



WASHINGTON, D.C. April 25, 2008

TO: NCSJ Leadership and Interested Parties

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

In Brief: U.S. Presidential Candidates on Russia; Trouble in the Caucasus

Dear Friend,

Recently, the Moscow Times interviewed foreign policy representatives for Senators McCain and Obama about U.S.-Russia relations. (Sen. Clinton's campaign did not respond to requests for an interview.) Aides for each camp made clear that his candidate's approach, should he be elected, would differ greatly from the current administration's. The advisors spoke forcefully on issues ranging from missile defense to human rights. At the very least, it is encouraging that the presidential aspirants are giving serious thought to developing their U.S.-Russia policy.

As noted in earlier updates, the various regions of the former Soviet Union are confronting increasing domestic and regional challenges. Tensions continue to mount between Russia and Georgia. The Russian military's downing of a Georgian drone plane and Russia's threat to recognize the autonomy of disputed Georgian territories are the latest incidents inflaming the relationship. Although Russia has expressed an intent to take a softer approach with Georgia (see story #4), there seems to be little 'give' by either government.

Georgia is not the only country in the Caucasus facing a political crisis. Armenia continues to grapple with its post-presidential election disaster. The U.S. and others remain concerned about the future direction of the country and its government, and there are increasing questions about what type of support the U.S. should provide to Armenia (see story #18).

Jewish communities continue to confront anti-Semitic incidents in several countries, including Belarus and Ukraine. The Ukrainian government is proactively addressing this issue. After the latest incident, a cemetery desecration in Zhytomir, three people were arrested in a matter of days. It will be important to see whether the three are charged with hate crimes or just 'hooliganism'.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads 'Mark B. Levin'.

Mark B. Levin
Executive Director



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

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

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

1. *Saakashvili Wants Peacekeepers Out*
Reuters, April 25, 2008
2. *Georgia-Russia Tension Escalates Over Downed Drone*
By C. J. CHIVERS
The New York Times, April 22, 2008
3. *Aggression in Georgia*
Editorial
Washington Post, April 22, 2008
4. *Putin Orders Friendlier Georgia Policy*
The Associated Press, April 21, 2008
5. *Echoes of the Anschluss in Georgia*
By Mart Laar
The Financial Times, April 20, 2008
6. *Moscow move on Georgia "provocative": Estonia*
By Susan Cornwell
Reuters, April 18, 2008
7. *U.S. Race Advisers Sound Off on Russia*
By Matt Siegel
The Moscow Times, April 22, 2008
8. *At Expense of All Others, Putin Picks a Church*
By CLIFFORD J. LEVY
The New York Times, April 24, 2008
9. *Russian shipment for Iranian nuclear plant blocked*
By Aida Sultanova
Associated Press, April 21, 2008
10. *Middle East talks in Moscow get scant support*
By Nicholas Kralev
Washington Times, April 23, 2008
11. *European Delegation Urges Russia on Rights*
By David Nowak
The Associated Press, April 24, 2008

12. *NGO Deadline Extended 2 Weeks*
The Moscow Times, April 21, 2008
13. *Rogozin Stays on Message in Brussels*
The Moscow Times, April 21, 2008
14. *Estonia goes cyber "thanks" to occupation*
The Baltic News, April 17, 2008
15. *Ukraine: Adolf Hitler doll on sale*
London Daily Mail, April 23 2008
16. *Ukraine cemetery vandals identified*
JTA Brief, April 23, 2008
17. *Ukrainian teacher guilty of anti-Semitic slurs*
JTA Brief, April 24, 2008
18. *ARMENIA: US OFFICIALS SAY YEREVAN RISKS LOSING DEVELOPMENT FUNDS*
By Joshua Kucera
Eurasianet, April 18, 2008
19. *Armenia to Push 'Genocide' Issue*
By Hasmik Mkrtchyan
Reuters, April 25, 2008
20. *Analysis: Armenia's Outgoing Foreign Minister Defends Karabakh Policy*
By Anna Saghalian and Liz Fuller
RFE/RL, April 18, 2008
21. *Belarus Demand 'Unprecedented'*
The Associated Press, April 25, 2008
22. *US diplomat visits Homyel amid reports about discovery of old Jewish cemetery*
Belarusskie Novosti, April 22, 2008
23. *Vandals Deface Belarus Holocaust Memorial*
JTA Brief, April 23, 2008
24. *Demonstrations of solidarity with Belarusian dissidents staged in Vilnius, Narva*
Belarus News, April 22, 2008
25. *Moldova to maintain ascendant pace of internal reforms to meet EU rigours, speaker says*
Moldpres, April 18, 2008
26. *Euro Court Rules for Uzbeks*
The Associated Press, April 25, 2008
27. *Uzbeks to Lose EU Sanctions*
Reuters, April 25, 2008

#1

**Saakashvili Wants Peacekeepers Out
Reuters, April 25, 2008**

Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili said Thursday that he would seek Western support for his efforts to replace Russian peacekeepers in the breakaway province of Abkhazia with an international force.

"Russia's presence, the presence of the Russian contingent in the conflict zone is becoming a risk factor," Saakashvili told a meeting with foreign ambassadors broadcast on national television.

"We plan to start intensive negotiations with countries that are Georgia's friends about the expediency of the Russian peacekeeping contingent's presence in the conflict zone," Saakashvili added.

Russia sent peacekeepers to Abkhazia in 1994 after it brokered a deal between Tbilisi and Abkhaz separatists ending nearly two years of war in which thousands of people died and hundreds of thousands were made refugees.

Ever since, Tbilisi has accused Moscow of backing the separatists. The feud over Abkhazia and another breakaway region, South Ossetia, has become the most painful issue in Georgia's relations with Russia.

The fate of Abkhazia and South Ossetia has become a major bargaining chip in Moscow's efforts to prevent Georgia, ruled by a pro-Western government since 2005, from joining NATO.

Georgia wants Russian peacekeepers to be replaced by a Western force. Russia says it has responsibility for the security of its citizens, which now make up the majority of residents in Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

Meanwhile, Western countries on Wednesday called on Russia to revoke moves establishing closer ties with Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

After a UN Security Council discussion of the crisis Wednesday, however, Russian Ambassador Vitaly Churkin called the demand by the United States, Britain, France and Germany a "tall order" and said it was "not going to happen."

President Vladimir Putin last week ordered the government to recognize some documents issued by separatist authorities in Abkhazia and South Ossetia and cooperate with those regions on trade and other issues.

Relations took a further turn for the worse Sunday when a Georgian reconnaissance drone was shot down over Abkhazia. Tbilisi blamed Russia, but the Russian Air Force has denied responsibility.

In a statement issued as the council met, the four Western powers said they were "highly concerned" about the move on ties with the breakaway regions, adding: "We call on the Russian Federation to revoke or not to implement its decision."

Asked by reporters to respond, Churkin said, "This is, of course, a tall order, and I think that they themselves understand that this is not something which is going to happen."

Georgia has accused Russia of "creeping annexation" of the rebel territories.

Churkin said Moscow's moves did not constitute diplomatic recognition of the two regions and did not involve enhanced military cooperation with them.

"There is nothing anti-Georgian in those efforts," he said. "Our measures are strictly within the limits of international law, within the limits of legality."

The Western powers said many ideas had been put forward by Georgia and the West for defusing the crisis with Abkhazia. "Such steps could start, but should not end, with the exchange of declarations concerning the nonresumption of hostilities and the return of refugees," they said.

The Western statement took no view on the drone incident but called on both Georgia and Abkhazia to immediately approve an increase in the powers of the 130-strong UN observer mission in Georgia.

That suggestion was supported by Georgian Foreign Minister David Bakradze, who attended the meeting, which was requested by Georgia.

Churkin repeated Moscow's assertion that the flight contravened a 1994 cease-fire agreement between Georgia and Abkhazia, which bans unannounced military activities, and also violated UN resolutions.

Bakradze dismissed the claim. Video footage taken by the drone "clearly shows a MiG-29 military aircraft, and the only country in the region possessing MiG-29 aircraft is the Russian Federation," he said. Radar records showed the plane coming from and returning to Russia, he added.

#2

Georgia-Russia Tension Escalates Over Downed Drone

By C. J. CHIVERS

The New York Times, April 22, 2008

Georgia accused Russia on Monday of violating its airspace and using a MIG fighter jet to shoot down a Georgian reconnaissance drone over the separatist territory of Abkhazia on Sunday.

Russia's Air Force denied the Georgian claim, saying that none of its military planes flew in or near southwestern Russia on Sunday and that its pilots were not working that day.

But Georgia released what is said was the video recording of the final live feed received from the unarmed reconnaissance aircraft before it was struck by an air-to-air missile and crashed at 9:55 a.m. Sunday.

Buoyed with what it called clear evidence, Georgia countered with a diplomatic and public relations offensive. President Mikheil Saakashvili appeared on national television and said he had spoken with President Vladimir V. Putin of Russia and demanded an end to what he called "unprovoked aggression against the sovereign territory of Georgia."

In a telephone interview Monday night, Mr. Saakashvili said he had spoken with Mr. Putin for about 40 minutes. He said that Mr. Putin had neither confirmed nor denied the attack, and that the two presidents had disagreed sharply about the status of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, two separatist enclaves in Georgia that receive intensive political and diplomatic Russian support.

Last week, Mr. Putin issued a decree expanding relations between Russia and the enclaves, including direct contacts with Russia's ministries and pledges of economic and agricultural aid. Georgia called the decree a formal step in "a creeping annexation."

The video released Monday seemed certain to intensify the dispute. It shows the clear silhouette of a twin-tailed fighter aircraft, which the Georgians claimed was a MIG-29 fighter jet, as it banks into view beneath the remotely piloted drone and fires a missile toward the camera.

The missile streaks swiftly toward the lens, leaving a long smoke trail as it advances and grows in size. The footage stops. Black-and-white static fills the screen.

Neither the Georgian Air Force nor the tiny contingent of Abkhaz planes in the separatist territory have MIG-29s. The only air force with MIG-29s that could have been in the area, Georgian officials said, is Russia's.

Mr. Saakashvili said the evidence was irrefutable. "It's on the video," he said. "It's a Russian plane."

The dispute marked the latest claim by Georgia that Russia had made illegal military incursions into Georgian airspace. Last year, Georgia accused Russia of two mysterious attacks — a coordinated helicopter and ground-to-ground rocket attack in the Kodori Gorge in March, and an attack from a Russian jet with an air-to-ground missile in August.

Mr. Saakashvili also said that Russia had secretly expanded military aid to Abkhazia, staging aircraft inside its borders and assigning trainers to Abkhaz ground units. He said that last year a special Georgian unit killed two Russian colonels who had accompanied an Abkhaz reconnaissance patrol deep into Georgian territory.

Each event, Georgia has said, is further evidence that Russia has sided militarily with separatists it already supports politically in South Ossetia and Abkhazia, which achieved de facto independence after brief wars against Georgia in the 1990s.

The attacks, Georgia has said, show that Russia is not neutral and should be grounds to nullify Russia's role as a peacekeeper in the region, which it has had since a cease-fire in 1993. Russia has repeatedly denied the Georgian claims, even when confronted with pieces of the broken rockets and missiles with Russian-language markings.

After the episode last August, Russia accused Georgia of staging a fake attack, or of attacking itself. Georgia countered that it had digital radar evidence of a plane entering from Russia, flying to the area of the attack and then returning to Russia.

Georgia initially denied Abkhaz reports on Sunday that it had lost a drone. But on Monday it changed its account, saying it had dispatched an unarmed drone to observe Abkhaz troop buildups in Gali, a district on the Black Sea near the internal administrative border between Georgian and Abkhaz forces.

Mr. Saakashvili said Georgia had about 40 reconnaissance drones, which it purchased from Israel and distributed among its police and military commands. "It is a very handy thing in a mountainous country," he said. The lost drone, he said, belonged to the Interior Ministry.

The Russian Air Force command did not dispute that a Georgian drone had been downed by an air-to-air missile. But it said an Abkhaz L-39 training plane had flown the mission, not a Russian MIG-29.

The fighter plane seen in the Georgian video did not resemble an L-39, which has a distinctive silhouette, including a single tail. The video could not be immediately verified independently. No markings were visible on the attacking plane.

Georgian officials said they were fortunate to capture the fighter plane on camera, and had done so only because a first missile fired by the plane missed the drone, which has a small engine that they said made it a difficult target for a heat-seeking missile.

The pilot apparently decided to approach closer for a second shot, they said, and flew near enough for the plane to be filmed by the drone before it was destroyed.

Shota Utiashvili, a senior official in Georgia's Interior Ministry, said radar data also showed that the Russian plane had flown from Gudauta, a former Soviet air base inside Abkhazia, which is within Georgia's internationally recognized borders.

Basing Russian attack aircraft in Abkhazia would be illegal and a violation of the terms of peacekeeping in the region, he said.

Georgian officials said the video had been shared with foreign embassies in Tbilisi, the Georgian capital; the embassies made no public comment. Mr. Saakashvili said Georgia would bring the attack up with the United Nations.

The attack, he said, was hardly the first, "but this time we have video evidence."

The episode occurred only days after several Western countries, including the United States, criticized Russia's announcement that it would expand its support for the breakaway regions.

"We are very concerned at the steps that have been taken and we have made our views known to the Russian government," Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice said last week.

#3

Aggression in Georgia

Editorial

Washington Post, April 22, 2008

Vladimir Putin steps up his campaign against Russia's democratic neighbor -- and bets that NATO won't respond.

Last month,, NATO sent a muddled message to Ukraine and Georgia, fragile European democracies that are seeking membership in the Western alliance. Pressed by President Bush, a NATO summit meeting issued a statement declaring that the two countries "will become members of NATO" someday. But the alliance also deferred the requests of their governments for "membership action plans," the bureaucratic vehicle for joining, at the insistence of France and Germany -- which made it clear they were deferring to Russian objections.

Russian President Vladimir Putin read NATO's ambivalence exactly as Georgia's president predicted he would -- as a sign of weakness. He has responded by escalating Moscow's campaign against Georgia's sovereignty, intended to force it back into the Kremlin's sphere of influence. Last week, Mr. Putin issued a decree establishing legal ties with the governments of two separatist regions of Georgia, a major step toward either recognizing them as independent states or annexing them to Russia. On Sunday, according to Georgian authorities, a Russian MiG-29 warplane operating over one of the regions, Abkhazia, shot down an unmanned Georgian reconnaissance aircraft.

Russia has backed Abkhazia and South Ossetia in their rebellions against Georgia ever since Georgia became an independent country after the breakup of the Soviet Union. It has dispatched its own personnel to head ministries in the separatist regions and issued passports to many of their remaining citizens. Now it is treating the provinces as if they were autonomous Russian republics and attacking Georgia's aircraft as if they were over the territory of Russia, rather than in Georgia. Mr. Putin clearly expects that Georgia's would-be Western allies will take no concrete steps to defend it -- and will shrink from any further step to bring it into NATO.

So far he's right. The Bush administration, the European Union and NATO duly issued statements last week expressing concern about Mr. Putin's legal decree and asking that it be reversed. Yesterday, they said they were asking the Russian government for an explanation of the downing of the unmanned aircraft; Moscow's initial denial of responsibility was hard to reconcile with the video of the incident posted by Georgia on the Internet. Yet *démarches* won't change Russian behavior.

The appropriate and proportionate response is for NATO to take its own concrete steps toward integrating Georgia and Ukraine. An alliance meeting in December is due to reconsider the issue; the Bush administration should insist that a decision on membership action plans for the two nations be made then. It should also propose a new international mechanism for resolving Georgia's dispute with its provinces, one that cannot be dominated by Russia. If it shrinks from challenging Mr. Putin's actions, NATO will allow a new line to be drawn in Europe -- one that leaves Georgia and Ukraine on the wrong side.

#4

Putin Orders Friendlier Georgia Policy

The Associated Press, April 21, 2008

President Vladimir Putin ordered his government to take steps to ease tensions with Georgia, the Foreign Ministry said Friday, a move that came amid international concern over Moscow's recent decision to strengthen ties with two breakaway Georgian regions.

Putin instructed authorities to hold talks aimed at lifting a ban on imports of Georgian wine, mineral water and other products, ending visa restrictions, and speeding up reconstruction of a border crossing, the ministry said.

The order follows Russia's announcement Wednesday that it is establishing stronger ties with Abkhazia and South Ossetia, which broke from Georgian control in the early 1990s and are not recognized by any country, including Russia.

That announcement had alarmed the West and angered Georgia, which views the move as a threat to its sovereignty.

#5

Echoes of the Anschluss in Georgia

By Mart Laar

The Financial Times, April 20, 2008

President Vladimir Putin on Wednesday accelerated Moscow's creeping annexation of Georgian territories to sweeping annexation. This is a victory for hard-liners who pressed Putin to give the order before he moves from the Kremlin to the White House as prime minister. It comes as Georgian proposals for peaceful settlements in the territories, Abkhazia and South Ossetia, languish. The West must shake off its torpor, condemn Putin's gambit and support the Georgian proposals. Ignoring Moscow's Soviet-style land grab would intensify strife in the South Caucasus.

According to Putin's instruction, Russia will open "representations" in the two territories to protect the interests of Russian citizens there and to foster cooperation. The Kremlin will claim that it has many citizens to protect in the two Georgian territories, after it illegally distributed its passports to anyone remaining after the civil wars and ethnic cleansing of the 1990s.

"Those who cannot learn from history," said Spanish philosopher George Santayana, "are doomed to repeat it." In 1937, Hitler agitated for the rights of the Sudeten Germans in Czechoslovakia; in 1938, he annexed Sudetenland into the Reich, purging it of non-Germans. In Abkhazia, most Georgians, Armenians, Estonians, Greeks and Russians -- perhaps 500,000 in all -- are already gone. The Kremlin recognizes Georgia's international boundaries, but its actions belie its words.

Moscow's representations will be less than official consulates, although consular services will be offered from offices in neighboring bits of Russia. Representation is a euphemism to soothe Western fears that Moscow may recognize the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia in tit-for-tat retaliation for Western recognition of Kosovo. But in Moscow's insidious gambit, the representative offices will be among the final steps toward annexation of the two Georgian territories.

The instruction allows Russian ministries and even Russian regions to open representations in Sukhumi and Tskhinvali, the capitals of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. It is a strategy to install in two Georgian territories government apparatus typical of Russian autonomous republics. Just as legal acts, corporate entities and documents of one autonomous republic are recognized throughout Russia, so too will be legal decisions, companies and papers of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. This will incorporate the two territories into the country's legal space.

In March, Moscow withdrew from the 1996 Commonwealth of Independent States restrictions on Abkhazia, including those that barred transfer of military equipment and assistance. The Kremlin also opened lucrative contracts associated with the 2014 Sochi Winter Olympics to Abkhaz contractors. The net effect is to include Abkhazia and South Ossetia in the country's economic space while maintaining formidable barriers against trade with the rest of Georgia.

The threat of force is never deeply submerged. Last November, Georgia reported that additional T-72 tanks, Grad multiple-launch rocket systems, armored personnel carriers, howitzers and about 200 new Russian troops had appeared in Abkhazia.

The authorities in Sukhumi and Tskhinvali are Russian subsidiaries. Moscow is taking big steps during the lull afforded by the U.S. presidential transition and by the hope of many European leaders for improved relations with President-elect Dmitry Medvedev.

Meanwhile, the West appears deaf and dumb to Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili's offer on March 28 of unprecedented autonomy for Abkhazia. Georgia's proposal of a new negotiating format for South Ossetia fares no better. Western political autism is irresponsible. The West must awake and unite -- not to oppose Russia or support Georgia, but to stand up for its ideals. It must send Medvedev a strong signal that the path to better relations lies only in repudiating the Putin instruction and engaging on the Georgian peace proposals.

"The belief that security can be obtained by throwing a small state to the wolves is a fatal delusion," said Winston Churchill just before Munich. We should have learned the lesson 70 years ago.

#6

Moscow move on Georgia "provocative": Estonia

By Susan Cornwell

Reuters, April 18, 2008

Russia may have seen NATO's recent refusal to put Georgia on a fast track to membership as a green light for its "provocative" move to strengthen ties with separatists in Georgia, Estonian President Toomas Hendrik Ilves said on Friday.

Ilves, whose Baltic nation, like Georgia, was once part of the Soviet Union, praised Tbilisi for staying calm after a decree by Russian President Vladimir Putin on Wednesday ordering his government to set up legal links with neighboring Georgia's breakaway regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

"The Russian decree we think is provocative, counterproductive and ultimately wrong," Ilves, currently on a visit to the United States, said in an interview with Reuters after meetings with Vice President Dick Cheney and U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice.

"We think that this kind of decree should be withdrawn or revoked," Ilves said, speaking in English. The United States and European Union, of which Estonia is a member, on Friday urged Russia to reverse the decree.

Estonia and some other countries that were once part of the Soviet Union or its sphere of influence, argued at NATO's summit in Bucharest this month for offering Georgia and Ukraine a "Membership Action Plan" (MAP) -- a first step toward entry.

The United States also favored MAPS for Ukraine and Georgia. But Germany, France and several others said neither country was ready and that Russia could be antagonized.

NATO compromised, promising Ukraine and Georgia they could one day join the western defense alliance, but refusing to give them MAPS now.

"One possible interpretation is that the refusal, the opposition to giving MAP by some members, some allies, was perceived (in Moscow) as a green light to proceed with this rather dangerous step," Ilves told Reuters.

Ilves said he worried that NATO's decision not to offer Georgia a Membership Action Plan now, was "sort of saying ... get the Georgians to react to something in a way that would preclude their receiving a MAP later."

"Their response (to Putin's decree) has been remarkably and commendably calm," he said of the Georgians. But he wondered whether Tbilisi could stay serene, especially with parliamentary elections scheduled for May: "How many cheeks do you have, to turn the other one?"

Estonia has had its own problems with Russia in the past year. Its decision last April to remove the bronze statue of a Red Army soldier from the center of the capital Tallinn sparked rioting by mainly Russian-speaking youths, and four weeks of attacks on Estonia's Internet infrastructure.

Ilves' visit to the United States comes as a new movie documentary being released there about Estonia, "The Singing Revolution," emphasizes that country's relative tranquility as it pushed for self-determination in the late 1980s.

The Soviet Union annexed Estonia in 1940 and re-occupied it after World War Two. Estonia regained its independence as the Soviet Union disintegrated in 1991.

"(We were) staying calm, sublimating our angst through song," Ilves said of the years leading to independence.

He smiled. "Our Georgian friends say, you Estonians are so unemotional. I think we are emotional. We express it perhaps in different ways."

#7

U.S. Race Advisers Sound Off on Russia

By Matt Siegel

The Moscow Times, April 22, 2008

Senator John McCain has called President Vladimir Putin's Russia revanchist and suggested that it be expelled from the G8. Senator Hillary Clinton famously quipped that the Russian president lacked a soul. And Senator Barack Obama has said, well, not very much at all.

But while U.S.-Russian relations have hardly been a leading issue in the U.S. presidential campaign, there appear to be palpable differences in how the candidates will navigate the increasingly strained relationship.

In wide-ranging interviews with The Moscow Times, the chief Russia policy advisers for McCain and Obama both criticized what they described as Russia's recent retreat from democratic values and bullying of its former Soviet satellites. But they offered differing visions on how to tackle contentious issues in U.S.-Russian relations, including NATO expansion and missile defense.

Stephen Biegun, a trained Russia expert and longtime congressional adviser who served as executive secretary of the U.S. National Security Council from 2001 to 2003, is McCain's top Russia adviser.

He described his view of the future of U.S.-Russian relations by taking a not-so-subtle jab at his former boss, U.S. President George W. Bush.

"It's very difficult for countries to maintain over time a strong level of cooperation simply anchored in an opportunistic judgment of shared interests," Biegun said. "There has to be more."

Frustrated by what many of his fellow conservatives see as Bush's failed appeasement of Putin, Biegun advocates muscular efforts to prevent Russia from dragging the continent back into what he called "a very dark era of European politics that we've left behind forever."

McCain has expressed his support for implementing Bush's plan to deploy elements of a missile-defense shield in Eastern Europe, despite Russia's objections to the shield. Abandoning missile defense, Biegun warned, would demoralize U.S. allies.

Obama has publicly said a missile-defense system should be deployed only if it "would protect us and our allies" and "only when the system works." He said last year that the Bush administration has "exaggerated missile-defense capabilities and rushed deployment for political purposes."

Michael McFaul, Obama's top Russia strategist and a political science professor at Stanford, called the Illinois senator "an engagement guy, not an isolation guy," a key foreign policy distinction between himself and Senator McCain, who has already pledged not to engage with governments isolated by the Bush administration such as North Korea and Iran.

"One has to think about arms control like a market negotiation," McFaul said. "When you go to buy a house from somebody, you don't have to share their values to do a deal to buy the house, so why can't we have that same separation in our own minds in terms of foreign policy?"

Clinton's camp declined repeated requests to be interviewed for this report. But Lee Feinstein, the national security director for her campaign, echoed Obama's position on missile defense.

"The Bush administration's approach on missile defense — buy before you try — has not strengthened our own security or that of our allies," Feinstein told Bloomberg.

Clinton and Obama square off Tuesday in a key primary in Pennsylvania, while McCain has already captured enough delegates to secure the Republican nomination in the November election.

On the issue of NATO expansion, the candidates have publicly espoused almost identical rhetoric. All three publicly supported extending Membership Action Plans, the first step toward NATO membership, to Georgia and Ukraine. Each expressed disappointment when French and German-led efforts to scuttle the invitations succeeded at the alliance's recent annual summit in Bucharest, Romania.

McFaul and Biegun differ sharply on how best to approach U.S.-Russian relations as NATO continues its eastward expansion. McFaul has long advocated offering NATO membership to Russia as a means to solve transcontinental disputes, an idea Biegun derided as "Pollyannaish."

Both McFaul and Biegun said the Bush administration's Russia policy had been an abject failure on issues ranging from human rights to energy security. They derided Bush for what they see as failed efforts to placate Putin into complying with U.S. and European policy initiatives.

"I think there's a fundamental false trade-off that many people make, and most certainly the Bush administration has accepted this false trade-off, that if you talk about democracy and you stand up for human rights, you're going to alienate President Putin and you're not going together him to do the real things that matter to America," Biegun said.

The Kremlin has so far expressed little interest publicly in the U.S. presidential campaign, certainly far less than the U.S. candidates did in Russia's recent elections, which Clinton called "a milestone in that country's retreat from democracy."

Dmitry Rogozin, Russia's ambassador to NATO, candidly expressed doubts that any of the candidates offered much hope for speedy rapprochement.

"All in all, I can say that we're not waiting for whichever candidate wins the elections to make our relations radically better," Rogozin said by telephone from Brussels.

Rogozin admitted that of the three candidates, he knows the least about Obama, although he expressed concern at his choice of Zbigniew Brzezinski, a notorious Russia hawk and cold warrior, to his foreign policy team.

Rose Gottemoeller, director of the Carnegie Moscow Center, said U.S.-Russian relations could be in for a "rough ride" in the first two years of a McCain presidency, but McCain could then "moderate his views over time." Obama and Clinton, while both expressing concern about the "course of reforms" in Russia, appear more inclined to develop a more wide-ranging relationship, Gottemoeller said.

Regardless of which candidate ends up in the White House, both sides will likely be driven by pragmatism, Gottemoeller said. "Both countries have so many important issues that they need to have success on working with each other," she said.

#8

At Expense of All Others, Putin Picks a Church

By CLIFFORD J. LEVY
The New York Times, April 24, 2008

It was not long after a Methodist church put down roots here that the troubles began.

First came visits from agents of the F.S.B., a successor to the K.G.B., who evidently saw a threat in a few dozen searching souls who liked to huddle in cramped apartments to read the Bible and, perhaps, drink a little tea. Local officials then labeled the church a “sect.” Finally, last month, they shut it down.

There was a time after the fall of Communism when small Protestant congregations blossomed here in southwestern Russia, when a church was almost as easy to set up as a general store. Today, this industrial region has become emblematic of the suppression of religious freedom under President Vladimir V. Putin.

Just as the government has tightened control over political life, so, too, has it intruded in matters of faith. The Kremlin’s surrogates in many areas have turned the Russian Orthodox Church into a de facto official religion, warding off other Christian denominations that seem to offer the most significant competition for worshippers. They have all but banned proselytizing by Protestants and discouraged Protestant worship through a variety of harassing measures, according to dozens of interviews with government officials and religious leaders across Russia.

This close alliance between the government and the Russian Orthodox Church has become a defining characteristic of Mr. Putin’s tenure, a mutually reinforcing choreography that is usually described here as working “in symphony.”

Mr. Putin makes frequent appearances with the church’s leader, Patriarch Aleksei II, on the Kremlin-controlled national television networks. Last week, Mr. Putin was shown prominently accepting an invitation from Aleksei II to attend services for Russian Orthodox Easter, which is this Sunday.

The relationship is grounded in part in a common nationalistic ideology dedicated to restoring Russia’s might after the disarray that followed the end of the Soviet Union. The church’s hostility toward Protestant groups, many of which are based in the United States or have large followings there, is tinged with the same anti-Western sentiment often voiced by Mr. Putin and other senior officials.

The government’s antipathy also seems to stem in part from the Kremlin’s wariness toward independent organizations that are not allied with the government.

Here in Sary Oskol, 300 miles south of Moscow, the police evicted a Seventh-day Adventist congregation from its meeting hall, forcing it to hold services in a ramshackle home next to a construction site. Evangelical Baptists were barred from renting a theater for a Christian music festival, and were not even allowed to hand out toys at an orphanage. A Lutheran minister said he moved away for a few years because he feared for his life. He has returned, but keeps a low profile.

On local television last month, the city’s chief Russian Orthodox priest, who is a confidant of the region’s most powerful politicians, gave a sermon that was repeated every few hours. His theme: Protestant heretics.

“We deplore those who are led astray — those Jehovah’s Witnesses, Baptists, evangelicals, Pentecostals and many others who cut Christ’s robes like bandits, who are like the soldiers who crucified Christ, who ripped apart Christ’s holy coat,” declared the priest, the Rev. Aleksei D. Zorin.

Such language is familiar to Protestants in Sary Oskol, who number about 2,000 in a city of 225,000.

The Rev. Vladimir Pakhomov, the minister of the Methodist church, recalled a warning from an F.S.B. officer to one of his parishioners: “ ‘Protestantism is facing difficult times — or maybe its end.’ ”

Most Protestant churches are required under the law to register with the government in order to do anything more than conduct prayers in an apartment. Officials rejected Mr. Pakhomov's registration this year, first saying his paperwork was deficient, then contending that the church was a front for an unspecified business.

Mr. Pakhomov appealed in court, but lost. He said he could now face arrest for so much as chatting with children about attending a Methodist camp.

"They have made us into lepers to scare people away," Mr. Pakhomov said. "There is this climate that you can feel with your every cell: 'It's not ours, it's American, it's alien; since it's alien we cannot expect anything good from it.' It's ignorance, all around."

Yuri I. Romashin, a senior city official, said the denial of the Methodist church's registration was appropriate, explaining that the government had to guard against suspicious organizations that used religion as a cover.

"Their goal was not a holy and noble one," he said of Mr. Pakhomov's church.

Mr. Romashin said the government did not discriminate against Protestants. "We have to create conditions so that we do not infringe upon their right in any way to their religion and their freedom of conscience," he said.

Yet, like many Russian officials, he referred to Protestant churches with the derogatory term "sects."

Religious Intolerance

The limits on Russia's Protestants — roughly 2 million in a total population of 142 million — have by no means reached those that existed under the officially atheistic Soviet Union, which brutally suppressed religion. And churches in some regions say they have not experienced major difficulties.

The Russian Constitution guarantees freedom of religion, and Mr. Putin has often spoken against discrimination. "In modern Russia, tolerance and tolerance for other beliefs are the foundation for civil peace, and an important factor for social progress," he said at a meeting of religious leaders in 2006.

Mr. Putin has also denounced anti-Semitism. While many Jews have emigrated over the past two decades, the Jewish population — now a few hundred thousand people — is experiencing something of a rebirth here.

Anti-Semitism has not disappeared. But in some regions it seems to have been supplanted by anti-Protestantism and, to a lesser extent, anti-Catholicism.

Mikhail I. Odintsov, a senior aide in the office of Russia's human rights commissioner, who was nominated by Mr. Putin, said most of the complaints his office received about religion involved Protestants.

Mr. Odintsov listed the issues: "Registration, reregistration, problems with property illegally taken away, problems with construction of church buildings, problems with renovations, problems with ministers coming from abroad, problems with law enforcement, usually with the police. Problems, problems, problems and more problems."

"In Russia," he said, "there isn't any significant, influential political force, party or any form of organization that upholds and protects the principle of freedom of religion."

This absence looms especially large at the regional level. At the request of a Russian Orthodox bishop, prosecutors in the western region of Smolensk shut down a Methodist church last month, supposedly for running a tiny Sunday school without an educational license. The church's defenders noted that many churches and other religious groups in Russia ran religious schools without licenses and had never been prosecuted.

The F.S.B. has been waging a battle across Russia against Jehovah's Witnesses. In Nizhny Novgorod, in the nation's center, the local Jehovah's Witnesses have had to cancel religious events at least a dozen times in the last few months after the F.S.B. threatened owners of meeting halls, the church's members said.

In February, some officials in the Siberian city of Novosibirsk, Russia's third largest, proposed creating a commission to combat what it called "totalitarian sects." The governor of the Tula region, near Moscow, charged that American military intelligence was using Protestant "sects" to infiltrate Russia.

Officials do not say precisely which groups they are referring to, but Protestant ministers say the epithet is so widespread that most Russians assume the speakers mean all Protestants.

The term has clearly seeped into the public's consciousness.

"As a Russian Orthodox believer, I am against the sects," said Valeriya Gubareva, a retired teacher, who was asked about Protestants as she was leaving a Russian Orthodox church here. "Our Russian Orthodox religion is inviolable, and it should not be shaken."

Like other parishioners interviewed, Ms. Gubareva said she supported freedom of religion.

A New Identity

While church attendance in Russia is very low, polls show that Russians are embracing Russian Orthodoxy as part of their identity. In one recent poll, 71 percent of respondents described themselves as Russian Orthodox, up from 59 percent in 2003.

There are a few hundred thousand Roman Catholics in Russia, and the Russian Orthodox Church has had tense relations with the Vatican, accusing Catholic missionaries of trying to convert Russians. The Vatican says it seeks only to reach out to existing Catholics.

The Russian government has often refused visas for foreign Catholic priests, whom the Vatican has sent because there are few Russian ones.

Russia has far more Muslims than Protestants or Catholics — anywhere from 7 million to 20 million, depending on how religious observance is measured. But the Russian Orthodox Church regards Islam as far less likely to lure converts.

There have been considerable numbers of Protestants in Russia since the second half of the 18th century. After the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991, Protestant faiths in the West saw Russia as fertile territory and spent heavily to send missionaries to help the existing worshipers and to convert others.

But the Russian Orthodox Church, which was widely persecuted under Communism, was rebuilding and worried about losing adherents.

A backlash ensued. In 1997, under President Boris N. Yeltsin, the first major federal law was enacted restricting Protestant churches and missionaries, requiring many of them to register with the government. But Mr. Yeltsin had a far more ambivalent relationship with the Russian Orthodox Church than does Mr. Putin, and in the chaos of the times the laws were not always enforced.

Under Mr. Putin, who has worn a cross and talked publicly about his faith, the government has added regulations, and laws have often been enforced more stringently or, some Protestants say, capriciously.

For its part, the church, with its links to the czars, has conferred legitimacy on Mr. Putin by championing his rule as he has consolidated power and battered the opposition. In December, after Mr. Putin selected his close aide, Dmitri A. Medvedev, as his successor as president, Aleksei II extolled the decision on national television. Mr. Medvedev, who takes office on May 7, easily won election last month.

Aleksandr Fedichkin, a leader of the Russian Evangelical Alliance, which represents many Protestant churches, said governors, who are appointed by Mr. Putin, regularly deferred to Russian Orthodox bishops.

“Many times, officials say to us, ‘Please, you must ask the Orthodox bishop about your activity, and if he agrees, then you can work here,’ ” Mr. Fedichkin said.

Asked about such complaints, Dmitri S. Peskov, a Kremlin spokesman, said Protestants had made impressive strides in Russia, with the number of officially registered religious organizations in the country having increased nearly fivefold, to more than 23,000, in recent years. Many of those, he said, were Protestant.

“First of all, all religions are treated on an equal basis,” Mr. Peskov said. “But at the same time, we have to keep in mind that the Russian Orthodox Church is the leading church in Russia, it’s the most popular church in Russia.”

He added, “Speaking about violations in terms of Protestants or others, about possible complaints, it’s very hard to draw any trends.”

He recommended seeking the views of Bishop Sergei V. Ryakhovsky, head of the Pentecostal Union, whom Mr. Putin appointed to the Public Chamber, a Kremlin advisory council.

Bishop Ryakhovsky said in an interview that while the Kremlin voiced support for tolerance, the situation at the regional level was troubling. Little if anything was being done, he said, to help Protestant churches that are routinely barred by officials from obtaining space for services. Nor, he said, did the Kremlin seem interested in discouraging Russian Orthodox clergy members from attacking Protestants.

“These questions, like construction and obtaining plots of land, are deeply problematic all over Russia,” he said. “The issue is not some particular regions or provinces. I am like a firefighter, and I have to rush to different areas of the country, to find ways to establish a dialogue with the authorities.”

The Grip of Orthodoxy

Here in southwestern Russia, the Belgorod region, traditionally a stronghold of Russian Orthodoxy, has been at the forefront of the anti-Protestant campaign.

In 2001, during Mr. Putin’s first term, the region enacted a law to drastically restrict Protestant proselytizing. More recently, it mandated that all public school children take what is essentially a Russian Orthodox religion course. A guide for teachers of young children recommends that schools have religious rooms with portraits of Jesus Christ, Russian Orthodox icons and other sacred items.

The regional governor, Yevgeny Savchenko, who calls himself a Russian Orthodox governor, declined to be interviewed for this article.

Archbishop Ioann, the chief Russian Orthodox priest in the Belgorod region, said Russians had a deep connection to Orthodoxy that the government should nurture. “In essence, we have begun to live through a period that is like the second Baptism of Russia, just as there was before the Baptism of ancient Russia,” he said, referring to Russia’s adoption of Christianity in the year 988.

He said the church wanted warm ties with other faiths, though it was hard to overlook the foreign connections of Protestants. “You know, what else alarms me, the majority of them are born — I must apologize, but I will tell the truth — from the West’s money,” he said. “Naturally, they need to play the role of the offended ones who need protection.”

The archbishop denied that the church disparaged Protestants.

“In our sermons, you will never hear us trying to condemn them or say that they do anything wrong,” he said.

In fact, on the day the archbishop was being interviewed, local television was repeatedly showing the sermon of his deputy, Father Zorin, likening Protestants to those who killed Jesus Christ.

The Protestant churches here say they are left alone by the authorities only if they keep their activities behind closed doors. And so it was that on a recent weekend, clusters of Protestants made their way to whatever gathering spots they could find.

The Lutheran pastor, the Rev. Sergei Matyukh, held a service in a small apartment with his Methodist colleague, Mr. Pakhomov, as a show of support. Many at the service said that what most bothered them was that the officials who harassed them once professed loyalty to Communism, and had switched to Russian Orthodoxy.

“The power holders, they are, as a rule, atheists,” said Gennadi Safonov, who works in marketing. “They have adopted a fashion or a trend.”

One of the few Protestant groups with a permanent base is the Evangelical Baptists, who in the relative freedom of the early 1990s were able to obtain a sturdy building that seats several hundred people. They have been allowed to stay, though they say they would not be permitted to find other space.

Protestants here must receive official permission before doing anything remotely like proselytizing. The Rev. Vladimir Kotenyov, a Baptist minister, said his church had given up asking.

“Naturally, it will be perceived as propaganda directed at our population,” Mr. Kotenyov said. “‘What kind of propaganda are you preaching?’ they would ask. ‘An American faith?’ ”

“This is how they think: If you are a Russian person, it means that you have to be Russian Orthodox.”

#9

Russian shipment for Iranian nuclear plant blocked

By Aida Sultanova

Associated Press, April 21, 2008

BAKU, Azerbaijan — Azerbaijan halted a Russian shipment of equipment intended for Iran's Bushehr nuclear power plant, demanding more information for fear of violating United Nations sanctions, officials said Monday.

The Russian state-run company Atomstroieksport said one or two trucks carrying the equipment were stopped two weeks ago at the town of Astara, on the Azerbaijani-Iranian border.

Agency spokeswoman Irina Yesipova said officials were holding talks with both Azerbaijan and Iran. There was no immediate comment from Iranian officials.

Iran is paying Russia more than \$1 billion to build the light-water reactor. Construction has been held up in recent months by disputes between Tehran and Moscow over payments and a schedule for shipping nuclear fuel.

Russia delivered the final shipment of uranium fuel in January, and Tehran has said it was hoping the plant would begin operations by summer.

The United States initially opposed Russia's building Bushehr, but later softened its position after Iran agreed to return spent nuclear fuel to Russia to ensure it does not extract plutonium from it that could be used to make atomic bombs.

Azerbaijani Foreign Ministry spokesman Khazar Ibragim said his country was seeking more information about the shipment due to fears that it might violate any of the three sets of U.N. Security Council sanctions imposed because of suspicions Iran is seeking to develop atomic weapons.

"Considering the sensitivity of the situation, we need to know all the details in order to know whether the shipment falls under U.N. sanctions," he said.

The U.S. and its Western allies agreed to drop any reference to Bushehr in the sanctions resolutions passed by the U.N. Security Council as a result of Russian pressure. Russia says the plant's contract is in line with all international agreements aimed at preventing nuclear weapons proliferation.

Yesipova said the shipment contained "heat-isolating equipment" essential to the plant's operation and that the holdup was not likely to delay the start-up of the plant, which Russia is building in the southern Iranian port city of Bushehr.

She could not give any further details about the precise nature of the equipment.

The United States and Russia have said the supply of Russian nuclear fuel means Iran has no need to continue its own uranium enrichment program — a process that can provide fuel for a reactor or fissile material for a bomb.

Iran has insisted it will continue enriching uranium, saying it needs to provide fuel to another 300-megawatt light-water reactor it is building.

Doubts remain about Iran's intentions. The European Union last week asked Iran to open its secretive program to greater international scrutiny by joining a treaty that would let the U.S. and other nations review Bushehr's safety.

#10

Middle East talks in Moscow get scant support

By Nicholas Kralev

Washington Times, April 23, 2008

A planned follow-up to November's highly-touted Middle East peace conference in Annapolis will likely be postponed or even canceled because of Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas' reluctance to take part, Western and Palestinian diplomats said yesterday.

The diplomats said Mr. Abbas, who meets with President Bush at the White House tomorrow, is doubtful that anything of value would be accomplished at the conference, set to take place in Moscow in June.

"President Abbas is not that keen on a conference in Moscow anymore," one Arab official said. "It's not clear what exactly its focus would be and what results it will produce."

A Russian official said no decision had been made, but he insisted that the idea is still on the table. It is "being discussed among Quartet members," he said in reference to the United States, the European Union, Russia and the United Nations.

More than 50 countries participated in the Annapolis conference in November.

A Western official said Israel was never interested in attending the Moscow sequel because it does not see any benefit in another large gathering and prefers to negotiate directly with the Palestinians and only a few other countries.

The Jewish state also is opposed to Russia's plan to put Israeli-Syrian issues, such as the Golan Heights, on the conference agenda. Israel wants to resolve those matters separately, and the United States agrees, the official added.

An Israeli official said participation "depends on the parameters" of the conference. He noted that his country always prefers to "sit down with the other party," rather than get distracted by more international events.

"How many other detours can you take?" he said.

All officials spoke on the condition of anonymity because they were not authorized to comment publicly on behind-the-scenes diplomacy.

During a visit to Moscow last week, Mr. Abbas called for a conference "as soon as possible" in order to push "the peace process forward."

Palestinian and other Arab diplomats said he has had second thoughts and will not be pushing for the gathering anymore when he meets Mr. Bush. At the same time, they said Mr. Abbas would probably attend, albeit reluctantly, if it happens.

Another Arab official said the United States does not support a bigger role for Russia in the peace process, such as hosting a major conference.

Mr. Abbas said yesterday that he would meet again with Mr. Bush in Egypt on May 17, after the president's visit to Israel for its 60th anniversary. The Israeli official said his government had not received an invitation for the Egypt meeting.

During a stop in Iceland on his way to Washington, Mr. Abbas said former President Jimmy Carter had "failed to convince" the militant Palestinian group Hamas that it should endorse a two-state peace deal with Israel.

Mr. Carter said after private meetings with Hamas leaders in Egypt and Syria last week that the Islamist group would accept the deal if approved in a referendum. But Hamas said on Monday that it would continue to reject Israel's right to exist.

After ruling out a truce with Israel that Egypt has been trying to broker, the group said yesterday that it would accept a cease-fire in just the Gaza Strip. Hamas militants have been firing rockets into Israel from Gaza, prompting retaliatory Israeli air strikes.

Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, who is expected to meet with Mr. Abbas today, disputed Mr. Carter's assertion that the State Department had not warned him against meeting with Hamas members.

"I just don't want there to be any confusion," Miss Rice said in Kuwait. "The United States is not going to deal with Hamas, and we had certainly told President Carter that we did not think meeting with Hamas was going to help."

Democratic presidential hopeful Barack Obama weighed in on the issue yesterday, saying Mr. Carter's negotiation attempt was a "bad idea."

"What we are seeing now is that, even as President Carter suggests there was breakthrough, you had some of the same old rhetoric coming out of Hamas representatives with regard to Israel," Mr. Obama told reporters while campaigning in Pennsylvania on primary day.

#11

European Delegation Urges Russia on Rights

By David Nowak

The Associated Press, April 24, 2008

Russia must promote human rights through education, not just seek to punish rights violators, a Council of Europe delegation said Wednesday after a two-day fact-finding trip.

Luc Van den Brande and Teodoros Pangalos, of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, met with law enforcement officials and human rights activists to gauge whether Russia was meeting its obligations as a member of the council, which Moscow joined in 1996.

"Human rights is not just a question of defense, but also of active promotion," Van den Brande said Wednesday. "Education is very important in this."

Van den Brande also said Russia needed to adopt legislation that would allow independent rights groups to work effectively. "The country has to improve and empower civil society," he said.

The Kremlin has repeatedly accused independent rights groups critical of the government of working to undermine Russia on behalf of foreign interests. Strict registration requirements and the apparent selective enforcement of laws have crippled or shut down thousands of these groups.

The delegation met Wednesday with members of the Public Chamber, an oversight body created in 2005 whose core membership was handpicked by President Vladimir Putin. Van den Brande and Pangalos questioned the chamber's independence and its ability to tackle issues on their own merit.

"There is great concern in the NGO world about the credibility of the Public Chamber," Van den Brande said. "We were very surprised to hear that the chamber has not addressed the issue of abolishing the death penalty."

The issue was raised Tuesday, when the delegation met with prominent rights activists, he said. The Council of Europe regulations prohibit its use.

While Russia has not abolished the death penalty, authorities have long observed a de facto moratorium on its implementation.

Pavel Astakhov, a lawyer-cum-celebrity and prominent Putin supporter, defended the chamber, noting that most of its members were elected. Astakhov said a working group would likely be set up to address the death penalty issue at a chamber meeting May 23.

The delegation also talked with representatives of non-governmental organizations about their struggles to reregister under a 2006 law that was promoted as a measure to increase their accountability. According to the U.S.-based group Human Rights Watch, Russian authorities issued warnings in the first four months of last year to 6,000 NGOs for various alleged violations of registration procedures. It said more than 2,300 groups had been shut down by court orders since 2006.

#12

NGO Deadline Extended 2 Weeks

The Moscow Times, April 21, 2008

The Federal Registration Service has extended the deadline for nongovernmental organizations to submit their accounting records, after numerous NGOs struggled with submitting their documents on time, the agency said Friday.

The agency has extended the April 15 deadline by "about two weeks" and will announce in mid-May the number of NGOs that submitted their registration paperwork, an agency spokeswoman said.

NGOs and rights groups have complained that a 2006 law on NGOs that tightens the requirements to remain registered is too strict and involves an unnecessary degree of paperwork.

The agency will announce how many organizations submitted forms in mid-May, the spokeswoman said.

Organizations that fail to submit the financial forms can have their activities suspended and may be liquidated. Last year, when the procedure was introduced, less than one-quarter of registered NGOs managed to submit on time due to the complexity of the paperwork.

Other organizations submitted forms, only for them to be lost in the mail, said Nina Tagankina, the acting director of Moscow Helsinki Group.

"There were cases when they mailed documents to the agency, but it didn't receive them and began the process of liquidation," Tagankina said.

Despite this, the majority of organizations decided to mail forms this year to avoid long lines when submitting in person, Tagankina said. The agency spokeswoman, who refused to give her name, said the fact that so many of the organizations had opted to mail their documents was a major reason for the extension.

Tagankina was cautiously optimistic that more organizations would be successful in the procedure this year. Last year, two or three NGO directors called her on the eve of the deadline because they had only just heard about it. "This year, that hasn't happened," she said.

Those NGOs that completed the form last year shouldn't have too many difficulties, Tagankina said, an opinion shared by Boris Pustyntsev, the chairman of Citizen's Watch, a St. Petersburg-based human rights organization.

"We had no problem with it. We submitted what we had submitted to other agencies," Pustyntsev said. "It didn't take that much time. It's a plague mainly for smaller NGOs."

Citizen's Watch is currently suing the Federal Registration Service for exceeding its authority last year by demanding all the NGO's outgoing correspondence for the last three years. The case is still pending in St. Petersburg's Vasilyevsky Ostrov district court.

The Federal Registration Service didn't have enough resources to investigate all the NGOs that failed to submit accounting forms last year, Tagankina said, but those that fail again will be targeted for checks this year.

#13

Rogozin Stays on Message in Brussels The Moscow Times, April 21, 2008

He was once a firebrand nationalist politician who led rallies against illegal immigration, met indicted Serbian war criminals and ran a campaign ad that seemed to compare dark-skinned southerners to garbage.

Now, Dmitry Rogozin lives in a brick house located in a quiet, leafy neighborhood of Brussels. Inside, only a Russian flag, a picture of St. Basil's Cathedral and some snapshots of Rogozin with world leaders suggest that it is the official residence of Russia's envoy to NATO.

Since taking the post in January, Rogozin has brought his bombastic style from the streets of Moscow to the corridors of NATO, where he has made headlines and provoked controversy with his criticism of the alliance.

"I express the viewpoint of my country," he said in a recent interview at his residence in the Belgian capital. "I am a thermometer that reflects the emotional level of Russia's reaction to steps taken by NATO, among other things."

The temperature of Russia-NATO relations has been rather hot lately, as Moscow has pushed back furiously at NATO proposals to admit Ukraine and Georgia into the alliance and to support building elements of a U.S. missile shield in Central Europe.

Despite assurances from U.S. President George W. Bush and other Western leaders, President Vladimir Putin has called the missile shield dangerous for Russian security and threatened to target missiles at Ukraine if NATO installations ever appeared there.

Against this backdrop, Putin made his surprise appointment of Rogozin, who rose to prominence as a leader of the nationalist Rodina party, as Russia's permanent representative to NATO.

In Brussels, some argue that Rogozin is not much of a diplomat. They see him more as a blunt instrument designed to convey Russia's stance as loudly as possible to the West.

"Clearly, he is not a person who is trying to find some solution to harmonize," said Rihard Piks, a former Latvian foreign minister who now represents Latvia in the European Parliament.

Piks, who said he knew Rogozin from his days on the State Duma's foreign relations committee, called him a "nationalistic and arrogant politician" with an aptitude for stirring up controversy.

"From my experience, Mr. Rogozin sometimes does not know very much what he is speaking about," Piks said. "His main aim is to make some noise, to surprise the people around him and to win attention."

Rogozin defends his style and insists that it is the correct response to the challenges he sees facing Russia.

"Diplomats who hide the meaning of their words are bad diplomats," he said. "I had one acquaintance, a Russian diplomat, who could speak for two hours and not say anything. He thought this was super, that it was a sort of mastery. But I considered him an idiot."

The reason he needs to be blunt, Rogozin said, is that NATO expansion and missile defense pose a clear and present danger to Russia. The envoy dismissed suggestions that Moscow itself was being the aggressor by meddling in the affairs of its Soviet-era dominions.

"Any of our objections, any of our occasionally emotional outbursts, are seen as signs of aggression," Rogozin said. "But who are the real aggressors here? They are the ones building new military bases, the ones moving ever closer to our borders, the ones digging foundation pits for rocket bases near our defensive perimeter."

A NATO official denied that the alliance's expansion posed a threat to Russia. "That's something that we don't agree with at all," he said, speaking on condition of anonymity because he was not authorized to comment.

The official linked NATO expansion to the spread of democratic values and downplayed the military aspect of the alliance.

"If you were to look very carefully at the actual effect of enlargement," he said, "you have, first, an enlarged area of predictability and transparency, and second, you're talking about countries which are in the process of ensuring the highest standards which NATO expects. And military standards are just one part of this."

Rogozin does not buy that argument.

"Imagine if the Warsaw Pact were alive today," he said, "and we were telling Bush that the entry of Venezuela and Panama did not pose a threat to America, but was simply an expansion of our democratic alliance. It would be interesting to see how Washington would react to such rhetoric from our side."

Earlier this month, Moscow appeared to win a skirmish in the ongoing struggle when NATO decided not to offer Membership Action Plans — the concrete steps needed for admission — to Ukraine and Georgia.

But the compromise deal reached at the NATO summit in Bucharest, Romania, affirmed that the two countries would eventually join the alliance.

For Rogozin, this means he still has work to do.

"In Bucharest, they once again confirmed that it would be good to swallow up Ukraine and Georgia," he said. "Their appetite is excellent, which is something they can be complemented on. My only concern is that, from the viewpoint of NATO's external appearance, it resembles those people who eat too much at McDonald's."

Though some may call him an unyielding hard-liner, Rogozin said he wanted to be constructive and find areas where Russia and NATO can cooperate.

In the interview, he repeatedly mentioned an agreement signed in Bucharest allowing the alliance to ship supplies across Russia to forces in Afghanistan. Other potential areas of cooperation, Rogozin said, are the fight against radical Islamic groups like the Taliban and international drug trafficking.

"NATO seems to understand that the main threat to it today comes from the south, but it continues expanding to the east," he said.

This is not the first time that Rogozin has sought to win people over by emphasizing a threat from the south.

Illegal immigration from the Caucasus and Central Asia was one of Rogozin's signature issues during his decade-long career in the State Duma. In 2005, he was accused of racism after appearing in a Rodina campaign ad that showed dark-skinned immigrants tossing watermelon rinds on the ground. The television commercial showed Rogozin chastising them and ended with words "Let's clear the city of garbage."

The Moscow City Court ruled that the ad incited ethnic hatred. Rogozin called the ruling politically motivated and denied that the term "garbage" was supposed to refer to the immigrants.

In 1996, before he was first elected to the State Duma, Rogozin met with Bosnian Serb Army leader Ratko Mladic, who had been indicted in The Hague on charges of genocide and crimes against humanity. Rogozin has also spoken at ultranationalist rallies in Moscow where demonstrators displayed Nazi and anti-Semitic signs, although he has denied holding racist beliefs himself.

Perhaps the peak of Rogozin's career came in December 2003, when his Rodina party won 9 percent of the vote in the Duma election. Rodina, which means "motherland," had been cobbled together a few months earlier and was widely seen as a Kremlin project to steal votes from the Communists.

Rogozin's relationship with the Kremlin quickly soured, however, and after the court ruling against his "garbage" commercial, Rodina was barred from the 2005 Moscow City Duma elections.

In 2006, Rogozin resigned as the party's leader, citing heavy Kremlin pressure, and was replaced with a more compliant, less charismatic leader, businessman Alexander Babakov. Last year, Rogozin attempted to start a new nationalist party, Great Russia, but its registration was denied on technical grounds.

While conceding that he disagreed with the Kremlin on some aspects of domestic policy, Rogozin stressed that he saw eye to eye with Putin on international affairs, especially since the shift toward a more muscular foreign policy in the second half of Putin's presidency.

"I was interested in helping my president defend the nation's interests," Rogozin said. "And the president was probably interested in having adequate people who were up to the task."

Rogozin added that he was no stranger to diplomacy, having led the Duma's foreign relations committee for four years.

Though some may find it hard to square with his reputation, Rogozin's resume is highly cosmopolitan. He graduated from the international department of the Moscow State University journalism school, and he speaks English, Spanish, Italian and French, according to the biography on his web site.

News of Rogozin's appointment broke late last year. Putin was expected to sign the decree sending him to Brussels in December, but the decree only came in January, and the delay caused some speculation.

Expressing satisfaction with his new job, Rogozin said it was nice to be working with the Kremlin again after his efforts to lead an opposition party.

"The problem of being in the opposition is that it's always a passive role," he said. "You end up as a critic of everything taking place in your country, and you don't participate in the formation of government policy."

"This is okay if your country is stable and perfectly safe, if your country is a well-fed Western democracy. Then it might even be preferable to having real responsibility.

"But if you care about the fate of your country — and I care what happens to Russia — and you know what needs to be changed, then you can't remain in the opposition. You need to strive for self-realization within the system."

#14

Estonia goes cyber "thanks" to occupation The Baltic News, April 17, 2008

Estonian President Toomas Hendrik Ilves said in Dublin on Tuesday that Estonia became an e-country "thanks" to the Soviet occupation lasting nearly 50 years.

"When Estonian independence was restored in 1991, there was nothing to be done with the structures that the occupation regime left behind. Many of the features that are characteristic of normal countries, such as banks, were totally missing," Ilves said in his presentation at the Institute of European Affairs.

The foundation for Estonia's e-revolution was the "internetization" schools and the development of Internet banking, he said.

In Estonia today, 66 percent of the population uses the Internet, and more than half of households have a home computer, 90 percent of which are connected to the Internet.

The audience was very interested in Estonia's experiences with conducting e-elections and in the use of ID cards, as well as the possibility of using the e-tax board environment to file tax declarations.

"Although an e-country has clear benefits -- savings in time and human resources, and the reduction of corruption -- there are also great risks," the president noted.

Estonia has not experienced any serious system errors, but last year it experienced a massive and coordinated cyber attack against the country with the goal of crippling the work of state institutions, banks and information channels, in order to destabilize the situation in the country, Ilves said.

The attacks came as a rebellion by those who were angered by the removal of Soviet war memorial.

Today, a NATO cyber security center is being established in Estonia, and European Union legislation to combat cyber crime and cyber attacks will also be planned as soon as possible, he said.

#15

Ukraine: Adolf Hitler doll on sale London Daily Mail, April 23 2008

An action-man style doll of Nazi leader Adolf Hitler has gone on sale in the Ukraine, with saleswomen comparing the doll to Barbie.

Supermarkets in the capital Kiev are stocking the 40 centimetre high figure of the fuhrer, complete with jackboots, leather trench-coat and swastika armband.

The £100 figure has a spare head "with a kind expression on it," glasses and several changes of clothes.

It comes in a presentation box with the dates of Hitler's birth and death on it.

The decision to market the figure comes at a time of growing extreme right political sentiment in Ukraine.

There are also reports of increasing xenophobia and racism, and of some extremists supporting racism similar to that of Nazi Germany under Hitler.

Critics believe a cult of Hitler could spring up among disaffected youths, too young to remember the ravages Nazism wreaked on the country.

Around three million people died as a result of the Nazi occupation of the Ukraine, including 1.5 million Jews.

Hitler wanted to turn the country into a buffer zone with Russia peopled by slave workers working for the Third Reich.

Although Ukrainian laws prohibit any form of fascism or propaganda, the dolls are already on sale and will be mass marketed this summer.

One saleswoman said: "It is like Barbie. Kids can undress fuhrer, pin on medals and there's a spare head in the kit to give him a kinder expression on his face.

"He has glasses that are round, in the manner of pacifist Jon Lennon".

The doll will also come with accessories like a miniature Blondi, Hitler's faithful Alsatian who died alongside the Nazi in his bunker in Berlin in 1945.

The doll is dressed in long light-brown cloak, military uniform and jackboots.

According to the saleswoman, should the demand be high, manufacturers will go further and launch a series of themed Third Reich toys, including interiors of Hitler's chancellery, toy concentration camps with barbed wire, barracks and operating models of gas chambers and crematoriums.

#16 Ukraine cemetery vandals identified JTA Brief, April 23, 2008

Ukraine officials reportedly identified three teenagers who allegedly burned down a memorial at the Zhitomir Jewish cemetery.

The Secret Service of Ukraine, or SBU, and the Ministry of Home Affairs identified the students, according to a report posted Tuesday on sbu.gov.ua.

The suspects, aged 17 to 19, are accused of burning down a memorial called the Ohel of Tzadik Rabbi Aharon from Zhitomir -- a student of the Baal Shem Tov, the founder of Chasidism -- during the night of April 15-16.

It was the second reported incident of vandalism in Zhitomir, a city of approximately 275,000 in western Ukraine, in the past five months.

SBU investigators said the teens played soccer near the cemetery before lighting a fire near the Ohel to warm up, but the fire went out of control and burned down the historic memorial. The Secret Service turned over the case to a local prosecutor; it was unclear what charges if any the teens would face.

Ukrainian courts often prosecute cases of ethnic violence as hooliganism to avoid Ukraine's hate crimes statute, which carries more stringent penalties.

#17 Ukrainian teacher guilty of anti-Semitic slurs JTA Brief, April 24, 2008

Jewish leaders in Ukraine welcomed a court decision finding a teacher guilty of making anti-Semitic statements.

Nikolay Yakimchuk, a public school teacher of Ukrainian language and literature in the city of Kirovograd, was charged with ethnic incitement after several students testified that he allegedly said during class that “Jews are bad and impudent people,” that Jewish students are only “taking space in our school,” and there should be “no place for them among people.”

In 2006 the Court of Ukraine’s Kirovograd region acquitted Yakimchuk of hate crimes charges. After an appeal from the Jewish community, however, the local court on Tuesday brought down a guilty verdict.

Lyudmila Borisenko, the leader of the Kirovograd Jewish community, told JTA that the local Jewish community appreciates the verdict, but that Jews are afraid Yakimchuk will be granted amnesty.

#18

ARMENIA: US OFFICIALS SAY YEREVAN RISKS LOSING DEVELOPMENT FUNDS

By Joshua Kucera

Eurasianet, April 18, 2008

Armenia could lose US economic support if it does not quickly take action to promote a “national dialogue,” US legislators and administration officials are cautioning.

Washington holds the Armenian government responsible for the March 1 clashes that resulted in the deaths of at least 10 people, said Matthew Bryza, deputy assistant secretary of state for Europe and Eurasia. “Although we may never know who was ultimately responsible for triggering the violence ... it is the responsibility of the government to avoid the use of lethal force, even when peaceful protests descend into violent clashes,” Bryza said while testifying April 17 at a hearing of the US Helsinki Commission.

Although a controversial state of emergency ended 20 days after it was imposed, several of its restrictions were written into law, in particular limitations on the right of assembly. In addition, tax authorities have been investigating opposition newspapers, police presence is heavy, and the authorities continue to arrest opposition activists across the country.

“We call for the impartial investigation and prosecution of anyone who used violence, on either side,” Bryza said. “We seek full restoration of all basic freedoms in both law and practice. We seek a national dialogue between the government, opposition, and civil society leaders to chart new electoral reforms and perhaps conclude a ‘contract for democracy’ that will ensure freedom of assembly in exchange for a pledge to protest lawfully and peacefully. Those who have been arrested for political reasons must be released. And we seek renewed and dramatic steps by the government of Armenia to resurrect democratic reforms that the past two months demonstrate are so vitally needed.”

Armenia is in line for \$235 million in aid as part of the US Millennium Challenge Corporation program, which rewards developing countries for implementing democratic and free-market reforms. The head of the MCC has written Armenia’s president, Robert Kocharian, suggesting that the crisis is endangering Armenia’s aid.

“We are disappointed that the results of that reform effort have been mixed – and in the wake of the tragic violence that followed the February election – below the MCC criteria,” Bryza said. “I’m not here to issue empty threats, or to sound threatening. But the reality is that the MCC is a performance-based program.”

Although Bryza attended Sarkisian’s inauguration, President George W. Bush has not written a letter congratulating him, as is customary. “I do sense from my colleagues at the White House that they – we all – share the desire to see dramatic steps to restore democratic momentum in Armenia and we are committed to doing everything we can to elicit and support such steps,” Bryza said.

Two Armenians also testified at the hearing: Arman Grigorian, an adviser to opposition leader Levon Ter-Petrossian, and Vigen Sarkisian, an assistant to the Serzh Sarkisian.

The commission's chairman, Representative Alcee Hastings (a Democrat from Florida) did not ask any questions of either of the witnesses but instead lectured both on the need to resolve Armenia's problems. To the opposition, Hastings said: "If you have proof that people are political prisoners, then that proof needs to be put forth. And if you accuse people of murder, you ought to be able to back up what you're saying. And if I turn to you, Mr. Sarkisian, and you tell me that there are no political prisoners, then I will tell you that you are out of your ever-loving mind. Because there are."

"All of y'all need to get grown up," he continued. "Armenia doesn't need American intervention or European intervention – what it needs are Armenian citizens to come to terms with their own reality and move your nation forward. And that makes it much easier for me and others to ask for appropriations for infrastructure and economic development and all of those things if we know that human rights are protected, if we know that civil liberties are protected, if we know that media rights are protected."

The hearing also touched on other ongoing issues in Armenia. Representative Chris Smith (a Republican from New Jersey), the co-chair of the commission, asked Bryza about an apparent escalation in bellicose rhetoric and military spending coming from Azerbaijan. Smith wondered whether Baku is considering trying to retake Nagorno-Karabakh by force. Bryza dismissed the rhetoric as merely for domestic political consumption.

"Leverage, bargaining, is part of the negotiation. Belligerent military threats are something nobody wants to hear, we complain about them, we urge President [Ilham] Aliyev to reduce tension to make it easier for there to be a solution," Bryza responded. "His statements reflect politics in Azerbaijan. There is a large number of Azerbaijani citizens who favor armed conflict to regain Nagorno-Karabakh. Whether we like it or not, people think that way, and President Aliyev's statements reflect that sentiment."

Pressed by Smith, Bryza declined to publicly say what penalty Azerbaijan might incur from Washington if it were to initiate military action. "I wouldn't want to speculate on that because all of the various scenarios are so unpredictable, but what I can say is that it's clear that any resumption of armed hostility in or around Nagorno-Karabakh would be tragic," he said.

Smith drew a parallel to Yugoslavia in 1991 and said that the West's feeble response to Serbian invasions of Slovenia and Croatia emboldened Serbia to continue its attacks. "I think a predictable penalty at least needs to be on the drawing board if hostilities are instigated by Azerbaijan. ... I'm very worried about what's going on here," he said.

#19

Armenia to Push 'Genocide' Issue

By Hasmik Mkrtchyan

Reuters, April 25, 2008

Armenia's new president said Thursday that he would seek "historic justice" for 1.5 million ethnic Armenians killed by Ottoman Turks, which is claimed as a genocide by Yerevan and still affects relations with Turkey.

Turkey strongly denies Armenian claims, backed by many Western historians, that the massacres of Armenians by Ottoman Turks during World War I amounted to a systematic genocide.

The issue has evolved into a source of tension that has complicated Ankara's relations with the United States and the European Union, which Turkey is seeking to join.

President Serzh Sargsyan, who was sworn into office this month, said in a statement to mark Armenia's annual Genocide Day that securing international condemnation of the killings nearly a century ago would be a priority for his administration.

"As a result of the genocide that was planned and carried out by the state in Ottoman Turkey, a vast number of Armenians were annihilated on their native land and lost their living space," Sargsyan said in the statement.

"International recognition and condemnation of the Armenian Genocide is an appropriate and inevitable part of Armenia's foreign policy agenda," Sargsyan said. "The motherland of all Armenians, the Republic of Armenia, should redouble its efforts for the restoration of historic justice."

Thousands of Armenians -- some with tears in their eyes -- laid wreaths of carnations and tulips in Yerevan at a memorial that honors those who perished in the killings, which took place between 1915 and 1923.

The former Soviet republic is sandwiched between Turkey and Azerbaijan in a region that is emerging as an important transit route for oil exports from the Caspian Sea to world markets, although Armenia has no pipelines of its own.

Armenia insists that the killings should be declared a genocide, and the massacres have been recognized as such by some Western lawmakers.

But Ankara says large numbers of both Christian Armenians and Muslim Turks were killed during the violent and chaotic breakup of the Ottoman Empire. A law in Turkey makes it a criminal offense to call the killings a genocide.

Armenia and Turkey have no diplomatic links, although Turkish President Abdullah Gul this month sent a letter to Yerevan calling for dialogue to normalize ties.

Turkey has kept its land border with Armenia closed since the early 1990s in protest of Yerevan's occupation of Nagorno-Karabakh, a slice of territory claimed by ally Azerbaijan. Turkey also objects to Yerevan's claims on some of its land.

#20

Analysis: Armenia's Outgoing Foreign Minister Defends Karabakh Policy

By Anna Saghabalian and Liz Fuller

RFE/RL, April 18, 2008

Vartan Oskanian, who stepped down as Armenia's foreign minister on April 9 after serving for a decade in that capacity, has shrugged off criticism that Armenian diplomacy remained passive during his time in office ostensibly leading to a number of failures, including last month's nonbinding UN General Assembly resolution on Karabakh.

In an interview with RFE/RL, Oskanian called that resolution, which defines the unrecognized Nagorno-Karabakh Republic as an internationally recognized part of Azerbaijan, a "tactical error" on the part of Azerbaijan. Earlier, Oskanian downplayed the impact of the resolution by saying that only 39 UN member states, most of them affiliated with the Organization of Islamic Conference, voted for it, while over 150 other countries abstained or did not vote. The three states that co-chair the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) Minsk Group-- the United States, Russia, and France -- were among the seven countries that voted against the resolution.

Oskanian believes the resolution was rather a sign that Azerbaijan is on the defensive, and displaying "nervousness" in its foreign policy. "They [Azerbaijan] are trying to take the issue to the UN, dissolve the whole Minsk process, do away with the Prague process and the document that has been produced as a result of our joint work with Azeris and the co-chairs during the past two years," Oskanian told RFE/RL, referring to the Basic Principles for resolving the conflict that the two sides have come close to agreement on.

The basic principles, as outlined in a statement by the co-chairs on June 22 to the OSCE's Permanent Council in Vienna and posted on June 28 on the website of the U.S. Embassy in Yerevan, point to a "phased-package" approach to resolving the conflict, meaning that the various elements of a settlement are agreed on simultaneously, even though they are implemented successively, with one key aspect -- the final status of the NKR -- to be decided by "a referendum or vote" at some unspecified future date.

"These principles include the phased redeployment of Armenian troops from Azerbaijani territories around Nagorno-Karabakh, with special modalities for Kelbajar and Lachin districts [separating Karabakh from Armenia proper]," the co-chairs said. "Demilitarization of those territories would follow. A referendum or popular vote would be agreed, at an unspecified future date, to determine the final legal status of Nagorno-Karabakh."

"An international peacekeeping force would be deployed," added the statement. "A joint commission would be agreed to implement the agreement. International financial assistance would be made available for de-mining, reconstruction, resettlement of internally displaced persons in the formerly occupied territories and the war-affected regions of Nagorno-Karabakh. The sides would renounce the use or threat of use of force, and international and bilateral security guarantees and assurances would be put in place."

Those provisions correspond very largely to the ones contained in the draft peace settlement proposed by the Minsk Group in May-July 1997, the key difference being that the 1997 document contained no specific mention of Kelbajar.

The mediators said the conflicting parties would also have to work out practical modalities of the Karabakh referendum. "Suitable preconditions for such a vote would have to be achieved so that the vote would take place in a noncoercive environment in which well-informed citizens have had ample opportunity to consider their positions after a vigorous debate in the public arena."

"Clearly the Azeris are not happy with the content of that document, which has been formalized by depositing at the OSCE Secretariat, and in which Karabakh's right to self-determination has been clearly codified, and this is what makes the Azeris very nervous," Oskanian explained.

"What they did at the UN is not a preemption. It's a reaction to the Minsk process. The document is a reaction to the co-chairs' move to deposit for the first time ever in the history of this conflict a document that they thought has reached the maturity which can be put at the OSCE Secretariat as a clear guideline and clear principles that have been codified as a result of the joint work of the past two years."

Oskanian, who was succeeded in office earlier this week by former Armenian Ambassador to France Eduard Nalbandian, said Armenia's options in the Karabakh process remain limited but refrained from prejudging what might happen under the new administration. "At this moment it is difficult to predict what the next president will do. It's his choice what kind of foreign policy he will implement, whether he will maintain the notion of 'complementarity' or not. But given my experience I don't think Armenia's room to maneuver is very wide. Our options are limited. What can be done is simply to make some changes in the accents not necessarily in direction," Oskanian said. "My expectation will be that there will not be major changes, but again I don't want to speak prematurely without waiting to see what decisions will be taken by the new president and the foreign minister."

"Given Azerbaijan's positions and change of heart, I do expect that there will be some modifications in our foreign policy that will be done by default, because Azerbaijan itself seems to be deviating from the established path. If Azerbaijan changes direction, then Armenia has no choice but to make corresponding adjustment in its policy. What exactly those changes will be, we have to wait and see," Oskanian concluded.

President Serzh Sarkisian paid tribute on April 16 to Oskanian's stint as foreign minister, noting in particular his role in the search for a solution to the Karabakh conflict and in strengthening Armenian statehood, regnum.ru reported on April 17. Sarkisian said that in the next few years Armenia's foreign policy will become "more proactive and oriented toward initiative," while remaining true to the policy of complementarity (which was largely Oskanian's brainchild). Specifically, Sarkisian affirmed that Azerbaijan must accept once and for all time that the existence of an independent Nagorno-Karabakh Republic is irreversible. It is impossible to envisage that the NKR could in some way be subordinate to Azerbaijan."

#21

**Belarus Demand 'Unprecedented'
The Associated Press, April 25, 2008**

Belarus' demand that the United States cut its staffing at its Minsk embassy to five diplomats is "unprecedented and unwarranted," the embassy said Thursday.

The embassy released the statement a day after the top U.S. diplomat still in Belarus, Charge d'Affaires Jonathan Moore, was summoned by the Belarussian Foreign Ministry and ordered to give a list of the five diplomats that would remain at the Minsk embassy as of April 30.

"Mr. Moore protested this news and noted that there would be grave consequences as a result of this unprecedented and unwarranted step by the Belarussian authorities. He added that he would inform the U.S. Department of State in Washington and would provide a reply to the Belarussian requirement in due course," the statement said.

Relations between Minsk and Washington have spiraled downward in recent months, sparked mainly by the U.S. decision to impose sanctions on a state-controlled oil-processing and chemicals company, Belneftekhim.

As a result of the deepening dispute, the U.S. ambassador was forced to leave Belarus in March and the embassy was forced cut its staff from 35 to 17 to match similar cuts Belarus made at its embassy in Washington. The U.S. Embassy has largely stopped issuing visas, as well.

#22

US diplomat visits Homyel amid reports about discovery of old Jewish cemetery Belarusskie Novosti, April 22, 2008

Jonathan Moore, the United States' charge d'affaires to Belarus, on Tuesday visited Homyel amid reports about the discovery of an old Jewish cemetery during redevelopment work at a stadium there.

The bones were unearthed this past month when excavations at the site began. A local Jewish community called Beit Yakov asked a prosecutor's office for permission to rebury the bones and was granted it, with the city executive committee allowing using a closed Jewish cemetery.

Earlier reports had it that bones were thrown away by builders.

Yosef Zholudzew, leader of the community, told BelaPAN that the US diplomat had visited the building site and the cemetery where the bones would be reburied.

"Perhaps, Jews who live in America are worried about the situation in Homyel as they see photos of the remains in the Internet," he said. "Perhaps, the US authorities told the representative of the embassy to visit the site to see everything with his own eyes. I talked to Jonathan Moore. He is satisfied with preparations for the reburial and, for sure, will be able to calm Americans as every bone has remained in place."

Around 40 volunteer youth workers from the US currently work at the cemetery, removing rubbish and making renovations, according to Mr. Zholudzew.

#23

Vandals Deface Belarus Holocaust Memorial JTA Brief, April 23, 2008

Vandals painted swastikas on a Holocaust memorial in Belarus.

"Swastikas and other fascist symbols were supposedly painted on the first day of Passover" in Slutsk, Leonid Levin, the head of the Union of Belarusian Jewish Public Associations and Communities and the architect of the memorial, told JTA. "I visited the monument a week ago and that time it was clean."

Levin said the monument was erected last year.

Police visited the memorial Monday, he said, and photographed the vandalism.

"They arrived very fast," Levin said.

Slutsk, a town 70 miles south of Minsk, has a population of approximately 65,000, including several hundred Jews. Some 6,000 Jews perished in its ghetto during World War II.

"Vandalism is unusual for such town as Slutsk," Levin said. "More often such cases happen in larger cities."

#24

Demonstrations of solidarity with Belarusian dissidents staged in Vilnius, Narva Belarus News, April 22, 2008

Demonstrations were staged in Lithuania's Vilnius and Estonia's Narva on April 16 in solidarity with Belarusian political prisoners and opposition youths standing trial in Minsk for their participation in a January 11 entrepreneurs' protest.

The demonstration in Vilnius was staged by the StudAlliance group at European Humanities University, a school originally based in Belarus but closed by authorities in 2004.

Youths gathered in front of the Belarusian embassy on Wednesday evening and displayed a sign featuring images of Alyaksandr Lukashenka, Interior Minister Uladzimir Navumaw and KGB chief Yury Zhadobin. Participants also distributed leaflets about the trial of opposition youths in Minsk.

In Narva located near the Russian border, Belarusian students unfolded a white-red-white flag and distributed leaflets to passers-by. "In Narva where 95 percent of the population speaks only Russian, the action of the Belarusians was welcomed despite the fact that all Russian-language media depict Belarus as an example that should be followed. For many, it was the first meeting with the Belarusian reality," Ihar Sluchak, a participant, told Belarus News.

#25

Moldova to maintain ascendant pace of internal reforms to meet EU rigours, speaker says Moldpres, April 18, 2008

The Moldovan authorities will maintain an ascendant pace of domestic reforms so as to adjust national fields to the European Union (EU) rigours.

Parliament Speaker Marian Lupu made the statement at a today's meeting with the deputy head of the parliamentary group for EU at the British legislature's House of Commons, private parliamentary secretary at the Justice Ministry of the United Kingdom Mark Hendrick, according to the parliament's media relations department.

Referring to reforms implemented by Moldova to achieve the European integration goal, the speaker stressed that the European integration is a priority on the agenda of Moldova's reforms and policies.

Lupu emphasized the importance of the British support for Moldova's European integration process. The speaker also said that the United Kingdom is a valuable partner to Moldova both on the bilateral cooperation dimension and in the European context.

Marian Lupu also highlighted the constructive dynamic of the Moldovan-British inter-parliamentary relations, which have been characterized by an active exchange of visits at the level of the two parliaments.

The two officials tackled prospects of the Transnistrian conflict settlement process, and underlined the need to identify a viable solution based on the principles of Moldova's sovereignty and territorial integrity.

The British official is on a 17-20 April working visit to Chisinau.

#26

Euro Court Rules for Uzbeks

The Associated Press, April 25, 2008

The European Court of Human Rights ruled Thursday that Russia breached the rights of 13 businessmen charged by Uzbek authorities with financing a 2005 anti-government uprising.

The court said Russia violated the civil liberties of 12 Uzbeks and one Kyrgyz national by detaining them after the uprising and holding them for 20 months without trial on charges they denied.

All 13 are Muslims who fled to Russia between 2000 and 2005 for fear of persecution in Uzbekistan for their religious beliefs and business activities.

The court said Russia would further violate their rights if it extradited them to Uzbekistan, where they say they would face ill treatment and persecution. The ruling awarded each plaintiff 15,000 euros in damages and a total of 17,709 euros to the group for court costs.

Government troops opened fire on crowds in the May 2005 protests in the Uzbek city of Andijan. Survivors and human rights groups said at least 700 people died, but the government put the figure at 187, and it blamed Islamic militants for the violence.

The Strasbourg court agreed with the plaintiffs that there was a danger they could be tortured in Uzbekistan if extradited. It also chided Russia for its inconsistent laws governing the placing of suspects into custody.

As a member of the Council of Europe, Russia is required to abide by the court's rulings.

#27

Uzbeks to Lose EU Sanctions

Reuters, April 25, 2008

European Union foreign ministers will agree next week to suspend sanctions on Uzbekistan for another six months but warn they can be reapplied if human rights conditions do not improve.

The 27-nation bloc imposed visa bans on senior Uzbek officials, including the defense minister and national security chief, after authorities in the former Soviet republic crushed a revolt in the town of Andizhan in 2005, with heavy loss of life.

Germany has led a push to drop the sanctions, and last October EU foreign ministers agreed to a six-month suspension, while warning they would be reapplied if there was not progress on human rights and democracy.

A statement drafted by EU ambassadors Thursday said the EU remained seriously concerned about the rights situation in Uzbekistan.

It welcomed some progress, however, including abolition of the death penalty and the release of some human rights activists.