



WASHINGTON, D.C. March 28, 2008

TO: NCSJ Leadership and Interested Parties

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

In Brief: U.S.-Belarus relationship worsens; President Bush adds Russia to his overseas trip

Dear Friend,

In this week's update there are several stories about the deterioration in relations between the United States and Belarus. Many U.S. government officials refer to Belarus as the "last dictatorship" in Europe. The United States has applied economic sanctions against the Belarus government and continues to look for ways to isolate the Belarus government from the rest of the world. In response, Belarus President Alexander Lukashenko recalled his Ambassador from Washington, D.C. and ordered the U.S. Ambassador to leave Belarus. The U.S. has also curtailed the issuance of visas from Belarus to the U.S. and reduced the size of our Embassy staff in Minsk. We continue to monitor this situation closely as to its impact on the sizable Belarusian Jewish community. I don't see the Jewish community being targeted because of these latest steps, but there is an interesting JTA article about Belarus' outreach to Iran, and what this means for their relationship with Israel.

President Bush announced earlier in the week that he has added a meeting with President Putin to his European trip in early April. The two presidents will meet in Russia to follow up on discussions held in Moscow between senior U.S. and Russian officials. It appears there may be some movement on several problematic issues, including the proposed missile defense systems to be placed in Poland and the Czech Republic. President Bush is traveling to Europe to attend a NATO Summit meeting, and will also visit Kyiv, Ukraine.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads 'Mark B. Levin'. The signature is written in a cursive 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. March 28, 2008

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#1

From Russia with love Local Jewish students bond with Russian peers By Richard Greenberg Washington Jewish Week, March 26, 2008

The once-embattled Jewish community of Moscow is on the rebound ----even if Jewish life there is sometimes less than idyllic, according to several Washington-area Jewish college students who recently returned from an eight-day solidarity-building trip to the Russian capital.

The local delegation, which returned on March 17, consisted of nine American University students and one from George Washington University, all of them affiliated with campus Hillel chapters. They met with 10 Russian students who are involved with Moscow Hillel; members of the two groups roomed with other.

"They really bonded; there were some tearful goodbyes," said Lesley Weiss, director of community services and cultural affairs for NCSJ, the former National Conference on Soviet Jewry. NCSJ organized the trip, which was funded primarily by the Jewish Federation of Greater Washington. The recently completed cross-cultural initiative, known as the Washington-Moscow Student Leadership Program, is an offshoot of the Washington-Moscow Connection, a federation-funded effort that seeks to build bridges between Jewish communities in the two cities.

The returning students drew a portrait of Jewish public life in Moscow that is laced with sharp contrasts. In certain key respects, it is flourishing after having been effectively banned as recently as 20 years ago. And yet it still faces significant impediments, including a persistent strain of grassroots anti-Semitism that continues to promote the blood libel (the canard that Jews drink the blood of Christians.)

"Still, it was quite amazing," said trip participant Lee Shore, 22, an A.U. student majoring in international affairs. "I was not expecting to see such a large Jewish community. You never hear about Russian Jews who are still in Russia, but it really is a vibrant community."

Shore and the other members of the local contingent said that in addition to a well-attended Hillel chapter, Moscow is now home to synagogues (from Reform congregations to Orthodox shuls), Jewish community centers, a Jewish facility for the elderly, a Chabad House and a thriving day school.

"A day school would have been impossible 20 years ago," said participant Cheryl Saferstein, an A.U. sophomore majoring in international affairs. "That really made me feel blessed that I was able to attend a day

school myself. It was very emotional. It was so uplifting to see the level of Jewish religious growth there. It was an unbelievable experience."

On the downside, Saferstein said "there's still lots of anti-Semitism, and some of the students we talked to said it can't always be reported to the police because some of the police are skinheads themselves and they can't be trusted to take this seriously."

No more than a few blocks from the Moscow Hillel headquarters, she pointed out, is a prominent sign that accuses the Jews of drinking the blood of children. Meanwhile, Adolf Hitler's birthday has become a field day in Moscow for drunken anti-Semites intent on beating up Jews.

Despite that depressing state of affairs, Saferstein added, the Russian government seems to be making efforts to combat anti-Jewish bigotry.

Tami Wolf, an A.U. senior majoring in history, said the Jewish scene in Moscow is "incredibly flourishing," although places in rural Russia are far less tolerant. She said she found day school students "who were proud to be Jewish. It wasn't something they were hiding. They definitely weren't afraid to be Jewish."

In contrast, she added, some of the students' parents had yet to adjust to the new climate and remain fearful of open displays of Jewishness. Some of the college students she met had encountered no anti-Semitism, but others said, " 'yeah, we have to be careful.' "

All told, Wolf said she was encouraged by what she saw -- and she wasn't alone. "I thought it was beautiful," she added. "It's another reason that I'm proud to be a Jew. The perseverance that these people showed was quite moving."

#2

Council of Muftis says conflict with Russian Jewish communities is over Interfax Religion, March 21, 2008

The Russian Council of Muftis regrets the decision by the Federation of Jewish Communities of Russia (FJCR) to freeze their relations because of the statements by mufti Nafigullah Ashirov who said that, "Zionism is a cancerous tumor because Zionism is fascism."

In a statement released by the Mufti Council Ashirov comments on his own statements: "If FJCR, which positions itself as a Russian organization, sees itself as part of Zionism, then certainly the announcement by this organization about suspension of relations with the Council of Muftis is quite understandable."

"The Russian Council of Muftis regrets the stand taken by FJCR and believes the situation has been dealt with," the statement reads.

Apart from that, the Council of Muftis regrets that FJCR, while being outraged by Ashirov's statement, has not sent them "any official documents to that effect", and as a result "the situation was given under the media control."

Concurrently, the authors of the statement said the comments by Bishop Mark, the deputy head of the Moscow Patriarchate Department for External Church Relations, on Ashirov's words sounded "like support to aggressive Zionism."

The last remark caused a strong reaction from Bishop Mark. "I do not comment on stupidities," he told journalists on Friday.

At the same time, the bishop said he felt "sorry for the interreligious dialogue and that the image of this religion is being distorted because of some representatives of Islam."

"I know and respect many Muslims, appreciate their wisdom, peacefulness, and weighted approach. But it appears that while many worthy representatives of Islam are working hard in their places, those who represent the Islam that is not characteristic of Russia have their voices heard in the media," Bishop Mark said.

#3

Fellow Muslims slam Russian mufti Interfax Religion, March 27, 2008

Russian Central Muslim Spiritual Administration has condemned a statement by Nafigullah Ashirov, co-chairman of the Russian Muftis Council that Zionism is similar to fascism, words that have caused a rift between the council and the Federation of Jewish Communities of Russia.

"By his words, Nafigullah Ashirov has endangered interreligious peace in the country," the Muslim Spiritual Administration's envoy to Moscow, Rastam Valeyev, told the Interfax-Religion.

"This is not the first time that the self-styled 'Supreme Mufti Authority of the Asian Part of Russia' has provoked a scandal and inflicted serious damage on interreligious dialogue," Valeyev said.

Much has been said recently about anti-Semitic and anti-Orthodox statements by Ashirov, but "it is Muslim leaders who have been the targets of the sharpest and most insulting statements by that mufti," the envoy said.

"Since 1992, Ashirov has been constantly and in the dirtiest way possible insulting the chairman of the Central Muslim Spiritual Administration, Supreme Mufti Sheikh ul-Islam Talgat Tajuddin, and his associates and North Caucasus Muslim leaders," Valeyev said.

Ashirov "has brought discord into Muslim communities on a territory from Yekaterinburg to Sakhalin," and the Administration is sorry it has "believed in his seemingly sincere repentance of his criminal past," Valeyev said.

#4

Putin Invites Bush to Confer in Move to Avoid Public Clash By Steven Lee Myers New York Times, March 27, 2008

President Bush announced Wednesday that he had accepted an invitation by President Vladimir V. Putin to visit Russia next week, signaling an effort to avoid a public clash over NATO and missile defenses when Mr. Bush travels to Europe next week.

The meeting — expected to take place on April 5 and 6 in Sochi, a resort city on the Black Sea — is likely to be the last between them before Mr. Putin steps aside as president and is replaced by his protégé, Dmitri A. Medvedev.

Mr. Medvedev is also likely to attend the meetings for what would be his first substantive discussions with Mr. Bush.

Mr. Bush's secretaries of state and defense, Condoleezza Rice and Robert M. Gates, went to Moscow this month after the president had sent a letter offering to formalize negotiations on a series of disputed issues.

Those included the administration's plans to base parts of a missile defense system in Poland and the Czech Republic, which Russia opposes, as well as stalled efforts to resume negotiations on reductions and verification measures for the two countries' strategic nuclear arsenals.

"I'm optimistic we can reach accord on very important matters," Mr. Bush said in a meeting with foreign reporters, according to a transcript released by the White House. "I think a lot of people in Europe would have a deep sigh of relief if we're able to reach an accord on missile defense. And hopefully we can."

Despite increasingly anti-American remarks, Mr. Putin's government has appeared open to Mr. Bush's proposals. The exact details of those have not been made public, but officials have said that they are intended to win Russia's acquiescence to missile defenses in Eastern Europe by promising transparency.

A delegation of senior Russian officials held still more talks here Wednesday in an effort to fashion agreements before Mr. Bush's trip, which begins Monday.

The focus of Mr. Bush's trip is a meeting of NATO's leaders in Bucharest, Romania. Among the items on the agenda are the question of membership for three more countries — Albania, Croatia and Macedonia — and a more tentative "road map" toward membership for Ukraine and Georgia, both former republics of the Soviet Union.

Russia has expressed hostility to any movement by Ukraine and Georgia toward joining the North Atlantic Treaty Organization. While Mr. Bush has expressed support for both countries' membership, other allies appear wary of offending the Russians. As a result, officials and diplomats have said, the NATO allies are expected to sidestep the issue.

"I found myself speaking differently to my congregation," Parnes says. "Instead of telling them Rashi says this or that, I began talking about their lives and how the patterns present in the text can become a living reality for them. People come up to me and say something you said really made a difference for me."

#5

Russia: 2 Journalists Killed Reuters Brief, March 22, 2008

Two journalists from the restive Caucasus region of Dagestan were killed in separate incidents, Russian news agencies reported. Gadzhi Abashilov, chairman of the Dagestan state broadcasting company and a former television journalist, was shot dead when unidentified gunmen fired on his car in the regional capital, Makhachkala, Tass reported. Mr. Abashilov's killing came hours after the body of another television journalist, originally from Dagestan, was found in Moscow after he was strangled in his apartment. Associated Press reported that the victim was Ilyas Shurapayev, of Channel One. More than a dozen journalists have died in Russian contract-style killings since 2000.

#6

Olmert cool on Russian offer to host peace summit Reuters, March 26, 2008

Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert signalled reluctance on Wednesday to attend a Middle East peace summit proposed by Russia, but did not rule it out.

"I think, quite frankly, as I said to (Russian Foreign Minister Sergei) Lavrov that, you know, what we need in order to make peace in the Middle East is to see the two sides sitting together and talk rather than going to international conventions," Olmert told reporters in English.

Russian officials said last week Moscow was preparing to host a Middle East peace conference this year to try to relaunch talks between Israel and Syria about the occupied Golan Heights.

Lavrov said during a visit to Syria the conference would be a follow-up to a U.S.-hosted meeting in Annapolis in November that relaunched peace talks between the Jewish state and the Palestinians.

Peace talks between Israel and Syria collapsed in 2000 over the extent of a proposed Israeli withdrawal from the Golan, a strategic plateau that Israel occupied in the 1967 Middle East war.

Tension between the two nations has risen since then. Olmert reiterated on Wednesday that Israel was willing to make peace with Syria and said he hoped the two sides would be able to hold talks.

"I said indeed that I am prepared to make peace with Syria. I hope that the Syrians are prepared to make peace with Israel and I hope that the circumstances will allow us to sit together," Olmert told a news conference for foreign journalists. "That doesn't mean that when we sit together you have to see us."

#7

Moscow and Cairo

Jerusalem Post, March 25, 2008

Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak, visiting Moscow during the last two days to further "nuclear cooperation" between his country and Russia, unleashed a vituperative attack on Israel's nuclear capability, which he likened to "Iran's nuclear project."

In some respects this is old news. Mubarak has long been in the habit of turning Israel's alleged A-bomb into his punching bag. His tone in the interviews to the Russian press didn't deviate from his norm.

Mubarak's customary hostility to Israel's reputed nuclear capability has always presented a jarring contrast with Egypt's role as Israel's most veteran peace-partner in the Arab world. His unconcealed antagonism hardly becomes a friendly neighbor.

Mubarak also knows that Israel's nuclear activity dates back nearly half a century, during which it has conducted itself with the utmost responsibility expected of the Western democracy that it is. In other words, Mubarak knows there's no risk of nuclear aggression by Israel, a fact that renders his analogy between Israel and Iran particularly galling.

While Israel is a liberal and transparent society, Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad blatantly threatens to annihilate the Jewish state, sponsors terrorism and tramples human rights. Iran answers all the criteria of a rogue state whose possession of nukes should alarm not only Israel.

If his desired effect is to deflect onto Jerusalem some of the pressure directed at Teheran, then Mubarak's obvious aim is to weaken Israel - again, hardly the conduct expected from a truly friendly neighbor.

But it gets worse. The Egyptian president's oft-repeated refrain is that Israel exacerbates the danger of nuclear proliferation by drawing attention away from the imminent Iranian menace. By saying this, Mubarak does precisely the reverse of what he claims to want - he intensifies the nuclear arms race.

That race can be preempted first and foremost by preventing Teheran from attaining bomb-manufacturing know-how. If Iran isn't stopped, its nuclear warheads will provide impetus for almost the entire erratic Middle East to follow suit, owing to the contention that the Shi'ite bomb must be countered by Sunni bombs. Indeed, already Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Bahrain, Oman, Kuwait, UAE, Yemen, Morocco, Libya, Jordan and Mubarak's own Egypt are lining up for nuclear ventures.

While peaceful nuclear power is legitimate and cannot be readily begrudged, there's no denying that none of the above Arab states is a stable democracy. Egypt is a glaring case in point.

Mubarak is in his 80th year. There's no telling who will succeed him and what the next regime's agenda might be. Moreover, Egypt is rife with Muslim Brotherhood networks. There's no guarantee that Egypt won't go the way Iran did. If nuclear means amassed by Mubarak later fell into radical Islamist hands, Egypt could be the next global hazard, with Israel in the direct line of fire, as it is with Iran.

Ahmadinejad's fiery Israel-baiting incitement already tempts indolent statesmen to belittle the Iranian danger as Israel's problem. Some in the international community lethargically pawn the onus off on Israel as a pretext to do nothing themselves. Their inaction in turn further fans the nuclear arms race, where Russia is a conspicuous offender.

By signing a nuclear cooperation deal with Egypt, Russia has positioned itself as a prime bidder for Egypt's nuclear reactor tender. Russia is responsible for the Iranian reactor in Bushehr and its record in furthering

Teheran's nuclear ambitions has been nothing if not disquieting. Now Moscow may be seeking to repeat its Iranian marketing success to the detriment of international security.

The free world might be well advised to stop pretending that Russia is on its side. It is high time Moscow is shown that reckless acts generate consequences. Russia, for instance, was granted G-8 membership, although its economy hardly merits the honor. It may be prudent to make clear to the Kremlin that states that imperil the world don't belong in the world's most elite club.

The real problem, of course, is the Islamic Republic, not Russia or Egypt. But the collaboration of the latter two to foster a new nuclear arms race illustrates just one of the major dangers of allowing Iran to go nuclear, and the need for Moscow and Cairo to do more to help thwart this eventuality rather than acting as if it is a fait accompli.

#8

Russia to supply Abbas with armored vehicles, no guns

Reuters, March 21, 2008

After months of delay, Russia agreed to Israeli conditions regarding the delivery of armored vehicles to Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas's security forces, Israeli officials said on Friday.

Israel agreed in November to allow the Palestinians to receive up to 50 lightly armored vehicles but a dispute emerged over a Palestinian demand that they have guns mounted on them.

Israeli officials said Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov told Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert during a meeting on Thursday that Russia agreed to shipping the vehicles without mounted guns.

It was unclear when the vehicles would be delivered to Abbas's forces.

"We have been hearing about these armed vehicles for more than a year," said a Palestinian security official. "Hopefully we will be able to receive the shipment."

Russian foreign ministry officials were not immediately available to comment.

Israel had agreed to an initial delivery of 25 armored trucks and said an additional 25 could be authorized if Abbas's forces make progress exerting greater security control in the Israeli-occupied West Bank.

The vehicles were offered to the Palestinians by Russia several years ago but the transfer was put on hold after the Hamas Islamist group won elections in January 2006.

#9

McCain Accuses Russia of Blackmail

Associated Press, March 28, 2008

U.S. Presidential candidate John McCain suggested revamping the Group of Eight, a trans-Atlantic group that deals with economic policy, to exclude Russia, which he accused of "nuclear blackmail."

McCain, almost certain to be the Republican candidate in November's election to replace President George W. Bush, gave a broad outline of his foreign policy views Wednesday in a speech in California.

"We should start by ensuring that the G-8 ... becomes again a club of leading market democracies: It should include Brazil and India but exclude Russia," McCain said.

McCain, a harsh critic of President Vladimir Putin, also said that "[Rather] than tolerate Russia's nuclear blackmail or cyber-attacks, Western nations should make clear that the solidarity of NATO, from the Baltic to the Black Sea, is indivisible and that the organization's doors remain open to all democracies committed to the defense of freedom."

Addressing relations with Europe, McCain recommended changes from Bush policies.

"The United States did not single-handedly win the Cold War," McCain said.

"The trans-Atlantic alliance did, in concert with partners around the world. The bonds we share with Europe in terms of history, values and interests are unique. Americans should welcome the rise of a strong, confident European Union as we continue to support a strong NATO," he said.

#10

Sea and Postal Links With Georgia Restored Moscow Times, March 28, 2008

Russia is set to lift a 1 1/2 year ban on shipping and postal links with Georgia after direct flights between the two countries resumed Tuesday.

A first Russian passenger ship, the Mikhail Svetlov, will make the 12- to 14-hour trip from Sochi to the Georgian port of Batumi as soon as weather permits, Nugzar Katamadze, a spokesman for the Batumi port authority, said Thursday. The ship was to have departed this evening.

"This is a very positive step," said Irakli Taktakishvili, head of Georgia's Transport Administration. "People can once more get on a boat and travel affordably to Russia instead of having to go through a third country."

Russia cut road, rail, air and sea links with Georgia, halted postal service and blocked money transfers in October 2006. The dispute erupted when Georgia arrested four Russian servicemen a month earlier, accusing them of spying.

Postal service between Russia and Georgia will be restored in "two or three weeks," Interfax reported Wednesday, citing Russian Post chief Andrei Kazmin.

Georgian Post received notification from Russia of "a proposed resumption of postal links in the immediate future," general director Davit Khutsishvili said.

#11

Russia MPs urge government over sovereignty for Georgia regions RIA Novosti, March 21, 2008

Russia's lower house of parliament has proposed that the president and the government consider the issue of whether to recognize the independence of breakaway separatist regions in Georgia.

Shortly after Kosovo declared its independence on February 17, two breakaway Georgian territories, Abkhazia and South Ossetia, along with Moldova's Transdnestr, asked Russia's parliament, the United Nations and other organizations to recognize their independence.

In their statement on Friday, MPs said it was necessary to protect people in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, most of whom are Russian passport holders, from a possible invasion by Georgia or Georgia's accession to NATO.

The statement also calls for strengthening of the peacekeeping force in the conflict zones between Georgia and its breakaway territories, while maintaining its current format, as well as considering other peace and security measures in the region.

"The withdrawal of Russian peacekeepers could result in catastrophic consequences for civilians and in the destabilization of the situation," the statement said.

#12

**Georgian president warns West not to appease Russia by blocking Georgia from NATO
Associated Press, March 20, 2008**

Georgian President Mikhail Saakashvili warned NATO countries not to appease Russia by rejecting his country's hopes to join the alliance.

He held out hopes after a White House meeting Wednesday that President George W. Bush can persuade NATO allies to put Georgia on a membership track when Bush attends NATO's summit in Bucharest, Romania, April 2-4.

Bush has been a strong supporter of Georgia's aspirations, but he is expected to meet resistance from some European leaders, including Germany's chancellor, Angela Merkel. Georgia's chances of joining a program that would prepare it for eventual membership will hinge on winning unanimous support of the 26 member countries.

"I don't think it's a done deal yet," Saakashvili said in a speech organized by the Atlantic Council, a group that promotes close U.S.-European ties. "The U.S. is engaged at the highest level; so are all East and Central Europeans and some big Northern and Western countries."

Bush said he would press the issue at the summit.

"I believe that NATO benefits with a Georgia membership. I believe Georgia benefits from being a part of NATO," Bush said at a joint appearance with Saakashvili.

Merkel recently signaled her opposition, arguing against membership for countries "that are entangled in regional conflicts."

That was a reference to differences with Russia over Georgia's two breakaway regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Both regions have had de-facto independence since wars in the 1990s, when Russian peacekeepers were deployed to observe cease-fires. No country recognizes their governments, although Moscow has tacitly supported their autonomy by granting most of their residents Russian passports and maintaining trade ties.

Russia has been vexed by Saakashvili's efforts to integrate closely into the West and join NATO.

Saakashvili, who has a law degree from Columbia University's law school, said that NATO countries should not give Russia a veto or try to appease Moscow by blocking Georgia from joining the alliance.

"Basically what it says is non-NATO members have veto rights over NATO decisions," he said at the Atlantic Council.

He said efforts to resolve differences with Russia over Abkhazia and South Ossetia had become entangled in Russia's disagreement with Western countries over Kosovo. Russia has warned that Kosovo's declaration of independence from Serbia last month, and the West's recognition of it, could fuel other separatist movements.

"After Kosovo, the Russians told us very clearly, this is no longer about you and us, it's about us and the West," Saakashvili said.

Saakashvili has one more day in Washington and is planning on Thursday to meet U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice and Defense Secretary Robert Gates, who have just returned from Moscow.

The boost from Washington for Georgia's NATO aspirations comes only months after the United States and other Western countries criticized a brutal police crackdown Nov. 7 against an opposition rally in Tbilisi. After the violence, Saakashvili called an early presidential vote to ease tensions, and the United States has praised the elections. Opposition leaders have accused Saakashvili of stealing the Jan. 5 presidential election in which

he was re-elected with just over half of the vote. Most Western election observers have given mostly positive reports.

#13

Georgian parliamentary elections to be held May 21 RIA Novosti, March 21, 2008

Georgia's parliamentary elections will be held May 21, the presidential administration said Friday.

In line with Georgia's constitution, the country's leader announces the date for parliamentary elections two months before they are due to be held.

"Based on the results of the January 5, 2008 referendum and consultations with the opposition, the president issued an order fixing the election date as May 21," the administration said.

On March 12, Georgia's parliament adopted Constitutional amendments setting parliamentary elections for spring 2008.

New legal amendments to election legislation were also adopted increasing the number of lawmakers elected from single-member constituencies to 75 from 50, extending the parliamentary term and reducing the number of seats to 150 from the current 235, and lowering the election threshold from 7% to 5%.

Pro-Western President Mikheil Saakashvili was reelected on January 5 with 53% of the vote.

In November 2007, he was forced to step down after opposition protests in the capital turned violent and police brutally dispersed protesters demanding his resignation as president, a post he had occupied since early 2004, following the 2003 bloodless 'Rose' revolution that saw Eduard Shevardnadze removed from power.

The opposition says the election legislation amendments create unequal conditions for the ruling party and the opposition.

#14

Georgia: Hunger Strike Continues, As Opposition Demands Remain Firm RFE/RL, March 21, 2008

The bitter political standoff in Georgia is showing no signs of abating despite increased pressure on the government to bow to opposition demands as a hunger strike enters its 12th day.

A group of more than 60 opposition activists are continuing to reject food in order to press their call for changes to the country's electoral system ahead of a key parliamentary poll in May.

The hunger-striking activists have set up tents on the square outside Georgia's parliament, while a handful of activists are camped inside the legislature, in the lobby of parliament speaker Nino Burjanadze's office.

"The dialogue was never severed, we have never reduced our efforts to bring our positions into line, and we are open to negotiations now, too," Burjanadze told reporters on March 20 in an effort to ease tensions. "There are a number of issues where it is extremely important to take different points of view into account, in order for these to be reflected in future legislation."

Burjanadze has dismissed calls for her resignation, saying she will step down only if the protesters drop all other demands.

The opposition is demanding more airtime on state television and changes in the electoral system ahead of parliamentary elections in two months. It is also calling on the government to allow the independent television channel Imedi back on air to create conditions for a fair election campaign. Imedi broadcasts were halted on

November 7 after President Mikheil Saakashvili deployed police to crack down on opposition protests and imposed a state of emergency.

The current standoff emerged after parliament approved fresh changes in the electoral law increasing the proportion of deputies elected under a system of single-mandate districts.

The opposition fiercely opposes the bill, which it views as an attempt by Saakashvili to extend his control over parliament. The single-mandate system tends to favor pro-government candidates, while opposition candidates tend to be more successful under proportional representation by party lists.

Saakashvili won reelection with a first-round majority after he called an early presidential election in January in the wake of the public unrest.

But with opponents refusing to acknowledge Saakashvili's election victory, many observers regard Georgia as more divided than at any time since the 2003 Rose Revolution.

Getting Serious

The hunger strikers appear determined not to cede ground, and several protesters have already been hospitalized.

Political analyst Soso Tsiskarishvili told RFE/RL's Georgian Service that the government must take action.

"The ball is now in the authorities' court, because they know very well about the opposition's demands," Tsiskarishvili said. "At one point, they seemed ready to open negotiations on these demands. If they meet at least some of them, I'm confident it will be possible to restore the dialogue format."

Saakashvili, during an official visit to Washington, on March 18 offered a compromise on the bill by proposing to increase the number of lawmakers in parliament. But that proposal runs counter to a 2003 referendum in which the population voted to reduce the number of deputies from 235 to 150.

"We have a decision that was made by the Georgian people. This number has been determined and this doesn't leave us any space to act," Tina Khidasheli, one of the leaders of the opposition Republican Party, told RFE/RL's Georgian Service. "Our country's parliament will consist of 150 deputies; this was decided by a huge majority of Georgians. There is no time for any more constitutional changes. This government has a history of working miracles, so maybe they'll succeed this time again. But we will take no part in this."

During talks with government officials this week, the Republican Party offered to replace single-mandate constituencies with multiple-mandate constituencies in order to harmonize the two different parliamentary election systems.

A statement by the Georgian Orthodox Church's respected Patriarch, Ilya II, on March 20 raised hopes of an early end to the standoff. He called on the opposition to halt the hunger strike and urged all sides to return to the negotiation table.

But after meeting the patriarch the same day, opposition leaders said the hunger strike would continue until authorities agreed to modify the electoral system.

The ruling party, in turn, said it would not consider the opposition's demands unless it called off the protest.

Gigi Ugulava, Tbilisi's mayor and a close ally of Saakashvili, said the opposition's refusal to end the hunger strike demonstrated a lack of respect for the patriarch.

#15

Ukraine opposition halts parliament over Kosovo issue

RIA Novosti, March 21, 2008

Ukraine's Party of Regions blocked the country's parliamentary rostrum Friday demanding the withdrawal of Ukrainian peacekeepers from Kosovo and the defense minister's resignation.

Over 20 Ukrainian peacekeepers were wounded and one later died in hospital following clashes in the Serb-dominated area of Mitrovica on March 17, when UN police and NATO-led KFOR troops launched an operation to regain control of a UN court building seized last week by ethnic Serbs.

As the Supreme Rada began its work on Friday morning, the Party of Regions proposed a bill on the withdrawal of Ukrainian peacekeepers from Kosovo, which was unanimously rejected by the parliamentary coalition.

The Party of Regions, led by former prime minister Viktor Yanukovich, also demanded that Defense Minister Yuriy Lutsenko resign for giving misleading information on the Kosovo incident.

"He [Lutsenko] said NATO had no connection to this operation. But the operation was commanded by KFOR, which has a direct link to NATO," Nestor Shufrych, one of the party's leaders, said.

The defense minister earlier called on parliament not to make any decision on the issue of the withdrawal of troops from Kosovo and asked the Party of Regions to avoid speculation regarding NATO, adding that the operation was conducted under the command of the UN mission in Kosovo.

Ukrainian Foreign Minister Volodymyr Ohryzko told journalists after a meeting of the National Security and Defense Council on Friday that Ukraine is not planning to end its peacekeeping operation in Kosovo.

"The question of withdrawing Ukrainian peacekeepers is not on the agenda," Ohryzko said.

The foreign minister added that the government will demand that the UN establish a two-party committee to investigate the incident with the Ukrainian peacekeepers.

Yanukovich's party blamed the death of the Ukrainian peacekeeper on the country's authorities, which are seeking NATO membership, saying they were putting political interests before the lives of Ukrainians.

Lutsenko blamed the UN for the incident and called for an investigation to find and bring those responsible for the soldier's death to justice.

Serb rioters attacked UN forces with rocks, grenades and Molotov cocktails as they tried to remove protesters from inside the courthouse.

In all, more than 60 UN police and KFOR troops, and over 70 Serb protesters were wounded in the worst outbreak of violence in the region since Kosovo unilaterally declared independence on February 17.

Work by the Supreme Rada was blocked for a few weeks last month by the Party of Regions and the Communist Party, who demanded a referendum on the country's accession to the NATO Membership Action Plan (MAP).

The NATO-Ukraine commission is due to hold a meeting during the alliance's summit in Bucharest, Romania, on April 2-4, 2008.

#16

Chief Rabbi of Dnepropetrovsk Receives Governor's Award Federation of Jewish Communities, March 26, 2008

Just a few days after Purim, the Jewish community of Dnepropetrovsk has been given some extra joy with his receipt of a prestigious award by Chief Rabbi Shmuel Kaminetsky. This honor was presented by the Chairman of the Regional Administration, Victor Bondar, in the 'Golden Rose' Synagogue.

During the ceremony, the top official noted that Rabbi Kaminetsky deserved this honor for his contribution to the overall development of the region, inter-ethnic and inter-religious accord, and in fostering a united and solid Jewish community. He also expressed how impressed he was at the beauty and uniqueness of the Synagogue. In his turn, the Chief Rabbi told the Governor about the community's activities, achievements and future plans.

"Contributing to a stronger Ukraine, the Dnepropetrovsk Region may serve as a model in terms of harmony that exists here between different religious confessions and national cultures," expressed Chief Rabbi Shmuel Kaminetsky. He also noted the great appreciation the Jewish community feels towards the different levels of government, which have been very supportive of its initiatives.

Governor Bondar wished the Jewish community continued success and blossoming and pledged his administration's support for the future advancement of ethnic and cultural traditions in the region. He also took this opportunity to congratulate the Jewish community on the holiday of Purim. The event ended with the presentation of the book "Bringing Heaven Down to Earth", which is based on the teachings of the Lubavitcher Rebbe.

#17

Belarus seeks Iran ties By Olga Tomashevskaya JTA, March 27, 2008

Facing diplomatic troubles with the United States and higher energy prices from Russia, Belarus is looking for new partners overseas. It's turning to Iran and the Arab world.

Belarus has been a subject of Western criticism for more than a decade, primarily due to the government's human rights record and limits on political freedoms.

Things have heated up in recent days, with the United States and Belarus recalling their ambassadors home for consultations. The flare-up was occasioned by the imposition of U.S. economic sanctions on Belarus and some state-owned Belarusian businesses.

Belarus President Alexander Lukashenko criticized the United States after the action and moved to limit the number of U.S. personnel at the embassy in Minsk.

"The U.S. demonstrated its cynical attitude toward international law," Lukashenko said last week.

Russia traditionally has been the main political benefactor of Belarus, but that relationship changed last year when Moscow cut back on the substantial economic support it provided through discounted sales of oil and gas supplies.

That prompted the former Soviet republic to seek a new source for its energy needs: the Islamic Republic of Iran.

"Cooperation between Belarus and Iran has a great future," Lukashenko wrote in a letter last week to Iran's president, Mahmoud Ahmedinejad, who visited Minsk last May.

After that visit, Belarus and Iran reportedly cemented plans for a "strategic partnership" and trade dramatically increased between them.

That, in addition to harsh remarks by Lukashenko about Israel and Jews in a live radio broadcast last October, unsettled many Jews here. On the radio show, broadcast from the Belarusian port city of Bobruisk, Lukashenko said, "This is a Jewish city, and the Jews are not concerned for the place they live in. They have turned Bobruisk into a pig sty. Look at Israel -- I was there."

Jewish community leaders suggested that the mention of Israel was a calculated signal by Lukashenko to the leadership of Iran. Five days later after Lukashenko's broadcast, 15 tombstones were desecrated in a Jewish cemetery in Bobruisk.

"Since Iran has linked up with Belarus, there's been a distinct anti-Israel flavor in Belarus," a leading Jewish community figure who requested anonymity told JTA at the time.

Israel's ambassador to Belarus, Ze'ev Ben Arie, said Belarus' outreach to Iran, while embarrassing to Israel, does not preclude a relationship between the Jewish state and this country of 10 million.

"Every country in the world is free to develop relations with any partners," Ben Arie told JTA. "We don't make any recommendations concerning Belarusian foreign policy.

"However, close contacts between Belarus and Iran embarrass us because annihilation of Israel is one of the aims of Iranian policy. Belarusian officials say that Minsk doesn't support this idea, but the declarations about political solidarity with Iran put obstacles in the way of cooperation between Belarus and Israel in different fields."

Ben Arie said the friendship between Minsk and Tehran could impede military or security cooperation between Israel and Belarus. Close ties to Iran -- Belarus already has a contract to extract oil from Jofeir, in Iran -- also are likely to make Israeli businessmen extra cautious about investing in projects in Belarus, he said.

Though Lukashenko has called Iran a strategic partner, Belarusian observers say Belarus is more interested in Iran and the Arab world's economic resources than building political alliances in the Middle East, despite the rhetoric.

"Contacts between Belarus and Arab states are based on anti-Western rhetoric," said the head of the Mises think tank in Belarus, Jaroslav Romanchuk. "But today's attempts to build real cooperation are not very successful."

Belarusian political scientist Alexander Klaskovsky said, "Authorities want to get great investment and cheap energy supplies from Arab states. However, we don't see really great results."

"I doubt that Iran would provide cheap energy supplies to Belarus only because this country is its political ally," Klaskovsky said. "I think that Tehran is going to make business, but not provide economic support to Minsk."

Meanwhile, the United States and the European Union continue to press Belarus on democratic reforms, insisting on freedom for political parties, an independent media and the release of all political prisoners in Belarus.

In 2006 and 2007, the United States froze the U.S. bank accounts of Belarus' president and several other top Belarusian officials. Last November, the United States imposed economic sanctions on Belneftekhim, a Belarus state oil and petrochemical consortium, freezing its U.S. assets.

This month, the U.S. Treasury Department said similar measures would be applied to all companies in which Belneftekhim has a larger than 50 percent ownership stake.

Lukashenko denounced the sanctions and recalled his country's ambassador to the United States.

The CIA classifies Belarus as a dictatorship, and U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice has called Lukashenko "Europe's last dictator."

#18

Turkmen Leader to Visit NATO Forum Reuters, March 24, 2008

Turkmen President Gurbanguly Berdymukhammedov will attend a NATO summit in April, the first leader of his long-isolated homeland to seek closer ties with the Western security alliance, state media reported.

Berdymukhammedov will visit Bucharest from April 2 to 4, the state Turkmen Khabarlary agency said late last week.

Turkmenistan, Central Asia's top natural gas exporter, was isolated first under Soviet rule and then during the 21-year reign of reclusive leader Saparmurat Niyazov, who died in late 2006.

Berdymukhammedov has made steps to end isolation and balance his nation's traditionally close relations with Russia by boosting ties with the West.

Moscow is particularly sensitive to former Soviet states' contacts with NATO and still sees Central Asia as part of its sphere of interest.

Separately, Turkmenistan has named an ambassador to neighboring Azerbaijan seven years after recalling its envoy during a dispute over Caspian Sea hydrocarbon resources, the state newspaper Neutral Turkmenistan reported.

Turkmenistan's former consul general in Turkey, Annamammed Mamedov, has been named ambassador to Azerbaijan.

Improving relations between the two energy-rich nations offers a glimmer of hope for building a gas pipeline circumventing Russia -- a proposal backed by the European Union and the United States.

#19

Moldova's Leader Nominates First Female Prime Minister Associated Press, March 24, 2008

Moldovan President Vladimir Voronin has nominated an economist and former finance minister to become the country's first female prime minister.

Russian-born Zinaida Greceanii, 52, a member of Voronin's Communist Party, is expected to receive the required parliamentary approval, where the communists hold 55 out of the 101 seats.

She would replace Prime Minister Vasile Tarlev who unexpectedly resigned Wednesday in a leadership shakeup that Tarlev predicted would benefit the country by creating a new government with more public appeal.

Tarlev, 44, a Communist, had been prime minister since 2001 and Moldova's longest-serving prime minister since Moldova became independent in 1991.

Greceanii served as finance minister from 2002 to 2005, when she was appointed deputy prime minister, a post she has held since.

In 2006, the economist negotiated the price of natural gas with Gazprom. Under the five-year deal, Moldova, one of Europe's poorest nations, will gradually pay more for natural gas until 2011, when it will pay the European average gas price.

The average monthly salary in Moldova is 2,200 leu (\$210).

Greceanii has 15 days to present a new government to the parliament, which will then vote on whether to approve the new Cabinet.

Moldova, a nation of about 4 million people bordering Romania and Ukraine, is scheduled to hold parliamentary elections in March 2009.

Moldova has moved closer to Russia in recent weeks, and Voronin is seeking to improve the weak economy and to resolve a dispute with the Transdnestr region which declared independence in 1991.

#20

Armenians Rally After State of Emergency Ends Associated Press, March 24, 2008

Several hundred opposition supporters held demonstrations across Yerevan on Friday after authorities lifted a 20-day state of emergency.

The rallies were against the March 1 arrests of dozens of opposition activists following clashes between police and protesters in which eight people were killed and dozens injured. A state of emergency followed, banning public gatherings, which ended Thursday at midnight.

The latest demonstrators lit candles and held pictures of those arrested on March 1. Police officers approached the protesters, who formed a chain across downtown Yerevan, urging them to disperse but not using force.

Several protesters yelled curses at the police, but there were no clashes.

The violence on March 1 erupted after police forcibly dispersed protesters claiming that the government rigged the Feb. 19 presidential election and demanding a new vote.

The official results gave the favored candidate of outgoing President Robert Kocharyan, Prime Minister Serzh Sargsyan, nearly 53 percent of the vote, while opposition leader Levon Ter-Petrosyan received about 21 percent. Sargsyan is set to be inaugurated April 9.

Sargsyan said Thursday that 106 of the scores of detained opposition supporters remained under arrest, including some of Ter-Petrosyan's former allies.

"We are demanding that the authorities explain to us why these 106 people have been arrested," said one protester, Armen Martirosyan.

The opposition has capitalized on widespread public anger over endemic poverty, despite recent economic growth. "We have nothing to eat," said another protester, Alla Arutyunyan. "I'm wondering whether Sargsyan and his family could survive on the money they give me."