarus in response to pressure by the government there to reduce its personnel. Tensions between the countries have intensified in recent weeks in response to sanctions that the United States has imposed on Belarus, its top state-owned businesses and senior officials.

Aleksandr G. Lukashenko, the country's authoritarian president, has preserved Belarus as a museum-quality relic of the Soviet Union. As retaliation for vocal criticism from the United States of the government's shoddy human rights practices, Belarus has recently moved to squeeze the American Embassy in Minsk.

The State Department said Thursday that the situation on the ground had forced the embassy to temporarily suspend its visa services. It said officials were reviewing the government's request to greatly reduce its staff of 30 to 40 people.

The Belarus government also pressured Karen B. Stewart, the United States ambassador, to return to Washington last week.

On Thursday, Andrei Popov, a spokesman for the Belarus Foreign Ministry, said dialogue with the United States would resume after "the removal in full of sanctions against Belarussian subjects," the official BelaPAN news agency reported.

The United States imposed sanctions against Mr. Lukashenko and other members of his government after the police arrested dozens of protesters at opposition demonstrations following presidential elections in

March 2006. Last November, the Treasury Department froze the assets of the state energy and chemical company, Belneftekhim.

Washington has also demanded the release of imprisoned opposition figures. Belarus recently freed five people the United States considered political prisoners, but continues to hold Aleksandr V. Kozulin, a former presidential candidate.

Mr. Lukashenko told the Austrian Press Agency on Thursday that deteriorating relations with the West could force Belarus deeper into Russia's orbit, BelaPAN reported. "Considering the massive pressure by the West on Belarus, I think that in the near future our relations with Russia will become closer," he said.

Meanwhile, a New York-based lawyer and American citizen appears to be in custody in Minsk along with his assistant after their arrest on March 12 shortly after they arrived in the capital. The reason for the arrest of the lawyer, Emanuel Zeltser, remains unclear. A spokeswoman from the American Embassy in Moscow said the State Department could not comment on the case.

#25

US ambassador to Belarus meets with EU officials in Brussels Belorusskie Novosti, March 15, 2008

The diplomat confirmed that the release of all political prisoners by the Belarusian authorities would become the beginning of a constructive dialogue between Minsk and the West.

Ms. Stewart and Mr. Kramer met with representatives of the European Commission and the EU Council.

The US ambassador's visit to Brussels was a stopover on her way to Washington. She was recalled from Minsk for consultations earlier this week.

"The departure of the US ambassador took place after K. Stewart was once again invited to a meeting at the Belarusian foreign ministry on March 11 where she was for the second time offered to follow the respective pressing recommendations of our country's government," Andrey Papow, spokesman for the Belarusian foreign ministry, told reporters on March 12.

US Ambassador Karen Stewart announced that she would travel to Washington for "short-term consultations" at a meeting with several opposition figures in Minsk on Wednesday.

Minsk recalled its ambassador to the United States, Mikhail Khvastov, "for consultations" over sanctions against Belarus' petrochemical conglomerate, the Belarusian State Petrochemical Concern (Belnaftakhim), last week.

The Belarusian foreign ministry also recommended that the US ambassador leave Minsk, but Washington originally refused to recall Ms. Stewart.

Mr. Khvastov was recalled from Washington one day after the US Treasury Department's Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) issued a statement with regard to the applicability of the financial sanctions imposed by the Department against Belnaftakhim on November 13, 2007 over human rights abuses.

#26

Uzbekistan is Looking West, Turkmenistan East By Sergei Arbenin Ferghana.ru, March 14, 2008

Hurrah presidents Gurbankuly Berdymammedov (Turkmenistan) and Islam Karimov (Uzbekistan)! Their meeting in Tashkent became an apotheosis of the famous Central Asian hospitality and a demonstration of

constructive cooperation (or willingness to advance it). At the very least, this is how it looked to numerous photo and TV cameras.

Millions in both countries watched Karimov the amicable host and Berdymuhammedov the guest of honor singing each other hosannah and reassuring each other again and again of inviolability of their friendship and immense benefits of their partnership. The Russian language is too poor to express all flowery compliments and rhetoric.

Triumphant meeting

When two-day exchange of amiabilities and protocol functions was finally over, Berdymuhammedov and Karimov boasted of having found ways and means to promote interaction and bilateral cooperation. Their firm handshake in front of official delegations flanked by TV cameras put an end to the so called Ice Age in the relations between two neighbor states that had begun in 2002 when official Ashkhabad accused Tashkent of covert support of Turkmen opposition.

Everything is forgotten and forgiven now. Commenting on the agreements signed, leaders of Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan were unbelievably eloquent. "We view this visit as a confirmation of the advancing Uzbek-Turkmen relations," Karimov said. "The documents we signed confirm commonality of the determination of Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan to develop political dialogue and advance mutually beneficial cooperation based on friendship and mutual trust."

"This meeting here today is a logical continuation of the Ashkhabad summit that elevated the Turkmen-Uzbek relations to a wholly new level," Berdymuhammedov matched the host's high-flown style. "These constructive relations are based on friendship, mutual respect, and commonality of interests." The presidents kept complimenting each other on "the reforms under way" in the counterpart's country, emphasizing their peace-loving policies, and wishing peoples of the two countries successes and accomplishments on the way of creation and prosperity.

Past grievances

There is actually more to the discord between Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan than the quarrel between Saparmurat Niyazov and Karimov several years ago.

Two neighbors, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan are still unable to reach an agreement on the joint use of the waters of the Amudarja. (The largest river in the Central Asian region, it runs through Turkmenistan.) The pumps installed in the Soviet era take water to the Uzbek irrigation system. The water-distribution problem always becomes pressing and tension mounts in summer when the fields in both countries require a great deal of water.

Transit is another stumbling stone in the bilateral relations. Last year, Uzbekistan was compelled to raise money from foreign sponsors to build a railroad in the mountains that connected the Surkhandarja region with the rest of Uzbekistan bypassing Turkmenistan. Transit via Turkmenistan before that had cost Tashkent over \$400,000 every year.

The bilateral relations are also marred by gas fields on the territories both countries claim ownership to and by encroachment on the rights of ethnic Uzbeks in Turkmenistan and ethnic Turkmens in Uzbekistan. The Turkmenbashi's last meeting with Karimov in 2004 was a failure. Nothing indicated any forthcoming changes in the relations between the two countries even when Niyazov passed on and was replaced with Berdymuhammedov in early 2007.

Common interests

The situation is changing. Geopolitical interest in the developments in Central Asia, in its economic prospects and strategic resources became a catalyst for official Ashkhabad. Turkmenistan's neutrality never

prevented Berdymuhammedov from mounting an active foreign political campaign aimed to do away with isolation of his country. Tashkent was there to encourage this trend.

It turned out all of a sudden Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan have a lot in common, beginning with the caution with which these countries are treated by the European Union and America who question the situation with democratic standards and human rights in these two countries. There are also environmental problems, availability of drinking water and water for irrigation, shortage of foodstuffs, write-ups, impoverishment, corruption, transfrontier crime, smuggling, trafficking, controlled Internet, and scorching summer heat. It turned out as well that each country desperately needs a reliable ally to promote its interests in Central Asia and beyond and to withstand political and economic pressure from other countries of the region.

Judge for yourselves. Both Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan need help to deal with the threats and challenges stemming from Afghanistan nearby - Islamic extremism, terrorism, trafficking. Each country needs economic cooperation with this highly unstable neighbor to try and minimize the level of tension on the borders.

Where energy is concerned, Ashkhabad and Tashkent both are involved in the joint project with Russia and Kazakhstan concerning construction of the Caspian Gas Pipeline, an element of the Central Asia - Center framework. Both capitals wouldn't mind diversifying gas export routes at the same time. Turkmenistan became the first country in Central Asia to do something about dependance on Russia as a transit country. An agreement with China was signed. Construction of a gas pipeline to this country is expected to be over in two years time. Part of this strategic pipeline will run across the Uzbek territory. This why Berdymuhamedov goes out of his way to please Karimov, Honorary Elder of the Turkmen people and the best friend of every Turkmen alive.

Uzbekistan itself, a country with substantial gas reserves on its territory, needs new transport routes and investments in its gas industry. Not necessarily Russian investments, that is. That is why is has been casting hopeful looks west, at Turkmenistan. The worsening global shortage of energy resources may make new joint oil and gas projects a reality in no time at all.

Almost geopolitics

The European Union included Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan into the European Commission's new programs of cooperation (international and bilateral) with Central Asia, last summer. It is another basis for development of partnership and promotion of Ashkhabad's and Tashkent's interests in the West.

There are other aspects of cooperation that should be mentioned. Speaking of the agreements made in Tashkent, Berdymuhammedov emphasized "complete mutual understanding" on pressing regional and international issues including matters of peace, security, stability, and stable development.

The message got through. Karimov on behalf of Uzbekistan seconded Turkmenistan's foreign policy and complimented Ashkhabad on the recent opening of the UN Preventive Diplomacy Regional Center in it. Karimov said his country was happy to cooperate with this structure.

Drawing Turkmenistan into the orbit of its own political and economic interests, Tashkent solidifies its positions in the strategic contest for regional leadership against Kazakhstan. Keeping its plans to establish a Central Asian Union to itself for the time being, official Astana dangles before Ashkhabad the carrot of investments promised and mutually beneficial cooperation offered.

There is one other nuance to be taken into account. Being over 70, Karimov cannot help thinking of successors. He knows that he must leave the successor a country without problems at least in the western direction (discounting the Kazakh, Kyrgyz, Tajik, and Afghani ones). Determined to revise and ameliorate relations with the rest of the world, Berdymuhammedov must have certainly found this intention on the Uzbek president's part to his liking.

MOLDOVA SEEKS GREAT-POWER ENDORSEMENT OF ITS NEUTRALITY

By Vladimir Socor

Eurasia Daily Monitor, March 14, 2008

Moldovan President Vladimir Voronin will attend NATO's summit in early April to seek a post-summit endorsement of Moldova's permanent neutrality, in a document to be signed by the Western powers with Russia.

Chisinau defines such neutrality as a commitment to never join military alliances and a ban on the stationing of foreign troops on Moldova's territory. In practice, the first part means staying out of NATO for an indefinitely long period of time; the second part entails ridding a reunified Moldova of Russian troops as soon as possible.

Following his latest discussion with Russian President Vladimir Putin on February 21 in Moscow, Voronin confirms in a detailed interview with Kommersant (undoubtedly intended as a public message to the Kremlin) that he sticks to this offer: an internationally witnessed Moldovan commitment to permanent neutrality in exchange for withdrawal of Russian troops from Moldova (Kommersant, March 11).

International recognition of neutrality so defined would underpin -- and, at least implicitly, ratify -- the outcome of bilateral negotiations between Chisinau and Moscow to resolve the long-running Transnistria conflict. Chisinau expects the outcome to involve Transnistria's return under Moldovan sovereignty, albeit with a broad-autonomy status; and an international mission of civilian observers to replace the Russian "peacekeeping" troops.

Voronin and his team believe that such a resolution is imminent, expecting Russian consent to the Moldovan-drafted "Package" of documents. Moscow has indeed conducted bilateral negotiations on that Package since the autumn of 2006, tantalizing Chisinau with hints at every step that a solution on those terms could be around the corner. The involvement of Russia's National Security Council's Deputy Secretary Yuri Zubakov as main negotiator, with Putin occasionally involved, has encouraged the Moldovan presidential team along this path. At present (unlike in 2007), Chisinau realizes that full disclosure to its Western partners is ultimately its best bet.

In fact, Moscow has dragged out these negotiations, pending its own discussions of a far more complex nature with NATO and the United States regarding the Treaty on Conventional Forces in Europe (CFE) and its implementation. In the CFE discussions, Russia has come close to extracting de facto consent from NATO and the United States to drop the demand for Russian troop withdrawal from Moldova (and Gudauta in Georgia) as a pre-condition (under the 1999 Istanbul Commitments) to ratifying the CFE treaty.

In this situation, Western endorsement of Moldova's neutrality could add political impetus to demands for Russian troop withdrawal from Moldova, irrespective of ups and downs in the ongoing CFE negotiations. For its part, Moldova has long tried to invoke its neutral status as one of the arguments in calling for withdrawal of Russian troops. However, the argument resting on neutrality would carry far greater weight if Moldova's neutral status were to receive some form of international endorsement

Moldova's "permanent neutrality" has been enshrined since 1993 in its constitution, along with a ban on the stationing of foreign troops on the country's territory. However, the neutrality remains to this day self-declared and has translated into a permanent Russian breach of the same, with troops in place.

Chisinau now seeks support for an international declaration that would bring the Western powers and Russia together in endorsing a neutral status for Moldova. In its four-paragraph draft, Chisinau presents the permanent neutrality as a Moldovan national choice and sovereign decision. The document would enshrine international support for the permanent neutral status at Moldova's own request. The word "recognition" could lead to semantic and legalistic debates. It seems that Chisinau seeks a declaration that would carry largely political and moral value, rather than legal commitments by the signatory parties to oversee or pledge to enforce Moldova's neutrality.

Moldova hopes to submit its draft for discussion and possible development and signing by Russia, Ukraine, the United States, European Union, and OSCE -- that is, the five international participants in the "5 + 2" negotiations to resolve the Transnistria conflict. Moldova would sign the declaration alongside them; whereas Tiraspol's de facto authorities would not qualify for signing, as they are not recognized by Moldova or internationally.

In parallel with initiating discussions on the neutrality declaration, Moldova seeks to wrap up its negotiations with Russia on the Package, which Moscow hints it could broadly accept. In Chisinau's sequencing, a positive closure with Russia should be followed by a relaunch of the "5 + 2" negotiations, which would review, possibly edit, and ultimately bless the package documents.

Voronin proposes that the "5 + 2" forum should emulate the Dayton procedure for resolution of the Bosnia conflict. It should involve a single, secluded, marathon-length negotiating session, with a prior commitment by all participants to emerge with a full resolution at the end. This new Dayton would be convoked in either Helsinki or St. Petersburg. Chisinau shows a slight preference for the latter venue, presumably to stimulate Russia to feel as a stakeholder in this process and its success.

A "5 + 2" agreement would then be crowned with the signing of the proposed declaration on Moldova's permanent neutrality. Chisinau hopes for this process to be completed within the next few months, in time for elections to be conducted in Moldova on both banks of the Nistru, to a single national parliament.

At the moment, the entire process seems to hinge on the trade-off involving Russian troop withdrawal in exchange for Moldovan permanent neutrality internationally endorsed internationally. Whether Russia would regard such a neutrality pledge as sufficient is far from certain. It seems more likely that it would pose additional preconditions, such as veto prerogatives for Tiraspol in a reunified Moldovan state; and that such trade-offs would involve on the Russian side not an actual withdrawal of its troops, but rather a promise to withdraw them after an intermediate period.