



WASHINGTON, D.C. May 2, 2008

TO: NCSJ Leadership and Interested Parties

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

In Brief: Trouble with Belarus; Recent anti-Semitism Data; and Russian Basketball

Dear Friend,

Over the past few weeks, we have been following the escalating diplomatic tensions between the United States and Belarus. This past week, Belarus ordered the U.S. to recall ten more of its diplomats, leaving only five U.S. Foreign Service officers in the country. The State Department has labeled these expulsions as “unjustified,” “unfair,” and “unwarranted.” We will continue to monitor this situation as it develops, and keep you up-to-date with any related current news.

On a more general level several studies have recently been released that look at the state of anti-Semitism around the globe, and that focus on extremism in Russia specifically. We have included several articles in this week’s update that outline their findings.

Finally, as in most updates, we try to focus on the political landscape of the region. This week, fortunately, we can bring you a somewhat lighter side of the news. *Sports Illustrated* recently published an article on the Russian Professional Basketball Team (CSKA – the former Red Army Team). The story covers President Vladimir Putin’s and various oligarchs’ relationship with professional sports and, on a broader level, pop culture in Russia in general.

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. May 2, 2008

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Belarus expulsions 'unjustified'
BBC, April 30, 2008

The US has said that Belarus' decision to order the expulsion of 10 US diplomats is unjustified.

Belarus summoned the highest US embassy official in Minsk to the foreign ministry on Wednesday, presenting him with a list of "personae non gratae".

The ex-Soviet republic's latest move follows the expulsion of the US ambassador in March.

US State Department Spokesperson Sean McCormack said the action was both unfair and "unwarranted".

"We are considering our response to this action," Mr McCormack said, according to Reuters.

A senior US diplomat, Jonathan Moore, said he had been given a list of 10 US diplomats who had been ordered to leave within 72 hours.

He said they would do everything possible to comply with the request and ensure the staff left the country within the set time limit.

The US embassy says it currently has 15 diplomats in Minsk.

Defiant

The diplomatic expulsions were initially ordered after Washington imposed sanctions on the country's state-controlled oil-processing and chemicals company, Belneftekhim.

The firm accounts for about a third of the country's foreign currency earnings.

Belarus said its embassy staff in Washington had been cut to six, but that the US had not cut staff enough.

The US - along with the European Union - has also restricted the travel of authoritarian President Alexander Lukashenko and members of his inner circle.

In his annual address to the nation on Tuesday, Mr Lukashenko expressed defiance over pressure from the US and EU to free political prisoners in order to improve ties.

"If the Americans introduce new sanctions and think we will collapse, that's rubbish," he said, adding that no political prisoners would be released.

#2

T.A. University: 6.6% rise in violent anti-Semitic attacks worldwide
Ha'aretz, April 30, 2008

Despite an overall decline in anti-Semitic incidents around the world in 2007, the Tel Aviv University anti-Semitism research center recorded a 6.6 percent rise specifically in violent anti-Semitic attacks, including arson and the use of firearms with intent to kill.

The Tel Aviv University report, published Wednesday on Holocaust Remembrance Day, encompasses 632 incidents of violent anti-Semitic attacks. The report maintains that the number of severe violent attacks has risen threefold with 19 incidents in 2006, and 57 incidents in 2007.

According to the report, there has been an overall decline in anti-Semitic events, such as verbal and visual offenses, in several key nations such as France, Belgium, Germany, South Africa, the United States and Britain.

The report also shows a decline in mild violence driven by anti-Semitism, such as vandalism of community centers and schools. However, the desecration of Jewish cemeteries, monuments and memorials has been on the rise around the world. Incidents of desecration rose from 91 in 2006 to 141 in 2007.

France saw a rise from two violent attacks to eight in 2007. The trend of increasing violent attacks was especially apparent in Australia and Ukraine. In Germany, Canada and Britain there was a sharp rise in violence: in Germany the number of milder attacks rose from 38 to 67, and 10 exceptionally violent attacks were recorded, as opposed to none in 2006. In Britain and Canada the rise was more moderate, but the number of extremely violent incidents rose from two to 15 in Britain and from none to five in Canada.

In the U.S. there was an overall 6 percent decline in all types of anti-Semitic events as well as a decrease in the number of harassments. However, the U.S. saw a rise in anti-Semitic vandalism. The Anti-Defamation League recorded 93 cases of vandalism in the U.S. and 48 cases of assault.

In Russia, anti-Semitic events remained static, with no rise or fall in the number of violent cases.

The report speculates that the decline in overt anti-Semitism in certain places could be a result of the commitment made by the government in those countries and other international bodies to fight anti-Semitism, especially anti-Semitic violence, and to integrate the Jewish communities in the law enforcement and legal processes.

Another possibility raised in the report is the respective governments' fear of street riots that could harm the general population, not just Jews, and drives the legislation and law enforcement in those places to clamp down against anti-Semitic phenomena.

The report adds that the commitment to fight anti-Semitism is apparent in Western countries like Canada, Britain the U.S. and Australia, but not so much in Russia and Ukraine.

#3

Report Sees Less Media Freedom By Alexander Osipovich The Moscow Times, April 29, 2008

Media freedom in Russia "saw continued and substantial declines" in 2007, the U.S.-based democracy watchdog Freedom House said in a report to be released Tuesday.

Russia has the same level of press freedom as Sudan and Yemen, the watchdog said in its annual survey of media freedom around the world, a copy of which was obtained in advance by The Moscow Times.

"Media freedom continued to decline in Russia as the Kremlin further restricted independent news reporting and public dissent while preparing for a stage-managed parliamentary election," the report said, referring to the Dec. 2 State Duma elections.

A Kremlin spokeswoman said she could not comment on the report without having seen it first. Previously, officials have accused Freedom House of being biased against Russia.

The media environment became worse because of a range of developments, Freedom House said, including the toughening of anti-extremism laws, the suspicious death of Kommersant defense correspondent Ivan Safronov and police raids on regional offices of Novaya Gazeta in search of pirated software. In a numerical ranking of countries by their degree of media freedom, Russia got the same score as Sudan, Yemen and Kazakhstan and was dubbed "Not Free" by the democracy watchdog.

"Lively but cautious political debate was increasingly limited to glossy weekly magazines and news web sites only available to urban, educated and affluent audiences," the report said.

Freedom House criticized many of Russia's neighbors too, saying the former Soviet Union was home to the largest nationwide decline in media freedom in 2007. The press in Georgia became less free last year, the report said, citing the shutdown of the pro-opposition Imedi television station during the country's political crisis in November.

The report noted declines in media freedom in Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Latvia. Turkmenistan remains the worst place for journalists in the former Soviet Union, even after the death of longtime leader Saparmurat Niyazov, it said.

#4

Moscow conference raises alarm over growing extremism in Russia ITAR-TASS, April 22, 2008

Skinheads in big cities across Russia have recently carried out a number of so-called "flash mobs", as a result of which more than 40 people have been killed, Igor Sundiyev, chief researcher at the Russian Interior Ministry's All-Russian Scientific Research Institute, told a conference on the prevention of extremism in Moscow on 22 April, according to ITAR-TASS. The agency explained that, acting on instructions posted on the internet, flash mob participants, who do not know each other, gather in a specific location to perform a prearranged action.

He said the flash mobs had been organized between December 2007 and March 2008. Their participants would meet through specialist websites and forums on the internet and agree on the venue for their next "sortie". Moreover, they would discuss in detail how they would be armed and dressed. "These young people would get together, then go and attack the first passers-by on their way who did not look Slav, beat them up and then quickly disperse," Sundiyev said.

According to him, 20 participants in skinhead groups have been detained and criminal cases have been opened against them. In total, about 300 people took part in the impromptu flash mobs.

Extremism on the rise

Extremist crimes are on the rise in Russia. According to an Interior Ministry press release circulated at the conference, in the first two months of 2008 alone 58 extremist crimes were registered, an increase of 10 per cent on the same period last year.

As borne out by the statistics, every year extremist crimes are growing. "If in 2005, 152 such crimes were recorded, last year there were 2.5 times more - 356," the press release says.

On the other hand, the number of people involved in these crimes has been growing too. Last year alone their number went up by a third. In 2007 more than 400 unlawful events were carried out and administrative proceedings were instituted against about 1,500 people.

Today's extremism has acquired a large scale and its geographical distribution is expanding, according to the papers distributed at the conference.

Nowadays extremism "is posing an unprecedented danger to the public and is linked to radicalism and terrorism; also, the scale and mobility of extremist activities are growing and its geography is expanding", the document says.

Moreover, according to experts, one of the conditions for this type of extremist attacks is that a large number of people should take part, hence their organizers use different forms, including both conventional attacks and flash mobs.

Experts say that leaders of extremist groups and their sponsors abroad will continue attempts to destabilize the sociopolitical situation in Russia.

Satanists more dangerous than Islamists

According to an Interfax report, Interior Ministry experts regard Satanists as more dangerous than radical Islamists. "Usually Islamic extremism is seen as religious extremism in Russia, but this is not the case. It is not Islamists but representatives of Satanist sects and similar organizations that pose a particular danger," Sundiyev told a news conference in Moscow today.

According to him, Satanist organizations exist mainly in big cities. Often they are linked to extremist organizations and use their services, the expert said.

Sundiyev said about 1,500 new religious organizations are registered in Russia every year and between 300-400 of them are later believed to be extremist and are banned.

Extremism poses greater danger than terrorism

Yuriy Antonyan, a chief researcher at the institute, said extremism was currently posing a greater danger for Russia than terrorism "since it has acquired a larger scale".

"Unless required measures are taken, extremism will turn into terrorism. Civil society institutions have not yet organized themselves to repulse extremism," he said.

"I would also mention burgeoning fascism based on various negative phenomena, including anti-Semitism," he said.

For his part, the head of the Interior Ministry's All-Russian Scientific Research Institute, Sergey Girko, said the gap between rich and poor was the main cause of extremist sentiments in society. "The difference between the rich and the poor strikes one in the eye and there is no doubt it encourages growing protest manifestations," he said.

Five arrested for racist murder in Stavropol

According to an Interfax report, five people have been arrested in Stavropol in southern Russia as suspects in the murder of an Azerbaijani national in November 2007. They are facing charges of causing premeditated bodily harm resulting in the death of the victim and inciting ethnic, racial and religious enmity.

A spokesman for the investigation department said that another investigation had been opened into the attack by unidentified persons on two Caucasians in Stavropol last Sunday, 20 April. One of the victims was a Chechen and the other an Ingush. They received stab injuries. The Chechen youth died at the scene from wounds received. The Ingush survived the attack and is now in hospital.

Uzbek national killed in Moscow Region

According to another Interfax report, an Uzbek national was killed in Moscow Region on Monday, 21 April. The body of a 36-year-old man with a head injury was found in a forest near the railway station of Bakhchivandzhi in Shchelkovskiy District.

An investigation has been launched and a search for the attackers is under way.

#5

Monitoring Racism

By Dmitry Babich

Russia Profile, April 24, 2008

The Moscow Bureau of Human Rights (MBHR), a Russian NGO monitoring and combating racist activity in the country recently published disturbing statistics of racist attacks that took place in the first four months of 2008. The group registered "no less" than 93 racially motivated assaults, which led to the deaths of "no less" than 54

people. "No less" than 113 people were injured. The organization uses the term "no less" since the police, from whom the data is collected, tends to deny the existence of racial motives behind attacks, ascribing them to "banal" hooliganism or "trivial" street violence. Thus many cases reported by the police need to be double-checked by anti-racist groups.

Alexander Brod, the head of MBHR, noted that in recent months, the natives of Central Asia became the "main target" of racist violence, because migrant workers from Central Asian countries come to Russian cities in ever increasing numbers, making up the backbone of a badly needed workforce in the least prestigious spheres of the cities' economies - street cleaning, loading, and construction. It is sadly ironic that migrants from Kyrgyzstan, the most "pro-Russian" of post-Soviet states where Russian language has an official status, made up the biggest group of victims of racial violence in 2008.

"The Kyrgyz hold the sad leadership among targeted groups, with nine people killed between January and April 2008," Brod said. "They are followed by Uzbeks (nine dead), Tajiks (six dead), Azeris (six dead) and Russians (five dead)."

MBHR ascribes the growing level of violence to rampant extremist activity on the Internet and in some print media, the plummeting standards of education among some of Russia's youth, and the absence of governmental action aimed at combating racial attacks and rhetoric. The dearth of government-funded race education programs is an especially lamentable phenomenon. In 2005, the "Tolerantsnost" school program, aimed at fostering tolerance for other ethnic groups and different lifestyles among Russian high school students, was curtailed due to the lack of funds. Sadly, many Russian liberals even supported cutting back the program, saying that it was a "waste of tax payers' money." Brod explains this attitude by Russian liberal intelligentsia's inherent mistrust of any government activity. In his and his colleagues' opinion, cooperation with the government is necessary, since it is the only way to curb racial violence by legal means.

Brod welcomed the recent creation of a special task force on racism, which includes officials from the police, the prosecutor's office, several other governmental bodies and human rights groups. "We hope that this task force will be a meeting place for all people willing to fight racism," Brod said.

"I would not say that the government consists of xenophobes who support racist violence in order to solve their political problems, as you often read in the liberal Russian media," said Viktor Dashevsky, deputy head of the Moscow Anti-Fascist Center, a small NGO specializing in recording public racist statements and attempting to bring their authors to justice. "The government just tends to underestimate the scope of the problem, thinking that it involves only marginal groups of the country's population. So, the government does not make fighting racism a priority, it does not see racists as a real threat."

This policy is seen as myopic by many experts, who point out that racists already feel strong enough to challenge the government.

Lots of pseudo-Orthodox Christian Internet sites and publications write about [the new President Dmitry] Medvedev's supposedly Jewish origin," said Yuri Tabak, an author of two books on racist mass media in Russia. "The leader of the so called 'skinhead movement' and the editor in chief of the Ya Russkiy (I Am Russian) newspaper [Vladimir] Ivanov-Sukharevsky openly called Putin's government 'pederastic' at a meeting in the center of Moscow, and vowed to remove it from power. But the authorities seem to be largely unperturbed by these actions."

Sergei Ryakhovsky, the leader of Russia's Pentacostal Christian community and a member of the state-supported Public Chamber, said that not only the pseudo-Orthodox, but also some quite official Orthodox communities often use xenophobic and especially anti-Semitic rhetoric.

"I know that the Patriarch of the Russian Orthodox Church is very sad about it. Very often the patriarchate issues statements denouncing the sale of anti-Semitic literature at churches, stressing that these books were not approved for sale by the local bishops," Ryakhovsky said. "But this is not enough. Sooner or later, a special order of the Holy Synod of the Russian Orthodox Church denouncing racism and intolerance of other beliefs will need to be adopted."

#6

UN Warns of Demographic Crisis

Reuters, April 29, 2008

Russia is doing too little to reverse a critical decline in its population driven by increasing alcohol abuse, poor diet and social change, a UN report said Monday.

Karl Kulessa, UN Population Fund chief in Russia, said in presenting the report that the population could fall from 142 million to 100 million in 40 to 50 years.

President Vladimir Putin has made fighting a falling population a priority.

The UN report, "Demographic Policy in Russia: From Reflection to Action," said preliminary data showed the birth rate rose 8.3 percent in 2007 in Russia and the mortality rate decreased by 4 percent; but the overall downward trend remained.

"The authors of this publication do not share the optimism of government officials who claim that Russia will succeed in halting the population decline by 2015 and increase the population to 145 million by 2025," the UN report said.

#7

Russian Revolution

By Ian Thomsen

Sports Illustrated, April 22, 2008

The world's most elegant cheerleaders take the court like a troupe of ballerinas, dressed simply in lilac tops and low-rise black pants for their role as arm candy to the star of this brief show. The iconic main attraction is decked out in the telltale white body suit and has the familiar upswept hair. During his brief time on earth, the original Elvis Presley typified the Western entertainment that was banned by the Soviet Union as "tumors on the social organism." But in this incarnation he is belting out bastardized Russian-and-English lyrics to the tune of Blue Suede Shoes as the twirling ladies encircle him. "Come on, SESS-ka!" sings Elvis, leaning into the crook of his glittering elbow.

SESS-ka refers to CSKA, or Central Sports Army Club, the home team for this February basketball game in Moscow. The celebrated organization dates to the Soviet days of Stalin and Khrushchev and Brezhnev, who ruled the army generals and also, by chain of command, the gold medalists competing for CSKA. The Red Army athletes were the most intimidating of competitors: fundamentally disciplined basketball stars, ice hockey players and figure skaters who tormented the U.S. in the Olympic Games every fourth winter and summer.

Then in 1989 the Berlin Wall fell, and soon the Soviet system collapsed. But the teams of CSKA Moscow have continued to thrive, though they bear little more than symbolic allegiance to the military. Instead, they answer to a former disc jockey.

It's true: CSKA is run by a deejay named Sergey Kushchenko, a genial, outgoing 46-year-old who was spinning LPs of the Beatles and bootlegging cassettes of the Rolling Stones even as Soviet coach Alexander Gomelsky and five CSKA players were leading the U.S.S.R. to an 82-76 win over the U.S. at the 1988 Olympics in Seoul. That Sergey the deejay happened also to fall in love with basketball has resulted in his spectacularly unpredictable rise to president of CSKA. Sitting courtside in a dark suit and tie -- uncomfortable attire during his deejay days -- he watches the team that he has reinvented to become the best in the world outside the NBA.

Two decades ago Soviet stars such as Arvydas Sabonis and Sarunas Marciulionis earned disposable income by selling athletic gear and black-market caviar out of their hotel rooms during international road trips. Now, the high-end clubs of the Russian Superleague have more money to spend than most of their European rivals. Russia's vast natural resources and the ambitions of president Vladimir Putin (who will move to the prime

minister's office on May 7) have recast basketball as a metric of the nation's new identity -- even if that identity is often cast by foreigners. The coach of what is still commonly referred to as the Red Army team is Ettore Messina, an Italian. He yells at his three American players, two Greeks, a Slovenian, a Lithuanian, a Belgian, an Australian and a half-dozen Russians in English -- English! -- proof that the new Russia is competing for talent on a global scale.

Sergey the deejay is driving this revolutionary trend in Russian basketball. He is striving to create an open-market environment for the American-born sport within an old-world government of Russian secrecy (in which investigative journalists are routinely found murdered) and strong-arm politics (as manipulated by Putin, who prolonged his influence by handpicking his presidential successor in a March election that was free of viable opposition candidates). The NBA has recognized the ambitions of Kushchenko, and over the last three years he has patiently negotiated a unique relationship between his progressive club and the NBA. Commissioner David Stern usually prefers to marry himself to international federations or leagues, but so important is CSKA to all of basketball in Russia, and so visionary is Kushchenko, that in February the NBA was ready to sign a deal with CSKA that would open the Russian frontier to opportunities benefiting both sides.

On this afternoon the Superleague meeting between CSKA and visiting Khimki is tight into the fourth quarter as CSKA's cheerleaders return yet again to the court. Their elegance is part of Sergey the deejay's larger vision for basketball in the CSKA Universal Sports Hall, a steeply tiered arena of 5,500 seats built for the 1980 Moscow Olympics. As the young women sweep gracefully onto the floor, they are met by dozens of colored lights spinning and strobing from the ceiling, another of Kushchenko's innovations. "Like disco," he explains.

An and-one drive by the visitors cuts CSKA's lead to 65-64 with 25 seconds remaining. Trajan Langdon, the former All-America guard at Duke who is one of CSKA's go-to scorers, responds with a free throw. Another drive by Khimki fails and CSKA seizes a 68-64 victory, one of 23 it will earn (against just one loss) domestically this season to claim first place in the Superleague.

Basketball is important to Russia because, in the beginning, it was important to the U.S. The Soviets embraced basketball after World War II for no other reason than to try to prove they could beat the U.S. at its own game, to demonstrate that their collective approach could overcome superior talent. They started by dominating the sport in the old world, dividing the first six European Champions Cups among ASK Riga, the army team of Latvia (winner of the first three titles, all coached by the legendary Gomelsky); Dinamo Tbilisi, the police-sponsored team from the Soviet republic of Georgia; and, of course, CSKA Moscow.

Today there are at least 1,500 Americans playing basketball professionally around the world, but this trend began in Europe when they were imported like mercenaries to repel the Soviets. In 1962 Real Madrid became the first Western European club to break into the finals of the Champions Cup (known today as the Euroleague) after its Hall of Fame coach, Pedro Ferrándiz, had traveled to Philadelphia to recruit 6' 8" power forward Wayne Hightower, an African-American who had left Kansas a year before he was eligible for the NBA draft. Europe had never seen an athlete like Hightower, and though he would return home to spend 11 years in the NBA and ABA, his one season in Europe created demand for more Americans to stand up to the Soviets.

The U.S.S.R. ratcheted up the standards of international competition by turning games into metaphorical life-and-death struggles with the free world. The common denominator for many of the nation's significant basketball victories was Gomelsky, who began an 11-year term as CSKA's coach in 1969 and later served as the team's president while guiding the Soviet national team on and off over three decades. "He was a wily little guy, politically shrewd, considered one of the 100 most powerful men in Russia, disliked by many, connected with higher-ups in the Politburo," says Dan Peterson, the expatriate American who coached in Italy during the Gomelsky era. "A ruthless winner, a brilliant guy."

Gomelsky's most important -- and final -- triumph was the 82-76 semifinal win over coach John Thompson's collegians in the '88 Games, which prompted USA Basketball to assemble the original Dream Team four years later. That last Soviet team, like the U.S.S.R. itself, was on the verge of splintering amid ethnic quarrels and demands for freedom, but Gomelsky achieved temporary unification in his locker room, according to Peterson, by persuading Mikhail Gorbachev to allow the players to sign with clubs outside the country provided they won the gold medal.

After the 1991 dissolution of the Soviet Union, most of its famed basketball generation scattered throughout Europe and the NBA, for in the first tortured decade of independence there was little money for Russian hoops. The proud clubs of the former empire were unable to pay their bills -- CSKA included, though that did not stop the team from winning nine straight Superleague titles. Gomelsky's search for his eventual replacement as team president, someone capable of responding to the problems and opportunities of the new millennium, led him to the isolated Russian city of Perm, a former Soviet weapons-manufacturing base 800 miles east of Moscow that was closed to foreigners until 1989. Perm was home to a small start-up club known as Ural Great, which had dethroned CSKA to win the 2001 Russian championship and which was owned and operated by none other than Sergey Kushchenko. "I visited Perm in 2001," recalls Roy Kirkdorffer, an American financial adviser based in the south of France who represents European basketball players. "And I had breakfast with Gomelsky, who said of Kushchenko, 'He's our bright young hope.' "

Three things that illustrate the paradox of Russian basketball:

1. It is not run as a business. While the NBA exists to make money, there is no tradition for profitability throughout European basketball. The major clubs are funded by private financiers or parent sports clubs and exist simply to win games for their city, region and country -- red ink be damned.

2. Kushchenko wants to run it as a business. Kushchenko, who took over CSKA's basketball team in 2002, talks of creating a market for basketball, of eventually developing sources of revenue that will equal or exceed his club's budget of more than \$40 million, which makes it among the richest in Europe. (The average NBA team's budget is more than \$100 million.) Over the last three years he has made several trips to the U.S. with his CSKA employees, and together they have studied everything from the marketing to the merchandising to the administration of the NBA website in hopes of acquiring the perspectives of an organization that is built for profit. As foreign as this may be to his Russian colleagues, Kushchenko sees no other future for basketball in his country.

3. There is no compelling need to run it as a business. CSKA is funded by a billionaire oligarch, Mikhail Prokhorov, 42, who made his initial fortune in the 1980s by selling stone-washed jeans in the U.S.S.R. When the state-owned industries were privatized in the '90s by Boris Yeltsin, Prokhorov leveraged his chairmanship of a bank to acquire Norilsk Nickel, the world's leading producer of nickel and palladium. He has since relinquished his stake in Norilsk, though he retains control of sister company Polyus Gold, the largest gold producer in Russia.

Despite standing 6' 9" and having played basketball in grade school, Prokhorov has shown minimal interest in the team. It appears to Western observers that he is involved with CSKA because Putin has instructed billionaire oligarchs to invest heavily in basketball and other sports to raise Russia's profile around the world. As it is, Prokhorov, the 24th-richest person in the world according to Forbes (net worth: \$19.5 billion), rarely attends hoops games, and he tends to be impressed neither by the spectacle nor by the American need to profit from the sport. During the NBA Europe Live exhibitions in Moscow in 2006, where the carnival of NBA sideshows was on display during timeouts, he turned to a few international guests and said, "This is all bulls---"

Prokhorov's passive interest has not prevented the team he bankrolls from becoming the most talented outside the NBA. CSKA has reached the Euroleague Final Four a record six consecutive times, and next week in Madrid the Russian power is favored to win the title for the second time in three seasons.

The leading scorer throughout the season (at just 13.4 points per game, befitting the club's balance) is 6' 11" center David Andersen, a 27-year-old Australian who plays on a Danish passport and is considering a move to the NBA next season. (The Atlanta Hawks drafted him in the second round in 2002.)

The point guard is a surprisingly talented player from Bucknell named J.R. Holden, 31. In his six years with CSKA he has become, according to coach Messina, the best point guard in Europe. The 6' 1" Holden's skills are so highly valued by the Russians that he was naturalized in 2003 -- despite not having met residency requirements -- so he could play for the national team. (A former national team general manager, Kushchenko

helped persuade the government to grant Holden an exemption.) Last September, Holden hit a contested jump shot with 2.1 seconds left to give Russia a shocking 60-59 victory over Spain in the European championships, a victory that promised to maintain political interest and money in Russian basketball for years to come.

The CSKA roster is overloaded with renowned Europeans such as Theodoros Papaloukas, 30, recently named one of the 35 greatest players in the 50-year history of the Euroleague; his fellow Greek guard Nikos Zisis, 24; and Lithuanian forward Ramunas Siskauskas, 29, who chose to leave Euroleague champion Panathinaikos to move to Moscow this season. The 6' 8" forward Marcus Goree, who grew up playing with Denver Nuggets forward Kenyon Martin in Dallas, is a 30-year-old who, according to Messina, "could be the European Ben Wallace." Messina himself was named one of the top 10 coaches in Euroleague history, and he views his team leaders as Holden and Langdon, who last season was the only American to make first-team all-Euroleague.

The man who put CSKA together, the open and sincere Kushchenko, is in every way the opposite of the stern, cold authoritarian whom one would expect to be presiding over the Red Army club. It helps that he doesn't particularly need basketball. He and some friends from Perm also cashed in on the privatization boom of the 1990s, and their ownership of Kam Kabel -- a manufacturer of electronic cables with 5,000 employees -- has made a millionaire of him. Today he lives with his wife, Svetlana, and their three children in a gated community outside Moscow, in a modern, four-story house with heated floors, a skylit penthouse and fixtures designed by Italian architects.

In 2006 Kushchenko was rewarded with a promotion to the presidency of all of CSKA and its 41 sports, which is a far more political position than simply managing the daily affairs of the basketball club. At All-Star weekend in New Orleans, he was welcomed by the NBA to finalize their long-sought partnership. The agreement appeared to be in place: CSKA would put up close to \$10 million to serve as host of NBA events in Moscow, including the charitable youth event Basketball Without Borders and preseason exhibitions involving NBA teams. NBA and CSKA officials would work side by side in Moscow, enabling the Americans to grow their league in Russia while providing CSKA with expertise in transforming basketball into a market-based business. CSKA games would be broadcast in the U.S. on NBA TV. Left unsaid was the eventual possibility that CSKA might become an NBA franchise during the league's planned expansion to Europe over the decades ahead.

The meetings in New Orleans were expected to be a formality -- sign the papers, shake hands, bring in Stern for group photographs -- but Kushchenko unexpectedly revealed that he was unable to agree to the terms. He also was unable to explain why. He grabbed the arm of NBA deputy commissioner Adam Silver and whispered, "Don't worry. We'll get that done."

The NBA isn't giving up on Kushchenko. "Russia remains an important market for the NBA," says Silver. "We are encouraged by the discussions we've had with Sergey and his colleagues. We remain hopeful that we're going to work out a long-term deal with him."

But something had changed, in spite of all of Kushchenko's successes in moving basketball forward in Russia. Was he unable to persuade the politicians to run the sport as a business? Were they, in spite of their reliance on foreign basketball talent, unwilling to form a partnership with the Americans? The story of Sergey the deejay, though it is not yet finished, is that Russia, for all of the promise of its new frontier, is still mired in its old ways.

#8

US hopes WTO talks with Russia wrapped up quickly

AFP, April 29, 2008

The United States said Monday it hoped that negotiations to admit Russia to the World Trade Organization (WTO) would be concluded soon as the two countries launched a formal economic dialogue.

Reuben Jeffery III, a senior US State Department official, said he discussed the WTO ascension process with his Russian counterpart Andrei Denisov during the talks here aimed at coordinating growing mutual economic interests.

"We hope quickly to wrap it to a close," Jeffrey told reporters of the ascension process.

"That's the single most significant thing we can do and are doing and have been deeply involved with that effort, and quite intensively over a long period of time, but certainly over the course of the past 12 months," Jeffrey said.

"President (George W.) Bush has indicated his commitment to work on that process, to see it to a successful conclusion, as part of which would be to work with our Congress ... the repeal of Jackson-Vanick," he said.

The 1974 Jackson-Vanik amendment, imposed at the height of the Cold War between the United States and Soviet Union, limits trade with Russia.

Jeffrey, the US undersecretary of State for Economic, Energy and Agricultural Affairs, chaired the inaugural session of the economic dialogue with Denisov, Russia's first deputy minister of foreign affairs.

A joint statement released by the State Department said the dialogue covered the US economy, US and Russian trade and investment policies, as well as growth and efficiency in energy markets.

On the US side there were officials from the National Security Council, Council of Economic Advisors, Office of the Trade Representative, and departments of Energy, Commerce, Treasury and State.

Russia was represented by officials from the ministries of Foreign Affairs, Finance and Economic Development and Trade, according to the statement.

Denisov said the next session of the economic dialogue would take place in Moscow in the autumn.

The joint statement said the launch of this dialogue "fulfills a commitment agreed to by President Bush and President (Vladimir) Putin in the US-Russia Strategic Framework Declaration" announced at their April 6 meeting in Sochi, Russia.

The United States said in January an economic dialogue is needed with Russia because of their growing investment and trade as well as Russia's growing importance in the world economy.

Jeffrey said the latest statistics show that Russia is a 1.3-trillion-dollar economy, the seventh largest in the world.

#9

Chechnya's Capital Rises From the Ashes, Atop Hidden Horrors

By ANDREW E. KRAMER

The New York Times, April 30, 2008

The surprise lay under tiles in the basement of the kindergarten on Kadyrov Street, found by laborers toiling here in the war zone turned construction site of Chechnya's capital city.

The bodies were exhumed and reburied with respect, though with nary a pause in the banging of hammers and plastering of walls to accommodate a forensic study of the basement.

And that, human rights workers say, is nothing unusual in a city more or less at peace now, but with many grim basements and much rebuilding under way.

"People died there, and now they just build a school," Natalia Estemirova, a researcher with Memorial, a human rights group, said in an interview. Her group documented the discovery of the bodies last summer at the Zvyozdochka, or Starlet, kindergarten.

She added: "We know people disappeared. We know that most of them were killed. And we know we need to look for them with a shovel."

Any systematic forensic work, though, could revive prickly questions for the departing Russian president, Vladimir V. Putin, about the prosecution of the war that, along with Russia's economic revival, will serve as his legacy of the past eight years.

As a result, Russia's general policy toward mass graves in Chechnya is to leave them undisturbed. There are 57 known but unopened mass graves in the republic of Chechnya, which is about the size of Connecticut. Countless smaller grave sites lie beneath the capital's parks, courtyards and basements.

In Grozny, bulldozers, cranes and men with jackhammers work around and sometimes over graves from two wars, the first from 1994 to 1996 and the second that began in 1999. (The fighting now is sporadic and small in scale.) The city, besieged, bombarded and depopulated by war, has now become the scene of a frantic, oil-financed rebuilding effort. And the authorities point proudly to gleaming new buildings as symbols of the peace.

In the past year, after Russia installed the leader of one of its proxy militias, Ramzan Kadyrov, as president, 969 refugees have received new housing. A mosque that will accommodate 10,000 worshipers is rising on the central square, and scores of schools have been rebuilt.

Yet, the graves in Grozny remain a vexing problem. At least a half dozen have been moved to make room for the rebuilding.

In perhaps the most striking case, in April 2006, workers exhumed 57 bodies in Kirov Park to clear ground for a youth entertainment complex. During bombardments in 1999 and 2000, human rights workers say, residents buried relatives and unidentified victims in the park. Six bodies from that site were never identified, and were reburied in numbered graves in a cemetery.

"Many, many bodies are found," Ms. Estemirova said.

The graves of Grozny grimly symbolize the peace that Russia has settled for here, one emphasizing physical reconstruction while leaving unaddressed the human scars of the war. There has been no systematic prosecution of war crimes or identification of the dead.

Just how many disappeared remains an open and contentious question. A human rights ombudsman for the Chechen government, Nurdi Nukhazhiyev, has identified 3,018 unsolved disappearances from the two wars. The remains of some of the missing surely are buried under construction sites.

The regional prosecutor has offered a lower figure, saying that 2,747 Chechen civilians have filed missing persons reports, and that 574 of those have been resolved. Memorial, Ms. Estemirova's group, put the number of people who disappeared at 3,000 to 5,000.

The mass graves have raised tensions between Russia and Europe. The Council of Europe, the human rights monitor, has made a major issue of the exhuming of mass graves and the identification of victims and their killers.

"There are a great number of families who have lost members to abductions," Thomas Hammarberg, the council's human rights commissioner, said during a visit to Chechnya this month. "So many people were affected by this it cannot simply be swept under the carpet."

But, of course, that is what is happening, as construction destroys evidence at the sites of war crimes. The building of the School for the Deaf on Minutka Square, for example, served as a temporary headquarters for Interior Ministry troops who became the focus of a rare, Russian war crimes investigation.

The basement, witnesses said, was used for torture. One Russian officer was convicted of murder. Yet in 2006, the basement was filled with debris, ostensibly to stabilize the site for rebuilding the school, Ms. Estemirova said.

And as building continues, even the question of how to link the names of the missing with the unidentified bodies in Grozny is contentious.

The Council of Europe is encouraging Russia to embrace systematic forensic work in the graves, before too many are disturbed by the building.

Mr. Kadyrov's government has endorsed a proposal to provide information about the disappeared anonymously on the Internet, separating the question of identification from the politically charged issue of culpability.

Yet disappearances in Chechnya continue. As the Russian policy of "Chechenization" of the conflict has gained traction and, even critics grudgingly say, success in tamping down the violence, abuse by Russian soldiers has waned. Increasingly, the disappearances bear the hallmarks of Chechen-on-Chechen violence.

Many Grozny residents still live in ruins, with yawning gaps in the walls. The city, though, is largely peaceful. Merchants sell cigarettes, stuffed animals and Red Bull energy drinks on the streets. Young men in police uniforms loiter on the sidewalks, spitting out sesame seed husks, Kalashnikovs slung over their shoulders. And the construction boom continues unabated.

But the building provides little solace to Adeni Idalova, a Grozny resident missing two sons. "Our children will never walk on these sidewalks of gold," she said. "What do we need them for?"

#10

The Gymnast And the Czar

By Fred Hiatt

Washington Post, April 28, 2008

On a recent visit to Italy, President Vladimir Putin was asked about a Russian newspaper report that he was divorcing his wife of many years to marry a 24-year-old rhythmic gymnast famous in Russia for her lithe beauty.

Putin denied the report in his usual charming way, scolding the media "with their snotty noses and their erotic fantasies." Then the newspaper that published the rumor was shut down.

Or, to be more precise, the newspaper that published the rumor, in a paroxysm of self-loathing and czar-love, shut itself down. And a few days later, just to make sure, the lower house of parliament, or Duma, approved a law, by a vote of 339 to 1, allowing authorities to shutter any other newspaper that dared to print such reports again.

It is no longer controversial to note that Putin "has led Russia into a harsh brand of authoritarianism with some fascist features," as French scholar Pierre Hassner said in a speech last fall. But it's worth recalling the methodical and patient way he crept toward dictatorship, because recent events raise fears that he is now creeping in the same way toward stifling the independence that Russia's neighboring states have enjoyed since the Soviet Union fractured in 1991.

Putin did not announce, eight years ago, his intention to create an autocracy in which all television channels would be under Kremlin control; in which elections would be decided, by him, ahead of time; in which every major industrialist and provincial governor would dance to his tune and roving bands of nationalist youths would threaten, intimidate or beat up anyone who objected.

He did not announce that by the time he gave up the presidency he would have created a replacement for the Communist Party of olden days -- United Russia -- and that he would graciously accept its chairmanship, though without deigning to join the party. (The only historical analogy that former Russian official Alfred Koch could find for that, Koch told me, was "the relationship between the Hebrews and their God during the exodus: God gave them the law, he led them out of Egypt, but the law was not binding on God.")

Putin did not preview any of this, but he did it, gradually and step by step. And for most of the journey, the Bush administration and other Western governments refused to acknowledge it publicly, or perhaps even to themselves. They fatuously compared 21st-century Russia with Stalin's Soviet Union, as if the positive differences should be comforting. And when the negative trends became too obvious to ignore, they -- particularly the Western Europeans -- still hesitated to offend the bear.

So it should not be surprising that leaders of small and even medium-size democracies on Russia's borders feel nervous as they see Putin challenging their sovereignty and threatening their futures. Estonia has endured cyber-attacks; Georgia's exports to Russia have been blocked; Ukraine has been told that it will be targeted by nuclear missiles should it think of joining NATO and watched as its president was mysteriously poisoned and nearly killed.

"It's clear that, for Russia, any formerly Communist country is a threat, if it opts for democracy, rule of law and human rights," Estonia's president, Toomas Ilves, told me during a recent visit to Washington.

Now Putin has issued a decree establishing legal ties with the rulers of two breakaway regions of Georgia, Abkhazia and South Ossetia. "A greater provocation is harder to imagine," Ilves said, than telling Georgia's government "you don't have sovereignty over your own people."

Georgia's foreign minister, David Bakradze, came to Washington last week to make the same point. "It's not just about Georgia," he said. "It's the first time the Russians think they are powerful enough to change borders in post-Soviet space. . . . If they are not stopped, they will go to the end."

It's quite possible that the Kremlin does not in fact want to absorb and take responsibility for Abkhazia and South Ossetia, at least not now. But undoubtedly Russia took note last month when, at Germany's insistence, and purely out of deference to Putin, NATO deferred Georgia and Ukraine's request for "membership action plans" -- one step on a long road to possible membership. Russia saw NATO's hesitation "as a green light," Ilves said. "It is not the signal being given, but it is taken that way."

U.S. and allied officials, including in Germany, objected last week to Russia's decree on Abkhazia and South Ossetia, as did all three U.S. presidential candidates. Maybe that will be enough, for now. But President Putin will soon become not only party chairman but also prime minister, in charge of implementing the decree he has just issued. The goals of provoking the Georgians into intemperate action, while persuading the Germans that it's all too much trouble to get involved -- those will not recede.

Meanwhile, the lovely and flexible Alina Kabaeva has been installed as a United Russia member of parliament, or Duma deputy. Are relations between Chairman Putin and Deputy Kabaeva anything more than comradely? Don't look for answers in a Russian newspaper anytime soon.

#11 Anti-Semitic April in FSU JTA Brief, April 25, 2008

Vandals attacked several Jewish cemeteries and memorials across the former Soviet Union this month.

On Sunday, which was both the first day of Passover and Hitler's birthday, hundreds rallied at Moscow's Triumfalnaya Square shouting anti-Semitic slogans and waving banners honoring Hitler. Area synagogues added extra security for Passover.

Vandals painted dozens of swastikas on a Holocaust memorial in Slutsk, Belarus, according to a report Monday on the Belarusian opposition Web site Kharitya 97. The memorial marks the site where the Nazis shot and burned to death 3,000 Jews in 1941.

In Ukraine on April 15, vandals attacked the tomb of a prominent rabbi, Aharon of Zhitomir. Local authorities say this is not the first time the cemetery has been attacked and that no action has been taken.

Moshe Kantor, president of the European Jewish Congress, sent a letter to the Ukrainian president asking him to address the situation.

In Vladivostok, on Russia's Pacific coast, vandals painted a swastika and other anti-Semitic graffiti on a synagogue door. The April 5 incident was the third in two years, according to the Sova Center, which monitors hate crimes in Russia.

April is usually the most active month for anti-Semitic activity in the former Soviet Union, experts say.

#12

Court fines Samara publisher for stoking ethnic and religious hatred Interfax-Religion, April 25, 2008

A court in Samara has convicted the publisher of the Slavyansky Almanac "Khors" Sergey Salamatin, on charges of inciting ethnic and religious hatred.

The magazine published negative and humiliating assessments of the Christian, Muslim and Judaism religions, their ideologies, doctrines, rituals, priests and other religious organizations, including the Russian Orthodox Church.

Salamatin has been fined 30,000 rubles for distributing banned extremist literature, the Russian Prosecution Investigative Committee's Investigative Department for the Samara region told Interfax on Friday.

Between August 2005 and January 21, 2007, Salamatin published and distributed a magazine called Slavyansky Almanac "Khors" containing extremist material. The publication contained anti-Semitic and anti-Tatar slogans.

#13

Georgia Challenges Russia's WTO Bid By Miriam Elder The Moscow Times, April 29, 2008

Negotiators aiming to speed up Russia's entry into the World Trade Organization overcame objections from Georgia during talks in Geneva on Monday, after Tbilisi threatened to block negotiations because of Moscow's decision to boost support for Georgia's separatist republics.

Georgia's tough stance at the talks showed that Russia still faces an uphill battle in its 15-year drive to join the world trade body. After reaching a bilateral deal with the United Arab Emirates last week, Russia only needs agreements with Georgia and Saudi Arabia, as well as approval from the multilateral talks in Geneva, to join the WTO.

The WTO took a "great step forward" in its membership talks with Russia in Geneva, said Stefan Haukur Johannesson, chairman of the negotiations and Iceland's ambassador to the EU, news agencies reported.

Yet, speaking to reporters in Tbilisi, Georgian First Deputy Economy Minister Vakhtang Lezhava for the first time linked heightened tensions with Russia to WTO membership.

"We demand that the order from President [Vladimir] Putin for the government to establish direct links with Abkhazia and South Ossetia, which contradicts WTO rules, be withdrawn," Lezhava said, Reuters reported.

Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov declined immediate comment.

Putin's order, signed earlier this month, stopped short of formally recognizing the republics, which have functioned under de facto independence since a series of separatist wars in the early 1990s.

The Russian government had hoped to join the WTO this year, but it is already off-schedule after missing its deadline to sign the bilateral agreement with Georgia by the middle of last year.

"It's about trade," Timothy Spence, a Russia WTO expert at the EU-Russia Cooperation Program, said of the bilateral agreement, "but obviously there might be a political angle in the way they approach their trade issues."

Putin has also called on the Cabinet to revive trade ties with Georgia, instructing ministers early last week to hold talks aimed at lifting a ban on imports of Georgian wine, mineral water and other products, as well as ending visa restrictions and speeding up reconstruction of a border crossing.

Georgian wine and mineral water, two of the country's main exports, have been banned since 2006, with Russia citing health concerns and critics pointing to political motives. Russia cut travel and postal links with Georgia following a spying dispute in 2006. Air and sea travel resumed earlier this month.

Strained relations between Moscow and Tbilisi have grown steadily worse in recent weeks. Russia denied reports late last week that it was deploying additional peacekeeping troops to Abkhazia, but the Foreign Ministry said it would use "all possible measures," including a military response, to defend its citizens that live in the republics. Many residents in the republics have Russian passports.

Spence said Russia faces potential WTO barriers from countries other than Georgia, noting that previously sealed bilateral agreements — notably a Russia-U.S. deal signed in November 2006 following 10 years of negotiations — were not set in stone.

"Russia has signed agreements with the EU and the U.S., but all the i's still have to be dotted," he said. "If something comes up, the U.S. and EU could go back to the drawing board."

Yet Spence, citing talks with Russian government officials, said he believed Russia would achieve WTO membership this year. "They feel much more confident this year than they ever have before," he said.

#14

Stand up for Georgia

By Joseph Biden and Richard Lugar

The Washington Times, April 27, 2008

Earlier this month at the NATO summit, the United States sought to win support for the extension of Membership Action Plans (MAPs) to Ukraine and the Republic of Georgia. These plans are the final preparatory step for states seeking to join the Alliance. Both Ukraine and Georgia have established themselves as Western-looking democracies and are worthy candidates for NATO membership

Unfortunately, some NATO members balked in the face of strong Russian opposition, and because NATO works by consensus, both countries' bids failed. While the United States failed to secure MAPs, the administration did succeed in securing a pledge in the final communique that in the future, Ukraine and Georgia "will become members of NATO" and that MAPs could be extended as early as December. This was a major success after a damaging setback. While MAP is a tangible step, it does not promise membership. The communique signed by NATO leaders did.

Moscow employed its entire arsenal of military, diplomatic and economic tools to undercut support for the two former Soviet states and to intimidate NATO leaders. Russian President Vladimir Putin went so far as to threaten Ukraine with a nuclear attack while standing beside Ukrainian President Victor Yushchenko at a press conference weeks before the Bucharest summit.

The more immediate challenge is the case of tiny Georgia (population 4.6 million). The Kremlin says NATO membership is so unacceptable it is prepared to subvert the territorial integrity of the one-time Soviet Republic in the Caucasus. Moscow is undertaking legal and diplomatic steps that could lead to recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, two separatist Georgian territories.

These actions are blatantly designed to undercut the extensive diplomatic proposal offered by Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili to the separatists, which includes guarantees of broad political representation; an Abkhazian vice president; the right to veto legislation; establishment of a joint free economic zone; and international guarantees of autonomy.

These Russian actions require a timely, robust and intensive diplomatic response from Washington. This issue will not resolve itself, and significant U.S. interests are at stake.

Georgia is an important friend to the United States. Most of the country's young leadership was educated in America and, after assuming power, quickly sought to join Western institutions. Georgians have made welcome military contributions in Iraq and Afghanistan. The country hosts a large segment of the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline carrying oil from the Caspian Sea to Western markets.

President Saakashvili has made impressive democratic and economic strides in the face of intense pressure from Russia. These machinations have included energy cutoffs in the middle of winter; military incursions and threats to Georgian territory; a blockade on trade; and massive subversive intelligence operations. Just this week, a Russian MiG shot down an unmanned Georgian surveillance drone as it flew over Abkhazia.

Russia is clearly trying to provoke the Georgians into an over-reaction that will tarnish Georgia's image in the West. To its great credit, Tbilisi has so far chosen the path of restraint and negotiation, as evidenced by Mr. Saakashvili's magnanimous diplomatic initiative.

But Georgia cannot win this standoff alone. A peaceful solution will require U.S. leadership, and engagement by the rest of NATO. Those NATO members who thought they could appease Moscow by denying Georgia a MAP have already learned a hard lesson. Days after the summit ended, the Russian government took further steps to pry the two breakaway regions from Georgia.

It is time for Europe to get off the fence. The European states must engage Moscow and make clear that its actions in Georgia are unacceptable and inconsistent with the assumption that several European governments made in blocking MAP for Georgia.

A peaceful solution to the crisis is possible if we act now. Washington must lead an intensive international diplomatic counteroffensive against Russia's efforts to destabilize Georgia and the region. The process should start by internationalizing the negotiations and peacekeeping missions in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, which until now have been dominated by Moscow.

The trans-Atlantic community must understand that Russia's actions are not directed solely at Georgia. They are also aimed squarely at NATO itself, whose peaceful expansion Russia has long opposed. Russia hopes to instigate confrontational responses and prolong the territorial crisis to further complicate Georgia's NATO aspirations.

America and its allies must not fall into this trap. Georgia has done its part by refusing to overreact and continues to seek a diplomatic solution. The time has come for the trans-Atlantic community to show unity and commitment. The administration should seek and our NATO allies should provide commitments to offer MAPs to Georgia and Ukraine at the next NATO meeting in December.

#15

Tensions Rise Sharply Over Abkhazia

By Matt Siegel and Nikolaus von Twickel

The Moscow Times, April 28, 2008

Tensions between Moscow and Tbilisi escalated over the weekend amid reports that Russian military reinforcements were being deployed in Georgia's breakaway republic of Abkhazia and local residents were being forced to swap their ID cards for Russian passports.

Russian-led peacekeeping forces in the region denied a report Friday by Georgia's Rustavi 2 television that it had video evidence that divisions of the Maikop brigade had been sent to the Ochamchira region, which is mostly populated by ethnic Georgians.

Lieutenant Colonel Alexander Diordiev, an aide to the commander of the peacekeeping forces, criticized the report as an attempt to "keep tension high and prolong provocations against the Russian peacekeepers," Interfax reported.

But Georgia's minister for reintegration, Temur Iakobashvili, said Sunday that isolated cases of Georgian citizens being forced to exchange their ID cards for Russian passports had been confirmed. He urged caution and said his government wanted a full report from the local United Nations observer mission.

"There is some evidence that this type of thing is happening," he said by telephone from Tbilisi. "On what scale, it's hard to say."

The reports of troop movements came just one day after Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili called for the expulsion of Russian peacekeepers. "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.

Relations between the two countries have been strained after Georgia accused the Russian military of shooting down an unmanned spy plane over Abkhazia, a charge denied by Moscow.

The accusations and escalating rhetoric continued to spill over from both sides last weekend. Valery Kenyaikin, an official from the Russian Foreign Ministry said Russia would take "all possible measures" to protect its citizens in Abkhazia if fighting broke out," provoking an outcry from Georgia.

The United States reiterated its support for Georgia and criticized Russia's overall policy toward breakaway republics. "We hope Russia will retract this statement as well as the steps it recently announced to strengthen its ties with Georgia's separatist regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia," State Department spokeswoman Joanne Moore said, The Associated Press reported.

Iakobashvili, who told The Moscow Times in February that Georgia would respond to any Russian recognition of the republics militarily, denied that his government was planning any armed response after the news report and urged diplomacy. "Instead of trying to handle the cases one by one, we should change the general attitude there and have a system where this kind of things will not happen," he said. "We are not going to employ a reactive policy but to change the situation on the ground in a way that human rights will be respected."

#16

Lithuania Ready to Block EU's Russia Talks

By Nerijus Adomaitis

The Moscow Times, April 28, 2008

Lithuania is prepared to take a stand against the rest of the European Union to try to tighten the terms of an EU mandate for partnership talks with Russia, the country's foreign minister said.

EU president Slovenia wants a mandate to be rubber-stamped by foreign ministers of the 27-member bloc in Luxembourg on Tuesday, allowing negotiations with Moscow on a wide-ranging pact to begin by the time of an EU-Russia summit in Khanty-Mansiisk on June 26 and 27.

But Lithuania is demanding that any mandate include assurances on energy supplies, Russian cooperation over a missing Lithuanian businessman, and movement by Moscow on unresolved "frozen conflicts" in other former Soviet republics.

Some EU envoys said a deal was in sight after Slovenia offered ideas for a compromise on Thursday. A Slovenian Foreign Ministry spokesman said the standoff was now being discussed "at the highest level."

But Lithuanian Foreign Minister Petras Vaitiekunas said he would insist that the issue be dropped from the agenda of Tuesday's meeting unless its demands were fully met.

"I have told Slovenia that I will demand taking the issue of a mandate off the agenda of the EU foreign ministers' meeting," he told the Lithuanian parliament's European Affairs committee on Friday. "That is going to be an open confrontation with the EU presidency, as well as with the other EU member states."

Vaitiekunas said Lithuania had the right to demand assurances on its energy security and on Russia's cooperation in criminal cases, some dating back to the early 1990s.

Failure to reach an agreement would be an embarrassment for the European Union just before a scheduled meeting with Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov on Tuesday evening.

EU negotiations with Russia, covering trade, energy, human rights and political cooperation, were to have started in November 2006.

Diplomats said new EU presidency proposals made Thursday sought to meet Lithuanian demands for assurances on the Druzhba pipeline, which carries Russian oil through Ukraine and Belarus to Europe, and on judicial cooperation.

#17

Iran Urges Azeris to Release Atomic Plant Parts The Moscow Times, April 28, 2008

Iran has urged Azerbaijan to release Russian parts for the Islamic Republic's first nuclear power plant, the Foreign Ministry said Sunday.

Russia says Azeri officials held up a shipment of heat insulators at the border with Iran last month that was destined for the Bushehr nuclear plant being built by a Russian contractor.

"We call on the government of the Republic of Azerbaijan to carry out the necessary measures for the delivery of the consignment to the Islamic Republic of Iran," Iranian Foreign Ministry spokesman Mohammad Ali Hosseini said at a news conference.

Iran has asked Azerbaijan's ambassador in Tehran "to do his utmost so as to deliver the consignment," he said.

"The consignment is within the framework of Iran-Russia cooperation with respect to the completion of Bushehr power plant. There is no ban regarding the consignment," he said.

Azeri customs officials say the cargo needs a special permit that was not supplied.

The United States and Russia say the plant would negate Tehran's need to enrich uranium itself. Western nations fear Iran is seeking to master enrichment technology to make nuclear bombs.

Russia has already delivered nuclear fuel under a \$1 billion contract to build the Bushehr plant, and Iranian officials say the reactor is likely to be started up in 2008.

#18

Global Cyber Attack Against Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty RFE/RL, April 28, 2008

An attack of unprecedented scale and intensity is under way against the Internet sites of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty's Belarus Service and more than half a dozen other RFE/RL language broadcasting sites.

The cyber warfare started at 8 AM Prague time (2 AM EST), Saturday, April 26, and is ongoing. Known as "Denial of Service," or DOS, it slows web traffic to a standstill by bombarding the system with bogus requests it has to consider and then deny. The brunt of the attack is aimed at RFE/RL's Belarus Service and is intensifying.

RFE/RL President Jeff Gedmin compared the situation to the Cold War days when RFE/RL radio broadcasting to Communist countries was jammed. He said: "this is a different weapon to block a technologically advanced information platform, but little else has changed. Dictators are still trying to prevent the kind of unfiltered news and information that RFE/RL provides from reaching their people. They did not succeed in the last century and they will not succeed now."

RFE/RL is taking countermeasures to restore service to affected RFE/RL Internet sites in Iran, Russia, Azerbaijan, Tajikistan, Kosovo in Serbia, Macedonia, Bosnia and Croatia, as well as Belarus.

RFE/RL Belarusian Service Director Alexander Lukashuk said he began getting personal e-mails from frustrated web visitors about two hours after the weekend attack began. He said "Saturday was a particularly important day in Minsk -- the 22nd anniversary of the Chernobyl nuclear catastrophe in neighboring Ukraine. We have a large Internet audience that was relying on us to report live a rally of thousands of people, protesting the plight of uncompensated Chernobyl victims and a government decision to build a new nuclear power station."

Lukashuk said a similar attack was launched against the Belarusian website on the 21st anniversary of Chernobyl in 2007 but it lasted only a few hours and did not affect other services. This weekend, other Belarusian websites were also hit, including the Minsk-based nongovernmental organization Charter 97. Lukashuk noted that many local websites in Belarus are coming to RFE/RL's aid and have offered to carry material and reports of RFE/RL correspondents until the RFE/RL Belarus website is operational again.

#19

Russians Find Refuge in Ukraine

By John Wendle and Natalya Krainova

The Moscow Times, April 29, 2008

The tiny apartment looks like a safe house except for the crib in the middle of the room.

No carpets on the floors. No magnets on the fridge. No pictures on the walls. No books in the bookcase.

Just a desk with a computer, a large mattress propped against one wall, and a fold-out couch along another. The crib stands in the middle.

Olga Kudrina has been living in this one-room apartment in Vinnitsa, a city in central Ukraine, since she fled Moscow two years ago to escape what she calls a politically motivated prison sentence. A Ukrainian court sided with Kudrina last month, granting her asylum, and she now shares her apartment with her 6-month-old daughter, Lena, and two fellow National Bolshevik activists who are seeking asylum.

Their days are filled with endless hours of typing ICQ instant messages, reading LiveJournal blogs and listening to Ekho Moskvyy radio. Kudrina is studying Ukrainian in hope of entering university to continue her education in computer programming. Every so often, the other two sit down with local authorities for interviews about their applications to be declared political refugees.

Dozens of Russians have sought asylum in Ukraine after complaining of political pressure at home, raising the specter of new tensions between the two countries. Russian authorities have been particularly tough on activists with the banned National Bolshevik Party, jailing dozens in recent years for their theatrical, anti-Kremlin protests.

But the Russian Foreign Ministry -- which has sharply criticized Britain and the United States for granting asylum to Russians facing prison terms at home -- seems unfazed that Ukrainian courts are offering asylum to Russians.

Kudrina, 24, was sentenced to 3 1/2 years in prison for a May 2005 stunt in which she and another National Bolshevik member hung a banner from the now-demolished Rossiya Hotel reading "Putin, Quit Your Job" and for participating in a 2004 break-in at the Health and Social Development Ministry. She failed to show up for her sentencing in May 2006, instead fleeing to Ukraine.

"I had to leave fast. I didn't even have time to go home. I just brought my purse, my documents and some money," Kudrina said.

She said she would only return if President Vladimir Putin and President-elect Dmitry Medvedev drastically changed Russia's course and a court annulled her prison sentence.

"I hope it will change," she said, a sentiment echoed by her roommates, Mikhail Gangan, 24, and Anna Ploskonosova, 19.

"They are all waiting. This is what makes them real refugees," said Dmitry Groisman, head of the Vinnitsa Human Rights Group. A doctor by training, Groisman helped Kudrina win asylum and is now assisting Gangan and Ploskonosova.

To get to the apartment, Groisman, 35, took a tram three stops from the main bus station, down a busy, potholed road, and entered a dimly lit apartment building with green-painted halls. At the door of the apartment, he knocked and, after hearing a noise behind the leather-covered wooden door, he called out, jokingly, "It's the police, open up!"

The three Russians squeezed into the closet-sized entryway of the apartment to meet him. Kudrina, wearing silver-trimmed, cat eye glasses and black clothes, held her baby on her hip. Gangan, a former leader of the National Bolshevik's Samara branch, is tall and lanky with dirty blond hair. Ploskonosova is the most recent arrival, arriving last month to avoid what she calls trumped-up charges of assaulting a police officer. Ploskonosova wore a black scarf around her neck and greeted Groisman timidly.

"They're always thinking about going home," Groisman said. "They are planning their life in this country only because they can't go home."

Planning may be too strong a word. The three seem to be biding their time.

"Life would be different for me here, but now I'm taking care of this one here," Kudrina said, looking down as Lena bubbled and cooed on her lap, "and studying Ukrainian and programming."

Gangan should know by June or July whether he will receive asylum, Groisman said.

Last Wednesday, Ploskonosova went for her second interview with Vinnitsa's migration service. "The hearing went well, I think," Ploskonosova said.

She will have two or three more interviews before a court decides whether to declare her a political refugee, Groisman said. "Anna must be granted refugee status. She fits the textbook definition of a refugee," Groisman said.

In addition to the assault charges, Ploskonosova saw her boyfriend, National Bolshevik member Yury Chervochkin, die of injuries sustained in a beating in the Moscow region in November. National Bolshevik activists say Chervochkin was being followed by police officers and accused them of attacking him. Police deny the allegation.

Under a 2001 Ukrainian law, a foreigner is eligible for refugee status if he has "reasonable apprehensions" of becoming a victim of persecution in his native country because of his race, faith, nationality, citizenship, social status or political views. In 2002, Ukraine joined the United Nations 1951 Refugee Convention, becoming its 143rd member.

While Ukraine's law is in line with that of Western countries, Groisman said he feared that the decision about Ploskonosova's status would be politically tinged. "If the price of Russian gas would be cut by just 10 cents per 1,000 cubic meters if Ukraine sent back these refugees, they would be sent back like that," he said, snapping his fingers.

Relations have been strained over Russia's insistence on raising the price of the gas it supplies to Ukraine as well as Kiev's aspirations to join NATO and the Orange Revolution election of President Viktor Yushchenko in 2004.

Asked whether offering asylum to Russians wanted on criminal charges might affect relations, a Russian Foreign Ministry spokesman said, "For now, the issue is not being discussed during bilateral political contacts."

"Issues of this type are considered within the court and law enforcement bodies of the two countries," he added.

A Ukrainian Foreign Ministry spokeswoman also pointed to asylum as a judicial issue. "Granting asylum is not within the Foreign Ministry's jurisdiction," she said by telephone from Kiev.

Last year, 93 Russians applied for refugee status, while four were denied it, six were stripped of it and a single applicant from a previous year was granted it, Ukraine's State Committee for the Affairs of Nationalities and Religion said in an e-mailed statement.

In 2007, Russia placed fourth on a list of 11 countries whose nationals had applied for refugee status in Ukraine. The top country was Afghanistan, with 1,171 appeals, followed by Armenia with 205 appeals and Azerbaijan with 184 appeals. Russia was followed by Congo with 85 appeals, Georgia with 79 appeals and Sudan with 61 appeals.

The only Russian who received asylum last year was Alexander Kosvintsev, a 54-year-old journalist who fled the Siberian city of Kemerovo in late 2006, citing threats from local authorities.

He and other Russian asylum seekers said they picked Ukraine because of its proximity, a visa-free regime for Russians, and the absence of language and cultural barriers. But it is no home, said Kosvintsev, who lives in Kiev with his wife and 7-year-old daughter. "If the circumstances changed, of course I would come back. I love Russia," he said by telephone.

Vinnitsa, a city of 350,000 people located 260 kilometers southwest of Kiev, has considerable experience with asylum seekers. In 1992, during fighting in Moldova's breakaway region of Transdnestr, more than 50,000 refugees flooded Ukraine, and about 20,000 settled in Vinnitsa. With this history, Vinnitsa has become a magnet for refugees, taking everyone from Somalis fleeing Mogadishu to Uzbeks caught in the Andijan massacre.

The city looks like a standard Soviet provincial town, with low-rise office buildings, dilapidated Khrushchev-era apartment blocks, muddy parks and uneven tram lines. It is surrounded by rolling farmland, now coated in a thin film of springtime green.

"I moved from city to city around Ukraine for about three months, working, until I heard about Dmitry [Groisman] and came to Vinnitsa," Kudrina said. "And it's cheaper here."

The Russians seem to be making friends. Kudrina has met people at the three local universities, and Gangan has made friends with students at one university's journalism department.

Though all three have similar interests and beliefs, "it is a few too many people for an apartment of this size," Kudrina said.

She and her roommates are not interested in leaving Ukraine for Europe or the United States.

"Of course it's boring here, [but] it's better than being in prison," Gangan said. "We are living, and we are waiting."

#20

Iran, Russia Discuss Nuclear Proposals The Associated Press, April 29, 2008

Iran discussed with Russia on Monday the general outlines of a package of proposals aimed at defusing concerns that Iran is using its nuclear program as a cover for weapons development, Iranian state media reported.

Top Iranian nuclear negotiator Saeed Jalili said Tehran would soon unveil the proposals publicly and claimed that they would help assure the international community that Iran's nuclear program was peaceful.

"The Islamic Republic of Iran has serious proposals that while reducing threats in the nuclear issue to the minimum, [also] prevent proliferation," Jalili was quoted as saying by Iran's official news agency, IRNA. He did not provide details of the proposals.

Iran has denied pursuing nuclear weapons, saying its program is geared toward generating electricity.

Jalili said he discussed the "outlines" of the package Monday with acting Security Council Secretary Valentin Sobolev during his visit to Iran, according to IRNA.

Sobolev said he hoped the talks would help "advance Iranian-Russian relations," RIA-Novosti reported.

"Our talks are of a peaceful nature and are not directed against any third countries," Sobolev said.

#21

EU to warn Uzbekistan but keep sanctions suspended By David Brunnstrom Reuters, April 24, 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 defence 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 suspend them for six months, while warning they would be automatically re-applied if there was not progress on human rights and democracy.

A statement drafted by EU ambassadors on Thursday and due to be rubber-stamped by foreign ministers meeting in Luxembourg next Tuesday said the EU remained seriously concerned about the rights situation in Uzbekistan.

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

"(The EU Council decided that) visa restrictions for individuals...would not apply for another period of six months," said a draft of the statement made available to Reuters.

"After three months, the Council will review the progress made by the Uzbek authorities," it added.

"The Council will closely and continuously monitor and assess...the human rights situation in Uzbekistan and may lift, amend or reapply the visa restrictions as appropriate."

Rights groups had called on the EU not to allow the sanctions to lapse, as they are due to in October, without ensuring progress.

They say that while there have been some improvements, serious rights issues remain and Uzbekistan still has not ensured accountability for Andizhan -- the main reason the sanctions were imposed in the first place.

Witnesses say hundreds of people, including women and children, were killed when troops opened fire on unarmed protesters in the town in May 2005.

Uzbekistan says 187 people, all guerrillas or "terrorists", were killed in a police action against Islamist extremists.

An EU diplomat said the compromise should keep both sides of the debate happy. "Everybody's pretty pleased -- we have conditionality," he said, using the EU term for making EU ties conditional on a third party fulfilling certain criteria.

Analysts say Germany is keen to protect interests in Uzbekistan, including a military base used to supply its troops stationed in Afghanistan as part of the NATO mission there.

#22

Lithuania raises Russia concerns BBC News, April 25, 2008

Lithuania has rejected a proposed compromise which would have paved the way for talks on an EU-Russia partnership deal to begin.

Lithuania insists that any EU mandate for talks must include assurances on energy supplies and other issues.

Any EU member state can prevent talks between the entire 27-nation bloc and third countries taking place.

The EU hopes that discussions on the pact with Russia, blocked since October 2006, can be launched at a June summit.

The pact is due to involve energy, migration and other issues. EU foreign ministers may return to the partnership issue when they meet in Luxembourg on Tuesday.

Lithuania, a former Soviet republic, complained that not all of its concerns had been addressed by the EU presidency, currently held by Slovenia.

"We believe that not all our remarks were taken into account, so negotiations have to continue [within the EU]. We cannot accept this proposal," said Violeta Gaizauskaite, a spokesperson for the country's foreign ministry.

Diplomats reportedly attempted to meet Lithuania's demands, which centre on safeguards over a pipeline which transports oil from Russia through Ukraine and Belarus to Europe.

Lithuania has also expressed concern about Russian policy towards Georgia and Moldova.

The EU-Russia negotiations have been stalled since late 2006, when Poland blocked the mandate after Russia had banned meat imports from Poland.

#23

Turkmenistan resumes Iran gas deliveries Forbes, April 25, 2008

Turkmenistan on Friday resumed natural gas deliveries to neighbouring Iran, four months after cutting supplies over what it said were payment delays and technical problems, an official in Turkmenistan said.

'Turkmenistan has resumed gas deliveries to Iran,' a source in the Turkmenistan oil and gas ministry said.

There was no immediate information about the volume of deliveries, or the price. Between 20 and 23 million cubic metres of gas were previously exported daily from Turkmenistan to Iran.

'These questions will be decided by heads of the relevant ministries in the near future,' the ministry source said.

Turkmenistan cut exports to Iran on December 29, compounding shortages in the north of the country during record low temperatures.

Turkmenistan's foreign ministry said needed repairs to the pipeline had been delayed because Tehran was late in paying bills, something the Iranian side rejected.

Turkmen President Gurbanguly Berdimukhamedov met Thursday in the capital Ashgabat with Iranian energy officials.

#24

A Turkey-Armenia reconciliation? Los Angeles Times, April 25, 2008

History can comfort or afflict us, and affliction was the order of the day Thursday as Armenians around the world commemorating the genocide of their people by the Ottoman Empire from 1915 to 1917 were met by Turks protesting that the genocide never took place.

The argument over remembrance and denial of the Armenian genocide has in recent years moved from France to the U.S. Congress and now to Israel, which faces its own moral and political dilemmas in deciding whether to debate the issue in the Knesset. Turkey is strongly lobbying to prevent such a debate. Like the United States, Israel is now torn between its commitment to confront genocide deniers of all kinds and its geopolitical interest in maintaining relations with its only Muslim ally.

It's a lose-lose proposition for any nation involved in the dispute, and for the millions of Turks and Armenians alive today who will have to continue to live next to each other. It's a winner, however, for Russia, which has been competing with the United States for influence in Armenia and which has leverage over the former Soviet republic's economy.

Given their rock-hard positions, there is little chance that the genocide issue will soon be resolved to the satisfaction of either side, but there is, for the first time, a faint hope for a thaw in relations between modern Turkey and Armenia. In Yerevan, President Serge Sargsyan took office this month after a deeply flawed election in which he promised to improve ties with Ankara. And although the two countries have no diplomatic relations, Turkish President Abdullah Gul was among the first to congratulate him -- and to express his desire to normalize relations.

These meager niceties between longtime foes should be extended. Turkey's offer to create a panel of historians to investigate the atrocities of 1915 remains objectionable as long as it continues to deny that the

slaughter of Armenians constituted genocide. Still, there are areas for cooperation. Turkey could temporarily reopen its closed frontier with Armenia -- with the caveat that it could shut the border again if relations sour.

A friendly, democratic government in Ankara could help Yerevan rebuild its frayed ties with the West, improve its economy and, eventually, negotiate peace with Azerbaijan over the disputed enclave of Nagorno-Karabakh. Demonstrating the political maturity to pursue rapprochement with Armenia could bring Turkey closer to its goal of joining the European Union. History need not be destiny.

#25

A year on, jury out on economic harm of Estonia's row with Russia AFP, April 27, 2008

A year after the Estonian capital Tallinn was trashed in demonstrations sparked by the relocation of a Soviet war memorial, the jury is still out on whether Russia has used backdoor trade sanctions to punish its Soviet-era vassal.

One recent official study said the tiny Baltic -- and European Union -- state lost an estimated 450 million euros (700 million dollars), nearly 3.0 percent of GDP, in business with Russia in the wake of the "Bronze Soldier" row.

The dip, however, was not reflected in Estonia's 2007 trade balance with Russia. To the contrary, its trade deficit decreased 68.4 percent.

The worst street violence in independent Estonia erupted on April 26, 2007 as protests by the country's sizable Russian minority against the shifting of a monument to Soviet troops killed in World War II spiralled into two nights of riots and looting.

For many Estonians the statue was a symbol of reviled Soviet domination, but the move was seen as an affront by many Russians.

Estonian officials allege that Moscow piloted the riots and a later cyber war that temporarily shut down Estonian government and business websites. Russia has flatly denied any involvement.

Many Estonians believe Moscow further retaliated by slapping unofficial sanctions on its neighbour, which has just 1.3 million people.

The transit sector catering to Russian coal and oil exports was been hardest hit.

"The transit of Russian goods via Estonian railways started to decrease sharply after last April's events and, altogether, railway transit fell last year by 26 percent compared to 2006," Erki Lohmuste, an Estonian finance ministry macro-economist, told AFP.

"This in turn affected the work of Estonian ports -- transit of Russian goods there decreased by 18 percent last year," he said.

"Since May last year Russia also accelerated a programme, launched several years ago, to use more of its own ports for transit of Russian goods," Lohmuste added.

But Estonian Prime Minister Andrus Ansip, who spearheaded the disputed relocation of the memorial, has insisted estimates of the economic damage tied directly to the row are inflated.

According to Ansip, the downturn in transit trade through Estonia is rooted in a long-term plan hatched by the Kremlin.

"Outgoing Russian President Vladimir Putin already said several years ago that transit states like Estonia are 'parasites' who live at the 'expense of Russia' and Russia should not 'feed them' -- and he really meant it, long ago launching a programme to redirect transit," Ansip told AFP.

"Russia has for years invested huge sums in (its domestic) ports and that's the reason why transit of its goods via Estonia has decreased," Ansip said.

"But the impact on the Estonian economy is much smaller than some critics say," he claimed.

While Estonian railways last year had to fire 200 workers due to slumping trade, Ansip pointed out that in some sectors trade between Estonia and Russia flourished.

"For example, timber imports from Russia increased last year by 24 percent. And in total from May 2007 until January 2008 export of Estonian goods to Russia increased by 9.6 percent compared to the same period a year before," Ansip said.

"In general the impact of last April's events on Estonia's economy were modest, because it is rather weakly linked to the Russian market," said Lohmuste.

"Most studies indicate that the impact was a loss of around 0.5-1.0 percent of gross domestic product, and not more," he said.

Ansip also trumpeted an overall 15-percent rise in exports between January 2007-2008, saying "that's been the best news in the Estonian economy after very bad export figures in last August and September."

"But our optimism is somehow also clouded, knowing that the economy is also cooling in our main export markets and that might decrease demand for our goods," he said.

Estonia's principal trade partners are fellow members of the EU, and with the bloc in the doldrums Estonia's central bank has more than halved its 2008 growth forecast to 2.0 percent.

In 2007 Estonia chalked up 7.1 percent GDP growth after a national record of 11.2 percent in 2006, the second-best rate in the entire EU.

After a five-decade occupation, Moscow finally lost its grip on Estonia and fellow Baltic republics Latvia and Lithuania as the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991. All three joined the EU in 2004.

#26

Azerbaijan to Open Embassy in Estonia and to Annul Visa Requirement Trend News Agency, April 25, 2008

Azerbaijan will open its embassy in Estonia and will annul the visa requirement for both the sides. The agreement on that was achieved in Tallinn on 25 April during the negotiations between Azerbaijani Foreign Minister Elmar Mammadyarov and Estonian Foreign Minister Urmas Paet, Estonian Foreign Ministry reported to Trend News.

"Azerbaijan is working on this issue and the Embassy may commence its operation by the end of the year," Mammadyarov said at briefing after negotiations.

Mammadyarov has invited Estonian President to pay an official visit to Azerbaijan.

The Azerbaijani Foreign Minister noted the necessity of developing the power resources supply from the Caspian region to Europe. "Estonia has good opportunities for cooperation with Azerbaijan in this field," he said.

#27

New cold war for Estonia? **The Baltic Times, April 25, 2008**

Lauri Almann, secretary-general of the Estonian Defense Ministry, drew a parallel between modern cyberthreats and the perception of threat during the cold war in a high-level security conference in Washington D.C. earlier today.

"Looking at the recent attacks against the critical infrastructure in Great Britain, France and Germany, we can say that we have arrived in the age of cyberterrorism and perhaps even cyberwar," Almann said.

In his opinion the cyberattacks against Estonia could be regarded as an attack against the country's life style, which heavily relies on information technology services.

Almann said that without timely and effective countermeasures the malicious activity in cyberspace could have ended very sadly for Estonia.

"In principle, the cyberattacks of 2007 against Estonia showed that the Internet has already become a perfect battleground of the 21st century," he added.

The secretary-general said that in order to cope with the threats coming from cyberspace countries should apply an approach embracing the whole society.

Almann added that more attention should be paid to the legal aspects of cybercrime.

"We may change our habitual lifestyle, controlling the spread of IT solutions on security considerations, but in a way fitting for an open and democratic society we could rather unite our forces and create cybersecurity measures against those who want to disturb our life style, he said.

#28

UZBEKISTAN: LAST PASSOVER IN TASHKENT FOR CHIEF RABBI?

By Mushfig Bayram

Forum 18 News, May 1, 2008

Uzbekistan's Chief Rabbi, Abe David Gurevich, and his wife Malka Gurevich, who also works for the Tashkent branch of the Hasidic World Lubavitch Movement, have been left with no accreditation for a month. The Chief Rabbi told Forum 18 News Service from the Uzbek capital Tashkent on 1 May that he sent letters to the Ministries of Justice and Foreign Affairs on 16 April - just ahead of Passover celebrations - seeking a resolution to the government's refusal to renew their accreditation. However, he has received no response. "Now we are hanging on the air with no status," he complained to Forum 18. "We remain here in Uzbekistan with expired visas and no accreditation."

The Chief Rabbi said 88 members of the Jewish community have signed a collective letter to the Ministry of Justice describing him as an exemplary person and leader. The members of the community explain that they have enjoyed practicing their religion and traditions under his leadership. "We do not want him to stop ministering to us," they told the Ministry.

Chief Rabbi Gurevich said many more people had come to the Passover celebration in Tashkent this April than usual. "It may be that they were afraid that they would not be able to see us again." He pointed out that the Rabbinate was dissolved ten years ago. "I can understand the community's fears," he told Forum 18.

Rabbi Gurevich told Forum 18 that he and his wife had submitted their application to renew their accreditation some five or six weeks before it expired on 1 April. However, they received an official letter on 10 April from the Justice Ministry, signed by Jalol Abdusattarov, telling them that their accreditation would not be renewed. The letter failed to specify exactly what the reasons were.

The Jewish community fears that the Chief Rabbi and his wife could be expelled from the country or, worse, charges could be brought against them for unregistered religious activity if their status is not resolved soon. Uzbekistan in defiance of its international human rights commitments punishes unregistered religious activity.

Members of various religious confessions such as Muslims, Protestants and Jehovah's Witnesses continue to be fined and sentenced for unregistered activity. On 25 April Jehovah's Witness Olim Turaev was handed a four-year labour camp sentence in Samarkand for hosting unregistered religious meetings at his home.

Forum 18 tried to reach Abdusattarov at the Justice Ministry on 28 April to discuss the stripping of accreditation from Gurevich and his wife. However, the person who answered the phone said Abdusattarov was not in the office and asked Forum 18 to call back an hour later. Each time Forum 18 called back the phone went unanswered.

Begzot Kadyrov of the government's Religious Affairs Committee said he did not wish to discuss the case. "Write us a letter we will answer you," he told Forum 18 from Tashkent on 1 May. Told that Bakhrom Abdukhalilov, advisor to President Islam Karimov on ethnic minorities and religion, had referred Forum 18 to the Committee to discuss religious freedoms issues, Kadyrov said he could not care less.

Government-controlled media often equate foreigners with dangerous religious activity. The internet agency Press-uz.info published an article on 21 April condemning the activity of Lee Syn Rul, a South Korean citizen, the ex-pastor of the Samarkand Protestant church, and his wife Lee Chjon Suk as unlawful and aimed at proselytising among local people. It said the church's building had been taken away and its registration had been annulled. Uzbekistan's Religion Law prohibits proselytising by local citizens and foreigners.

Although the article did not mention it, Protestants from Samarkand told Forum 18 on 1 May that Pastor Syn Rul was expelled from Uzbekistan.

However, they say the removal of the building and the expulsion happened more than a year ago. It remains unclear why the news service has suddenly published an article on the church.

Uzbekistan has expelled other foreigners involved in religious activity. A Tajik citizen who lived in Uzbekistan for more than 10 years was deported back to Tajikistan in June 2007 for her involvement in a Pentecostal church. Before being deported she was held in jail for 22 days.

A Baptist who is a Russian citizen, Ivan Bychkov, was deported to Russia in August 2006. Born in neighbouring Kazakhstan, Bychkov was brought up in Tashkent. He led a youth group at the city's Bethany Baptist Church. Officials would not give him a reason for his deportation.