



**WASHINGTON, D.C. May 23, 2008**

**TO: NCSJ Leadership and Interested Parties**

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

In Brief: Moldova and Belarus Mission Trip Continued

Dear Friend,

We are writing to you from Minsk, Belarus where we are celebrating Shabbat with the local Jewish community.

It has been a very busy trip for us so far. We landed in Chisinau (Kishinev), Moldova on Monday where we met with President Vladimir Voronin, other senior government officials, U.S. Ambassador Michael Kirby, the Moldova branch of the Joint Distribution Committee (JDC) and members of the local Jewish leadership.

In the meeting with President Voronin, he expressed his support for the Moldovan Jewish community and for the U.S. position on the 2009 U.N. follow-up World Conference Against Racism, commonly known as "Durban II."

On Wednesday, we left Moldova and arrived here in Minsk. We have met with local Jewish leaders, representatives from international Jewish organizations, and the Chargé d'affaires at the U.S. Embassy, Jonathan Moore.

It is always a highlight of these trips to get to spend Shabbat with the local community. Our shared traditions and prayers help us connect in a way that is unique to the Jewish people.

We return to the United States next week, and will share more stories and insights with you then.

Have a happy Memorial Day weekend.

Sincerely,

Mark B. Levin  
Executive Director

Ed Robin  
Chairman

Lesley Israel  
President



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

NCSJ WEEKLY NEWS BRIEF  
Washington, D.C. May 23, 2008

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**#1**

**Russia Reunites Moldova from NATO**

**Kommersant, May 20, 2008**

Speakers of the Moldovan and Transdniestrian parliaments Marian Lupu and Evgeny Shevchuk met yesterday in Brussels as one more step closer for Tiraspol and Chisinau since Moscow organized a meeting between Moldovan President Vladimir Voronin and Transdniestrian President Igor Smirnov last month. Several days before their meeting, Voronin and Smirnov held their first conversation in seven years by telephone. Moscow is preparing to reunite the divided country with the breakaway republic of Transdniestria. If it succeeds, it will show the world that not joining NATO is the direct course to territorial integrity.

The parliamentary speakers expressed their support for a settlement within the "5 + 2" format, that is, Moldova and Transdniestria and Russia, Ukraine, the OSCE and observers from the European Union and United States. Russia, nonetheless, is claiming a special role in the reunification process. Moscow is taking the process very seriously as a demonstration of its peacemaking skills, especially in contrast to the disputed settlement in Kosovo. "We see our historical mission in the unification of Moldova," head of the Russian Foreign Ministry's CIS department Nikolay Fomin told Kommersant. "That is our unalterable position." A source in the presidential administration told Kommersant that Voronin and Smirnov will fly to Moscow to shake hands in the presence of Russian President Dmitry Medvedev and Prime Minister Vladimir Putin. Smirnov recently visited Moscow and was received at the Foreign Ministry and Security Council. Voronin will have a chance to discuss the Transdniestria question with Russian leaders at the CIS summit in St. Petersburg at the beginning of next month.

Russia's role is far from unselfish. Moscow expects Chisinau to reinforce its neutrality. Neutrality is written into the Moldovan Constitution, but Moscow wants a guarantee that Moldova will not join NATO. Moscow also wants Moldova to distance itself from the GUAM (Georgia, Ukraine, Azerbaijan and Moldova) organization, which is not friendly to Russia. Smirnov has almost completely given up his militant rhetoric regarding Moldova and demands that Transdniestria be recognized on the model of Kosovo after several conversations in the Russian Foreign Ministry and presidential administration. The 2005 Moldovan law "On the Basic Principles of the Status of Transdniestria," passed without consulting the unrecognized republic, remains a bone of contention, however.

**#2**

**McCain Is Alone on Russia**

**By Edward Lozansky**

**The Moscow Times, May 19, 2008**

The three presumed U.S. presidential candidates rarely mention Russia. When they do, their remarks are critical -- possibly because they are hoping to attract a few more votes from the numerous and well-organized ethnic communities from Ukraine, the Baltics and East Europe.

Still, Senator John McCain stands alone. McCain, the Republican hopeful with a good shot of winning the election, has practically included Russia in a new axis of evil, along with North Korea, China and Iran. McCain's advisers are openly lambasting President George W. Bush for being too chummy with President Vladimir Putin and promise that Moscow will be treated a lot more harshly in a McCain presidency.

I am not sure if the statements from McCain and his camp are making the Kremlin nervous, but they are causing considerable concern among U.S. foreign policy experts. Recently, several mainstream news organizations, including Newsweek and the International Herald Tribune, published articles critical of McCain's rhetoric, which, they say, might inflame international tensions linked to U.S. actions over Iraq and Iran. The

foreign policy experts say a proposal by McCain to kick Russia out of the Group of Eight industrial countries will never happen, because other G8 members would oppose it. Stephen Cohen, a Russia scholar, said the McCain camp's rhetoric was pushing the world toward a new Cold War. Newsweek went even further, branding McCain's ideas "schizophrenic."

I have assumed a more moderate attitude regarding what should be Washington's official attitude toward Russia. As the president of the annual World Russian Forum, which opens Monday on the premises of the U.S. Senate, I invited McCain to explain his stance and possibly engage in a debate with leading U.S. and Russian experts, including Thomas Graham, former director of the National Security Council's Russia Department, and Andranik Migranyan of the Institute of Democracy and Cooperation, which is the Kremlin's first attempt at an NGO in Washington.

I cannot speak for the other panelists, but personally I would like to ask McCain how U.S. security would benefit from Russia's expulsion from the G8. Also, I would like to ask McCain about an idea of his to form a league of democracies that would exclude Russia and China. Don't the Americans need the Russians and the Chinese to cooperate on nuclear nonproliferation and a climate change treaty? Sidelining them with the creation of this new body would do nothing to smooth over cooperation in other areas. Moreover, how would Washington's Middle East allies like Egypt, Kuwait and Saudi Arabia react to such a democratic grouping?

McCain also recently suggested that the United States should follow the French example of generating 80 percent of France's electricity with nuclear power. However, some experts say more than 700 huge nuclear power plants would have to be built by 2050 -- more than one plant per month -- to satisfy McCain's desire to be like France. Keeping in mind the fact that the Bush administration last month signed a deal permitting reactor fuel to come from Russia, where would the United States get all the uranium required to fuel 700 nuclear power plants if its next president bashed Russia day and night?

To be fair to McCain, the other two presidential front-runners, Democratic Senators Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton, have not offered a positive-thinking agenda for Russia either, pledging to be tougher with Russia than Bush and endorsing further NATO expansion by accepting Ukraine and Georgia into the alliance. All three presidential contenders have promised to expand the Bush administration's effort to "spread democracy," a policy that an overwhelming majority of Russians see as a thinly veiled smoke screen to strengthen the U.S. position in the world at the expense of Russia.

At a recent celebration in honor of former U.S. National Security Adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski, speaker after speaker stood up to say that none of the major security problems faced by the United States and the rest of the world could have been solved without cooperation from Russia. Even Brzezinski himself, who considers Russia to be little more than an evil genius, echoed this sentiment. Does McCain believe that all of them are wrong?

We may never know. Neither McCain nor his top foreign policy adviser, Randy Scheuneman, have confirmed or declined my invitation to speak at the forum, even though the meeting hall is right next door to McCain's office in the Hart Senate Office Building.

*Edward Lozansky is president of American University in Moscow and president of the World Russian Forum in Washington.*

### **#3**

#### **World Congress of Russian-speaking Jewry opening in Jerusalem's Palace of Nations Itar-Tass, May 21, 2008**

General Assembly of the World Congress of Russian-speaking Jewry opens in Jerusalem's Palace of Nations Wednesday.

The forum is dedicated to the 60th anniversary since the foundation of the State of Israel and brings together more than 3,000 delegates from 35 countries.

The participants represent the 3 million Jews who speak Russian, which is one-fourth of the entire Jewish nation.

In Israel alone, Russian is spoken by over a million people.

Boris Shpigel, who was elected the first president of the World Congress of the Russian-Speaking Jewry last November, has managed to unite in a single union the scattered organizations of Russian-speaking Jews from different parts of the world from Russia to Australia.

The Congress has continental sections in America, Europe, the Commonwealth of Independent States, Asia/Pacific, and Israel. It has the headquarters in Jerusalem and offices in Moscow, New York and Berlin.

The organization has declared support to all the Russian-speaking Jews across the world as its objective and it works towards uniting the Jewish people who hail from the USSR and reviving their cultural traditions.

“That’s the best way of uniting the Jewish communities,” Boris Shpigel says.

The Congress holds an annual competition and arts festival called the Golden Hanukkiyah and other events and runs the Jewish Artek international summer camp for children. Its name reminds the Jews descending from the USSR of a highly prestigious Soviet-era children’s camp Artek in the Crimea.

The sphere of interests of the organization embraces the promotion of Russian-Israeli trade, as a big range of Israeli companies work in high technologies and they are ready to invest in Russian industries.

The Congress pays special attention to fighting with international terrorism, which traditionally targets the countries having a big number of Russian-speaking Jewish families.

In part, it has organized the Children Against Terror exhibitions in a number of cities and has raised monies for the Jews who suffered from terrorist acts.

#### **#4**

### **Breaking Impasse, European Nations Agree to Start Broad Talks With Russians**

**By STEPHEN CASTLE**

**The New York Times, May 22, 2008**

Ending an 18-month impasse, European Union countries agreed Wednesday to begin wide new negotiations with Russia.

The agreement among senior European diplomats paves the way for the union and Moscow to start negotiating their first broad cooperation deal in more than a decade. Among the issues expected to be discussed are energy security, trade and how the countries can cooperate on security and combating terrorism.

“The new agreement we want to strike with Russia will shape Russian-E.U. relations for the 21st century,” said Cristina Gallach, the spokeswoman for Javier Solana, the foreign policy chief for the European Union. “It will replace what we currently have in place, which was the first agreement between the E.U. and Russia after the fall of the Soviet Union.”

The agreement to start talks is expected to be approved Monday by the foreign ministers of the European Union’s member countries.

Coming at the start of the presidency of Dmitri A. Medvedev in Russia, the negotiations will test whether the relationship between Europe and Moscow can improve after years of tension and combative talk from his predecessor, Vladimir V. Putin, who remains a powerful force as prime minister.

He has argued with Europe over many issues, including trade, the role of Russia's gas monopoly, and recognition of an independent Kosovo. Negotiating the Partnership and Cooperation Agreement could also strain European Union unity. Members often have different ideas of how to deal with Russia.

Relations with Russia are so delicate that the Europeans haggled for 18 months to reach this pact, which outlines what will be discussed in talks with Moscow.

The agreement had been delayed first by Poland, then by Lithuania, which cited concerns over such issues as energy security and the disappearance of Lithuanian businessmen in Russia last year.

Lithuania agreed to allow the talks to proceed once other European Union members said they would raise its concerns as part of the negotiations, which are expected to begin next month.

The talks are expected to last at least a year and any agreement would be subject to ratification by all 27 European Union member states, making it unlikely to take effect until 2011.

## **#5**

### **Russian chief rabbi lauds Muslim cooperation**

**JTA Brief, May 21, 2008**

The Muslims of Russia have shown unrivaled cooperation with both the state and the Jewish community, a chief rabbi said.

"The situation we have in Russia is unlike anywhere else in the world," Berel Lazar, one of two chief rabbis in Russia, said Tuesday at the World Economic Forum on the Middle East. "Russia is unique because the state is interested in peaceful relations between the faiths, and they are ready to actively participate in resolving conflicts."

Four religions are recognized in Russia, and the government maintains ties with chosen leaders from each religion.

The Chabad-run Federation of Jewish Communities cut ties with Russia's Council of Muftis last month after a member of the council equated Zionism with fascism. Most recently, the same Islamic leader, Nafigullah Ashirov, suggested that ethnic minorities and Muslims should live in isolated compounds to avoid attacks from Russian skinheads.

The council renounced both statements. Lazar noted at the conference that Russia's Public Chamber, an advisory body to the government of prominent figures in society, also spoke out against Ashirov.

"Participants in this process understand that the state is interested in solving conflicts peacefully," Lazar said.

## **#6**

### **Russian JCC workers attacked**

**JTA Brief, May 14, 2008**

Three people were detained in an attack on two workers at a Russian Jewish community center.

Three days earlier the center in Tula, about 90 miles south of Moscow, had been vandalized with swastikas and neo-Nazi phrases.

The suspects in Sunday's attack, including one carrying a shovel, were charged with belonging to a nationalist group, according to the Russian Jewish Congress.

On May 8, the vandals painted such phrases as "Glory to Hitler" and "Russia for the Russians," a common rallying cry for nationalist groups.

"Those who hate Jews have desecrated the memory of millions of people who died in the fight with Nazi Germany," the RJC said in a statement.

The organization chastised local officials for a slow response to the vandalism. It also cited local news reports that police tried to prevent journalists from recording the graffiti as officers tried to clean it.

**#7**

### **Vandals damage Russian rabbi's grave**

**JTA Brief, May 14, 2008**

Several headstones, including a chief rabbi's, were vandalized in a Russian cemetery.

The grave of Rabbi Jude Bershtein was among those damaged in the attack on the Marina Roscha cemetery, located just outside Russia's fourth-largest city, Nizhny Novgorod, the Interfax news service reported.

Local Jews frequently visit Bershtein's grave, according to Interfax.

The chief rabbi for the Chabad-led Federation of Jewish Communities in Nizhny Novgorod, Shimon Bergman, said police are investigating but no arrests have been made.

**#8**

### **Not all is sweetness and light between Iran and Russia**

**By Pyotr Goncharov**

**Ria Novosti, May 15, 2008**

Vladimir Putin's last-minute decision to fulfill U.N. Security Council Resolution 1803 on Iran before handing over power to Dmitry Medvedev surprised many. Has Russia decided to join the U.N. sanctions? Will the new president shift Russia's policy regarding Iran to the West?

According to one version, in an attempt to try to persuade Putin to join sanctions against Iran, the White House signed the Russian-American agreement on the peaceful uses of nuclear energy, the longtime dream of Russian nuclear-fuel exporters giving them the right to directly export low-enriched uranium to the United States without intermediaries.

Under another version, Putin decided to spare Medvedev from making the unpleasant but necessary decision.

It would be surprising if Russia, which co-authored and voted for the U.N. sanctions, had not joined their enforcement.

Before signing the order soon before Medvedev's inauguration, Putin had instructed Valentin Sobolev, acting secretary of the Russian Security Council, to tell President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad during his visit to Tehran that Russia would remain committed to the principles of its relations with Iran, and that its policy does not depend on the man in power.

This secured the continuity of Russia's policy regarding Iran under the new president. Happy with the news, Ahmadinejad asked Sobolev to convey his greetings to Putin and Medvedev.

Iranian Ambassador to Russia Gholamreza Ansari said, with good reason, that Putin's rule was a golden period in Russian-Iranian relations. During it, the two countries signed a trade and economic cooperation agreement for 10 years, even though it has not even been halfway implemented because of Iran's passivity.

Putin was also instrumental in the Bushehr nuclear power plant project, because he convinced Iran to agree to return used nuclear fuel to Russia and sign a supplementary protocol to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty. This has alleviated some international concerns over the Bushehr plant and allowed Iran to complete its construction.

Putin also proposed setting up an international uranium-enrichment center in Russia, which Iran would be able to use. This idea allowed International Atomic Energy Agency experts and international negotiators to convince Iran to suspend, if not terminate, its uranium-enrichment project, and also offered a chance for a diplomatic resolution to Iran's nuclear problem.

And last, Iran has greatly enhanced its status in Central Asia by receiving observer status in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and becoming a prominent candidate for membership in that regional body. Thanks to Moscow, Iran is now involved in many Central Asian projects, including in Afghanistan.

In addition, Iran is also Russia's strategic partner in such crucial regions as the Caucasus, the Caspian and Central Asia, as well as in the energy and gas spheres. Russian and Iranian interests do not clash there, but complement each other under all development scenarios. Such partners are worth their weight in gold.

The above are positive elements in Russian-Iranian relations, which the administration of the new Russian president will use to carry on the predecessor's policy. But they cannot safeguard the two countries from problems — the largest of which is Iran's nuclear program.

Tehran seems to be speculating on Moscow's desire to solve its nuclear problem diplomatically. It knows that the U.N. sanctions co-authored by Russia can be easily neutralized by the package of positive proposals on Iran, drafted at the insistence of Moscow.

But it is not clear why Tehran prefers not to notice that each new Security Council resolution makes the space for solving its problem diplomatically much smaller.

The new Kremlin administration may advance new demands to Tehran regarding its nuclear program, and not because the new president will change Russia's policy. By refusing to resume negotiations on U.N. conditions, Tehran is paving the way for the only possible solution — harsher sanctions against it, including international isolation. No matter what Moscow may do now, the international community will eventually impose sanctions.

Iran's nuclear program is not the only headache for the international community, including Moscow. Other problems are Iran's missile program, its anti-Israeli rhetoric, and its questionable stance regarding the Arab-Israeli problem.

Despite all of this, Tehran still hopes that Russia's third president, Dmitry Medvedev, will carry on Putin's policy regarding Iran. And he is likely to do this, under certain mutual commitments.

## **#9**

### **The Federation of Jewish Communities of Russia calls Europe to stop the devaluation of human values and politicization of religion Interfax-Religion, May 16, 2008**

The Federation of Jewish Communities of Russia called Europe to return to the traditional spiritual background.

"It is traditional spiritual values that unite our civilizations in much greater degree than politics or economy. This is the basis for the unity of Europe: while politics is changeable, and economic interests may be different, traditional values are enduring," said the Chief Rabbi of Russia's representative Andrey Glotser in his report to the panel Christian Values of European Civilization: a Look from the East to the West of the international forum Europe-Russia held in Rome.

According to Glotser, today, both Europeans and Russians are facing "an extremely complicated objective: to fight down cruelty and fanaticism generated by the devaluation of such traditional notions, as love of neighbours, family, human life and many others."

"It is necessary to stop the devaluation of human values and to stop the politicization of religion which is also ruining the traditional meaning of religion," said Glotser.

According to Glotser, the European and Russian civilizations "are based on religious values, and it is religious values that to the large extent define political, cultural, social, and economic values of our communities."

## #10

### **A Voice of Mother Russia, in English**

**By STEPHEN HEYMAN**

**The New York Times, May 18, 2008**

JUDGING from the news lately, Russia is well on its way to restoring that old Evil Empire image. Military parades have returned to Red Square. Key businesses are choked by corruption or are under state control. Journalists who probe too deeply turn up dead. And critics of the Kremlin are jailed, pushed out of elections or, in one instance, mysteriously poisoned.

But on Russia Today, an English-language news channel begun in 2005 and financed by the Russian government, a more generous picture emerges. In this Russia, corruption is not quite a scourge but a symptom of a developing economy. And concerns about street thugs, poverty and Ukraine's aspirations for European Union membership trump fears over Vladimir V. Putin's grip on power.

This Moscow-based channel's view of Russia is available to 120 million television viewers worldwide. That includes 20 million in the United States since last summer, when Russia Today was added to Time Warner Cable's digital package in the New York City region.

The Russian government has already poured more than \$100 million into Russia Today, prompting charges that Kremlin sponsorship affects its coverage. Andrei N. Illarionov, a former adviser to Mr. Putin and now one of his critics, last year called the channel Russia's "best propaganda machine for the outside world." The station is part of the state-owned news conglomerate RIA Novosti, and news organizations routinely refer to it as "state-run," including The New York Times, which has said it was created to promote "pro-Kremlin views."

Although it was conceived to counter what it sees as a Western news bias against Russia, the channel bills itself as "an autonomous nonprofit organization," and its executives say they do not take orders from the Kremlin.

"I'm a bit tired to try to explain that we are independent, that I don't get calls from the government — I do not," said Margarita Simonyan, Russia Today's editor in chief. "We want to develop into a really trusted name that people turn to because they want to know what's going on in the country."

Ms. Simonyan herself has been a focus of the channel's critics. Andrei Richter, the director of the Moscow Media Law and Policy Institute and a journalism professor at Moscow State University, said the editor, a 28-year-old former pool reporter for the Kremlin, was appointed because she is well-connected.

Ms. Simonyan acknowledged she once received flowers on her birthday from Mr. Putin, who stepped down this month but will retain power as the country's prime minister. Still, she said, her age often leads people to make assumptions about how she got her job.

"I realize that it's quite remarkable for someone who doesn't live in Russia," Ms. Simonyan said, adding that after the fall of the Soviet Union a new crop of young journalists was hired. "I started my career when I was 18."

With a slick studio and polished graphics, Russia Today looks like most cable news channels. But there are a few differences. Technical problems plague live telecasts. While all the Russian reporters speak English, some have thick accents. And many staff members are as young as their editor. That youthfulness is reflected in many of the segments, like the campy "Technology Update"; in one episode a reporter rolled around in a simulated skirmish with Russian special forces, testing out anti-sniper gadgetry to the tune of Eminem's "Lose Yourself."

The channel has also reported on serious news events. In November, as water cannons struck anti-government demonstrators in Tbilisi, the capital of Georgia, the Russia Today correspondent Katerina Azarova

was reporting so close to the protests that she was poisoned by tear gas (Video of Her Report). Watching the channel's round-the-clock coverage of the unrest in Tbilisi felt like peeking into a foreign newscast — without needing to know a foreign language.

Despite such ambitions, several former Russia Today journalists said that working for a channel financed by the Kremlin made it difficult to cover news about Russia impartially. “You are understandably walking a very fine line of being full and frank and biting the hand that feeds,” said Carson Scott, a former business news presenter who is now with Sky News Business Channel in Australia. “I had countless heated editorial debates with my editor, frankly speaking. I was very vocal. ‘We have to give the other side of the argument. We have to be balanced.’ And oftentimes eyes just glazed over.”

But several of Russia Today's journalists said they were earnestly trying to tell Russia's story. “No one is telling me what to say,” said Peter Lavelle, the effusive host of “In Context.” Nevertheless, he said, the channel does take certain views. “Part of our mission is public relations,” he added.

Some of the channel's specials seek to expose and correct Western biases about Russia. An episode of “Cracking the Myths” about Russia's economy opens with Jay Leno-style street interviews with Americans, who guess that most Russians subsist on penny-a-day incomes or wait in line for hours to get bread (Watch the Video). The show then offers scenes of Russian prosperity, like a shopping mall brimming with members of the expanding middle class.

Mr. Richter said that this tendency to shape opinions reveals one of the channel's flaws. “The idea of Russia Today is that our country is in a very hostile media environment,” he said. “The idea is very rotten because if you believe you're in a hostile environment, you want to persuade others that what they think is not true.”

The concept of state-sponsored news aimed to viewers abroad is not new. During the cold war Western-financed radio stations like Voice of America, which began broadcasting in Russian in 1947, existed in part to counter Soviet spin. Russia Today has inverted the recipe, broadcasting in English from Russia in the hopes of improving Russia's increasingly ominous image in the West. And it is but the first in what has become a veritable parade of state-financed anglophone news channels.

Since Russia Today's debut Iran (Press TV), China (CCTV-9), France (France 24) and Qatar (Al Jazeera English) have created their own English news networks. Al Jazeera's English spinoff is clearly the leader of this pack, drawing on the credibility of its Arabic-language counterpart and the deep pockets of the emir of Qatar.

Ben O'Loughlin, an international relations professor at the University of London's Royal Holloway campus, studies the emergence of state-financed news channels jockeying to have a voice in what he calls “the anglosphere.”

“The journalists at Russia Today probably don't see themselves as political pawns,” Mr. O'Loughlin said. “They might say their goal isn't objectivity, it's balance — having both sides. If we're interested in a pluralistic global media, then in many respects this could be a good thing, but that's very provisional.”

For at least one viewer the question of the channel's independence is irrelevant. Alexandr Polin, a Manhattan event planner who left St. Petersburg in 1991, said he considered it propaganda, but not in the Soviet style. “I watched a documentary yesterday about AIDS,” he said. “In Soviet times they would never say that people were sick somewhere.”

Mr. Polin said that Western news coverage often eclipsed the good things happening back home: “It's not only Mafia, Red Square, vodka and prostitutes.”

## **#11 Arab diplomats in Russia decry Israel JTA Brief, May 19, 2008**

Arab diplomats in Russia called Israel's 60th birthday celebrations an affront to Arabs.

"What took place 60 years ago was an act of genocide," said Faed Mustafa, the charge d'affaires for the Palestinian mission in Moscow. "A whole people was ejected from its own territory for the purpose of that territory being occupied by another people."

Mustafa and four other diplomats spoke May 16 at a roundtable called "60 Years of Unceasing Conflict: The Tragedy of the Palestinian People."

Izzat Saad, Egypt's ambassador to Russia, said the current American administration was holding back any hope of progress on peace talks in the Middle East.

Oleg Ozerov, the deputy director of Russia's Foreign Ministry Department dealing with the Middle East, said a representative from the Jewish side would have differed in his version of history from the Arab diplomats.

"Every people has their own tragedy, including the Israelis," Ozerov said at the roundtable. He added that for the Russians, who are trying to play a role in the peace process, "the most important thing is justice."

Ozerov articulated Russia's position that Israel must scale back its settlements in the West Bank and work toward the establishment of a viable, democratic Palestinian state.

In addition to the discussion, the leaders of the Arab community in Russia also planned an exhibition of photographs and films at Moscow's Central Artists' House highlighting what they see as the Nakba, Arabic for "catastrophe," of 1948.

## **#12**

### **Medvedev Orders Cleanup of Courts The Moscow Times, May 21, 2008**

President Dmitry Medvedev said Tuesday that the establishment of an independent judiciary was the central plank of planned reforms to the judicial system in a Kremlin meeting with senior judges and legal officials.

As if to underline the message, the head of the Supreme Arbitration Court called for a subordinate to be suspended for alleged involvement in crooked real estate deals.

"Our main goal is to achieve independence for the courts as a reality," Medvedev said, the presidential web site reported. "The principle that courts should be guided only by the law is well-known, and this, as a matter of fact, forms the basis for respect for the courts and trust in a fair justice system."

In the meeting, Medvedev outlined a number of obstacles that had to be removed if real independence of the judiciary is to be achieved.

One of the major requirements, he said, was to protect judges from outside pressure or bribery aimed at influencing their decisions.

"[Unjust] decisions, as we all know, do happen and come as a result of different kinds of pressure, like telephone calls and — there's no point in denying — offers of money," Medvedev said.

Also mentioned was the need to cut the amount of red tape in court procedures.

"Of course, not at the expense of the quality of consideration cases receive," he added.

Medvedev, himself a graduate and former member of the faculty at St. Petersburg State University's school of law, also criticized the poor qualifications of many judges, which he said were the result of an increase in the number of universities and institutes providing inadequate legal education.

"We must ... bring order into the issue of training legal experts," Medvedev said.

He said the issues with the judiciary would be tackled with laws regulating judges' work and amending the Administrative Offenses Code, although he did not elaborate.

Medvedev will name a working group to prepare the contents of the changes in "the next few days," Justice Minister Alexander Kononov said after Tuesday's meeting, Interfax reported.

Participants of the meeting included Supreme Court chairman Vyacheslav Lebedev, Supreme Arbitration Court chairman Anton Ivanov, First Deputy Prosecutor General Alexander Bastrykin, Deputy Prime Minister Sergei Sobyenin, and prominent lawyer and Public Chamber member Anatoly Kucherena.

On May 12, Ivanov filed a request to have Lyudmila Maikova, the chairwoman of the Federal Arbitration Court in the Moscow District, suspended from her duties for "damaging the authority of the judicial branch and the reputation of the judiciary," Kommersant reported Tuesday. Ivanov's request said Maikova, who had been on the bench in a number of legal disputes involving the city government, received help from City Hall in 2004 to swap her own apartment for two others and to buy another from a developer at less than market price.

Legal experts and political analysts were divided on Medvedev's prospects for success in battling corruption and political pressure on the ranks of the judiciary. Pavel Astakhov, a prominent lawyer and the host of a television court show, said it would be possible to introduce the necessary reforms in the space of seven to 10 years, although he added that different attitudes would have to be instilled in a new generation of judges from childhood. "We have to raise these judges, beginning in kindergarten," Astakhov said, adding that he agreed with Medvedev's comments on the quality of legal education available. "Unqualified schools of higher education in law have become numerous," he said.

Prominent lawyer-turned-politician Mikhail Barshchevsky said results from the planned changes could be achieved in a short period — one to 1 1/2 years — but would depend on how serious Medvedev and the government were about the reform. "This is just a question of political will," Barshchevsky said.

Political analyst and former Kremlin spin doctor Stanislav Belkovsky had little hope for the prospects of improvement but said some cleaning house would benefit Medvedev politically.

"The judicial system is completely corrupt, and to reverse this what is necessary is a change of the ruling elite and not just the judges," Belkovsky said.

He predicted that the reform would "contribute to the consolidation of power in Medvedev's hands," as the winnowing-out and replacement of judges, and the appearance of new high-profile cases or review of past decisions could reinforce the president's authority with the people.

Tuesday's meeting appears to be part of a larger message from the Kremlin concentrating on the need to battle corruption. In one of his first major steps as president, Medvedev said Monday that he would head a new federal council to fight against graft, giving a group of senior Kremlin, government and law enforcement officials a month to draw up a "national plan" to deal with the issue.

In a January speech while campaigning for the presidency, Medvedev called Russia "a country of legal nihilism" with a "disregard for the law." He has promised to strengthen the rule of law, fight corruption, and encourage growth.

Former President and current Prime Minister Vladimir Putin pledged sweeping reform of Russia's complex and corrupt judicial system soon after he came to power in 2000.

In 2001, then-deputy head of the presidential administration Dmitry Kozak introduced a legal reform program, part of which involved trying to guarantee greater independence for judges. The reforms ultimately ran into a wall of resistance for a number of reasons, Belkovsky said.

"The judicial community was in total opposition to Kozak's reforms," he said.

## #13

### Putin's Puppet Press

The Moscow Times, May 21, 2008

During Vladimir Putin's presidency, tight control of the mass media evolved as one of the Russian leadership's key political resources. It will be equally indispensable to President Dmitry Medvedev.

To understand how journalism here changed under Putin, consider two book projects.

In 1999, Natalya Gevorkyan and Andrei Kolesnikov, two reporters at Kommersant, interviewed Putin for a book that was to introduce the president-to-be to the public. Excerpts printed in Kommersant before the book's publication revealed an angry exchange over Andrei Babitsky, a Radio Liberty reporter who was being held incommunicado in Chechnya. The journalists voiced the suspicion, shared then by many in Russia, that Babitsky was being held on state orders. They demanded that Putin release Babitsky and said bluntly that they didn't believe his responses.

The second book interviews involved Medvedev and occurred shortly before he was elected president. This time the excerpts were published on the Kremlin web site. Medvedev was queried about what the words "great Russia" mean to him, his conception of democracy and his attitude toward private property. The journalists were friendly and respectful, and Medvedev's answers were long and uninterrupted.

If the interviewers, a husband and wife, had wanted to discuss journalists in trouble with the government, they wouldn't have had to struggle for examples. Last year, reporter Natalya Morar was deported after The New Times weekly magazine ran a series she wrote alleging that high-ranking officials were siphoning huge sums out of the country. Manana Aslamazian, director of the Educated Media Foundation, a mostly U.S.-funded organization that since 1992 had trained television journalists and supported independent broadcasters, fled the country fearing arrest; the Educated Media Foundation was promptly destroyed. The killings and mysterious deaths of several high-profile journalists, including Anna Politkovskaya, Yury Shchekochikhin and Paul Klebnikov, remain unsolved.

But in today's Russia, journalists don't press top officials. In fact, apart from the interviews with Gevorkyan and Kolesnikov, Putin, as president, never publicly faced a single unfriendly question from a Russian reporter.

During Putin's tenure, television broadcasting was honed to perfection -- as a tool to shape public opinion. Coverage of political and public affairs is now tightly controlled through a coordinated effort of the national channels' top managers and Kremlin aides. The result is that any event, person, group or movement may be boosted or played down in the public eye in a way that would best suit the Kremlin's desires and designs; anyone deemed an adversary of the government may be discredited or vilified.

Polls indicate that the public is highly responsive to television brainwashing -- whether the campaigns are against Georgia, Ukraine or the West, or are intended to influence voting preferences. In contrast to Soviet times, the government's most effective media tools are also highly profitable. Each of the two biggest channels reaches almost all Russian households. While stations don't compete in news coverage -- news shows differ little from channel to channel -- other competition for viewers and advertisers is fierce. The result: first-class soap operas and other entertainment programs that keep people glued to their screens. Advertisers, attracted to large audiences, eagerly commit their budgets to state-controlled television.

This business model and the controlled political content are inseparable and mutually beneficial. The Kremlin-designed television diet is easily digested: Bland information is supplemented by exciting entertainment shows. As he completed his second term, Putin granted special letters of commendation to the top managers of the national channels.

The government has radically curtailed broadcast freedom, but it does not totally control speech. Some broadcast, print and online outlets with smaller audiences have maintained relatively independent editorial

lines, which serves to let off steam. These outlets may create an appearance of media freedom, but they are tightly insulated from national television, effectively marginalized and kept politically irrelevant.

Shortly before his inauguration this month, Medvedev disagreed with the view that there has been "regress" in the way Russian media are regulated. He told the popular weekly Argumenty i Fakty that the "mass media develop not badly at all." "In its quality and the means used," he continued, "Russian television is among the best in the world" and is not "pro-government." This is blatantly untrue. People who work in television privately admit that they operate under tight government control. Some have even said so publicly. Prominent TV journalist Vladimir Pozner said recently at a public meeting that "on television and not only on television [there is] no press freedom." During recent parliamentary and presidential election campaigns, Pozner added, some issues were "entirely banned" and certain public figures could not be invited on air.

Whether or not Medvedev believes his statements about Russian television, he'll have to draw on the system of manipulative politics -- and its key element, the state-controlled media -- that Putin's Kremlin created. The national TV channels are a political resource of uncontested might. However power-sharing between Putin and Medvedev may evolve, they will have to share the power of television as well.

#### **#14**

#### **When Rebels Need Cash, a Relative Vanishes The Moscow Times, May 21, 2008**

Terrorist leaders in the North Caucasus have received a new infusion of money, Deputy Interior Minister Arkady Yedelev announced last week in Nalchik. It was a kind of international tranche and "money from kidnappings," Yedelev said.

Honestly, it would have been better if Yedelev had kept his mouth shut.

When al-Qaida's emissary to Russian insurgents, Abu Khavs, was killed in Dagestan in November 2006, records of the insurgents' accounts were found with his body. The Federal Security Service said Khavs received \$340,000 in foreign contributions and \$5 million "for a high-ranking hostage who was released in May."

The only "high-ranking hostage" released in May 2006 was Magomed Chakhkiyev, father-in-law of Ingush President Murat Zyazikov.

The terrorists had a heyday with that \$5 million. They blew up Ingushetia's deputy interior minister, Dzhabrail Kostoyev. They shot the acting head of Ingushetia's riot police, Musa Nalgiyev, with his young children. They bought two KamAZ trucks carrying guided-missile systems. And here Russia got lucky: The missiles blew up during handling, killing insurgent leader Shamil Basayev and a few of his top commanders. The blast occurred in Ekazhevo, two kilometers from Nazran, and burned until morning. Insurgents attempted without success to retrieve Basayev's corpse, finally leaving in the morning.

Don't misunderstand me: Unlike Yedelev, I am not suggesting that the insurgents are fighting for the sake of money. The best thugs in Russia now earn more than the terrorists do. But money is the lifeblood of war. You don't need money to become a suicide bomber, but nobody is handing out free landmines to blow up state officials.

The accounts found with Khavs' body indicate that the money for the 2006 terror campaign came from Ingushetia. And Yedelev again informed us that the insurgents received funds "from kidnappings."

Excuse me, but who was kidnapped that year? Again, it was a person from Ingushetia -- Urus Khan Zyazikov, the uncle of President Zyazikov and the father of the president's personal guard. He was abducted in March and freed in October 2007.

How much did Zyazikov's abductors receive for freeing him? In Ingushetia, they say the figure was \$7.5 million. After the kidnappers received the money, terrorist acts became more frequent in Ingushetia, and from there the

flare-up spread to Chechnya. And insurgents stepped up their activity this spring, in comparison to the same period last year. On March 19, insurgents under the leadership of Tarkhan Gaziyeu entered the foothills of Alkhazurov, encountered stiff resistance and then retreated. The insurgents killed six men and lost eight. In April, bands of 15 to 20 insurgents appeared in Roshni-Chu, Yandin-Kotar, Shalazhi and Komsomolsk. As a rule, they chose small villages in the foothills -- although a "small" Chechen village has about 5,000 inhabitants. With only one exception, the insurgents "warned" the local police without killing them.

I repeat: I don't think that insurgents who fight in the Caucasus Mountains are fighting for the money. But the leaflets in which insurgent leader Doka Umarov calls on police to leave their posts and the police uniforms purchased to erect false roadblocks cannot be obtained without funds.

Russia reestablished control over Chechnya thanks to the extremely cruel but effective methods of the republic's Kremlin-installed president, Ramzan Kadyrov. Amazingly though, it is losing control over the Caucasus because of the ineffectiveness of regional leaders -- primarily Zyazikov, who cannot even stop the insurgents from kidnapping his relatives.

## **#15**

### **Russia Near Bottom of Peace Index The Moscow Times, May 21, 2008**

Russia is one of the least peaceful places in the world, according to a new study, which ranks it among countries mired in drug trafficking, guerilla wars and political instability.

Russia took 131st place out of 140 countries on the Global Peace Index, just below Colombia and above Lebanon, says the study, released late Monday. Iceland was named the most peaceful country, while Iraq came in last.

Several Moscow-based defense analysts questioned the objectivity of the study.

Russia scored low because of its high military spending, booming arms sales and poor relations with its neighbors, says the study, the brainchild of Steve Killelea, an Australian philanthropist and entrepreneur.

Also hitting Russia's ranking were "high scores for homicides, jailed population, distrust among citizens, violent crime" and a lack of respect for human rights, it said.

The study, which uses 24 criteria, was prepared by Killelea's Institute of Economics and Peace and the Economist Intelligence Unit.

While the study noted "increased stability in Chechnya," it pointed to Russia's "moderately tense" relations with its neighbors and extremely high arms exports.

"I am sure it's quite possible for Russia to improve," Killelea said by telephone from London, noting that Russia's ranking had improved a notch from last year, when the country ranked 118th out of 121 countries in the first-ever study.

Of the other global "military-diplomatic powers," two others also received poor marks, with the United States ranked at 97th and China at 67th, the report said. While European Union members each received a separate ranking, the EU collectively was ranked fourth, tying with New Zealand. Killelea said the poor U.S. ranking had caused "a lot of controversy" in the United States.

Defense analysts took issue with the study's conclusions. "There exists a huge number of misconceptions about Russia and other countries, and they are reflected here," said Ruslan Pukhov, director of the Center for Analysis of Strategies and Technologies, a think tank that tracks security challenges and Russia's arms trade. "There is no doubt that this ranking reflects an Anglo-Saxon outlook on things."

Global Peace Index

- 1 Iceland
- 2 Denmark
- 3 Norway
- 4 New Zealand, EU (tied)
- 5 Japan
- 14 Germany
- 67 China
- 96 Jamaica
- 97 United States
- 98 Trinidad and Tobago
- 130 Colombia
- 131 Russia
- 132 Lebanon
- 136 Israel
- 137 Afghanistan
- 138 Sudan
- 139 Somalia
- 140 Iraq

Source: The Institute for Economics and Peace and the Economist Intelligence Unit.

Pukhov rejected a study conclusion that small arms are easily accessible in Russia. "In the United States, these weapons are available like diapers in a supermarket," said Pukhov, who sits on the Defense Ministry's public advisory board. "Here, it's very hard to obtain arms."

Alexander Khramchikhin, a senior researcher at the Institute for Political and Military Analysis, said the methodology of these kind of studies baffled him.

"This has nothing to do with science," he said. "It has to do with ideology."

Russia tends to rank poorly in similar international studies, including in democracy, transparency, the environment and media freedom, to name a few.

Russian government officials have repeatedly complained that the studies are biased against Russia and do not reflect reality.

Russia's ties with its former Soviet neighbors have grown more strained in recent years, and the country has showed off its increased military might. During the Victory Day parade on May 9, tanks and nuclear-missile launchers rumbled over Red Square for the first time since the Soviet collapse, triggering suggestions of Russian saber-rattling.

Killelea rejected any accusation of bias in the latest report, saying the authors had used independent data and methodology.

He added that he had never visited Russia but that it was among the countries he hoped to see one day.

## **#16**

### **Opposition Assembly Takes On State**

**By Natalya Krainova**

**The Moscow Times, May 19, 2008**

The first meeting on Saturday of a "National Assembly" organized by the Other Russia opposition coalition featured calls for a strong challenge to the current government, while demonstrating much of the disarray that often plagues the Kremlin's opponents.

The assembly, which was initially supposed to declare itself an alternative parliament, turned out to be only a halfhearted attempt by the fractured opposition to unite.

The event brought together more than 700 people, including regional activists from dozens of political groups and human rights and nongovernmental organizations.

Scheduled to start at 11 a.m. at Amber Plaza, near the Novoslobodskaya metro station, the schedule was pushed back an hour by a protracted registration process for participants. Garry Kasparov, one of the leaders of The Other Russia, didn't arrive himself until noon.

"May 17 is a special day," Kasparov said, finally opening the session.

"On May 17, 1606, Moscow rebelled against the False Dmitry," he said, in a clear attempt to link the 17th-century pretender to the Muscovite throne to President Dmitry Medvedev.

The assembly's political declaration called the ruling political regime in Russia "illegitimate" and said State Duma elections in December and the presidential vote in March were "neither free, nor competent, nor fair." The assembly was created to turn Russia into a "legal, democratic, secular, federative republic," the declaration said.

In line with the idea of creating an alternative parliament, the assembly adopted some of the characteristics of the State Duma, creating committees and commissions to draft legislation to solve Russia's most pressing problems.

Nine committees were elected, including those for human rights, ethnic policy, cooperation with nongovernmental and political groups, freedom of speech and media and the structure of the state.

The 717 regional deputies to the body include the 300 names from the Other Russia list for the December Duma vote, although the list itself was not registered, as the organization has no official party status. The remainder were chosen at April conferences held by "left," "national-patriotic" and "democratic" organizations, the declaration said.

Organizers backed off the initial idea of proclaiming the assembly an alternative people's parliament, prompting shouts of "shame" from members of the banned National Bolshevik Party, dozens of whom walked out on the proceedings.

There were further signs of discord in the speeches of assembly participants. Some speakers called for violent street protests, others for legal initiatives, and others yet for the rebirth of the Soviet Union.

Sergei Udaltsov, the leader of the Red Youth Vanguard, provided his own reason for attending the event.

"I celebrated [Medvedev's] inauguration in a cell ... where [Kasparov] had been detained before me. I listened to [Medvedev] together with Oborona leader [Oleg] Kozlovsky, who was placed in the cell the day before me," he said. "They want to drive us all into one big cell."

"We all want to express our opinion freely and not serve jail time for it," he said.

A couple of pro-Kremlin Young Russia activists added to the commotion at the event by launching plastic phallus on propellers, which were knocked out of the air by security guards.

## **#17**

### **Yushchenko Sees Better Ties Under Medvedev Reuters, May 19, 2008**

Ukraine expects to have better ties with Russia under President Dmitry Medvedev, Ukrainian President Viktor Yushchenko said Sunday.

"We really and truly want progress with the new president of Russia and we will be doing everything possible for that," Yushchenko told Britain's Sky News in an interview during a visit to London.

"I think that [Medvedev] is a person of my generation. And this generation does not think a lot about stereotypes of the past," he added.

"I think that both parties are interested in improving their relations. I think we have to get rid of some orthodoxy of policy that sometimes gets in the way of improving relations."

Yushchenko, who aims to bring his country of 40 million into NATO and the European Union, had frequent disputes with Russia under President Vladimir Putin, who now serves as prime minister under Medvedev.

Putin strongly opposed Ukraine's goal of joining NATO. Moscow still has considerable leverage over Ukraine because it supplies it with energy, and much of the population in eastern Ukraine is Russian-speaking with cultural links to Russia.

But Yushchenko said it was Kiev's sovereign right to determine its own foreign policy, and that he believed a new generation of Russian politicians was willing to accept that.

"I can see many politicians right now in Russia who are ready to well understand the new layout of independent states. Therefore I am a very optimistic politician," Yushchenko said.

## **#18**

### **Yushchenko Regains Some Power**

**By Ron Popeski**

**Reuters, May 19, 2008**

Ukrainian President Viktor Yushchenko, at odds for months with his prime minister, on Friday clawed back some powers he had lost since taking office with passage of a new law limiting the government's authority.

Resuming its activity after several days of confrontation, parliament approved a bill on the Cabinet, restoring some powers Yushchenko had lost since taking office in the aftermath of 2004 Orange Revolution.

A total of 245 lawmakers backed the bill in the 450-seat chamber, restoring the president's right to review Cabinet appointments and boost control over defense and foreign policy.

The measures went through after all parties agreed to proceed with debate on a package of legislation that included measures to curb inflation demanded by Prime Minister Yulia Tymoshenko.

Yushchenko's powers were trimmed under a political deal to end the 2004 protests over election fraud and were further reduced by legislation passed two years later. He wants to overhaul the constitution to redress the balance between the powers of the government and president.

Yushchenko, prevented by Tymoshenko's supporters from making his annual state of the nation speech to parliament, had the address published in official newspapers and his official web site.

In it, he urged ministers to tackle record inflation and end bickering which has pitched the affairs of state into confusion.

"Imbalances in the state apparatus, the absence of effective power distribution, the anachronistic nature of relations between the centre and the regions and mass corruption make up the main threat to our country and its citizens," he said.

It was time to "halt the madness of political battles. This has become a farce which not only discredits [parliament] and state authority but thoroughly demoralizes public opinion."

He also said it was up to Tymoshenko, his on-again off-again ally since the 2004 mass protests, to take urgent steps to bring down inflation -- now at 30 percent year-on-year.

"The main factor in inflation is an imbalance in supply and demand on our domestic market," he said. "We must fight it not in Soviet style or through controls but through market methods."

He also urged ministers to start talks with Russia on a 2009 gas import price -- a key factor in high inflation after big increases since 2006.

Tymoshenko backed Yushchenko in the 2004 rallies and became his first prime minister only to be sacked seven months later.

She returned to the job last year at the head of a new "orange" coalition. But both leaders, likely rivals in the next presidential election, have sniped over how to curb price increases, oversee privatization and manage state banks.

They also differ over constitutional reform. Yushchenko wants greater powers for the president, while Tymoshenko seeks a parliamentary form of government.

Tymoshenko last week threatened to end her alliance with the president unless criticism of her government stopped.

## **#19**

### **Ukraine Becomes WTO's 152nd Member**

**By Ulrika Lomas**

**LawAndTax-News.com, May 19, 2008**

On 16 May 2008, the WTO welcomed Ukraine as its newest member. Ukraine started its accession negotiations in 1993.

"I am very pleased to welcome Ukraine as a new member. It is a significant step for the WTO as this new membership will strengthen the multilateral trading system. We will continue facilitating fuller integration into the world economy of other countries" commented Director General Pascal Lamy.

The terms of membership, which include the Working Party Report for Ukraine's Accession, the Protocol of Accession, and the Schedules of Ukraine's commitments on Market Access for Goods and Services, were adopted by the WTO at the General Council in February 2008.

Ukraine ratified its accession package on 16 April 2008, which was the final step in the accession process before it could officially join the WTO.

Under WTO rules, a country becomes a member 30 days after national ratification.

Ukraine, Europe's second largest country by area, is a land of agriculture and heavy industry with a population of 46.6 million people.

Its main trading partners are the EC, Russia, Turkey, Belarus and the US.

## **#20**

### **Artist's plaque stolen in Ukraine**

**JTA Brief, May 19, 2008**

A memorial plaque was stolen from the site where a Jewish writer and painter was killed in Western Ukraine.

The bronze plaque for Bruno Schulz was dedicated a year and a half ago by the Polish organization in the artists' birthplace, the town of Drohobycz, in Ukraine's Lvov province. It was placed at the spot where Schulz was shot by a Nazi officer on Nov. 19, 1942.

According to Lvov Jewish leaders, the act of vandalism took place between May 9 and 10 but was reported only Sunday.

Boris Dorfman, a Lvov Jewish activist, told JTA that local law enforcement agencies detained a young suspect.

Among Schulz's works are a collection of short stories called "The Street of Crocodiles" and the novel "Sanatorium Under the Sign of the Hourglass," as well as the unfinished novel "The Messiah."

During the Nazi invasion of the Soviet Union, Schulz was protected temporarily by Gestapo officer Felix Landau, who admired his drawings. During the last weeks of his life, Schulz painted a mural in Landau's home in Drohobycz, pieces of which were restored and smuggled out of the country to Jerusalem by Yad Vashem.

Two weeks earlier, unknown vandals demolished the fence of a local Jewish cemetery that is no longer used for new burials. Local police are investigating the case but say they don't believe the vandalism was politically motivated.

## **#21**

### **Belarusian Christians pray for Israel JTA Brief, May 20, 2008**

Belarusian Protestants celebrated the 60th anniversary of Israel with prayer.

About 2,000 Belarusians prayed for the Jewish people and for peace in Israel.

"The Bible says that every Christian has to pray for Israel and the Jewish people," Protestant priest Oleg Akulenko told the Belarusian news agency BelaPAN.

The priest said that the 60th anniversary of Israel is a time to confess for persecutions, oppressions and the lack of respect to Jewish people that took place in the past.

Akulenko said the formation of the state of Israel 2,000 years after the destruction of Jerusalem was the fulfillment of Biblical prophecies.

## **#22**

### **Treasury Department moves against 3 Belarus businesses By JEANNINE AVERSA The Associated Press, May 16, 2008**

The Bush administration moved Thursday to clamp down financially on three businesses in Belarus linked to a major oil and chemical company allegedly controlled by authoritarian President Alexander Lukashenko.

The Treasury Department's action is against Lakokraska OAO, Polotsk Steklovolokno OAO and the Byelorussian Oil Trade House. Any assets found in the United States that belong to the companies must be frozen. Americans also are prohibited from doing business with them.

The three companies were designated because of their connections to Belneftexim Concern, a petrochemicals conglomerate that the United States says is controlled by Lukashenko. The U.S. government moved to freeze that company's assets in November.

The United States took its latest action under an executive order President Bush issued in 2006 considering what the United States called "oppression" by Lukashenko and key members of his administration.

The executive order, among other things, gives the U.S. government power to impose financial sanctions on people or companies determined to be responsible for undermining democratic processes or institutions in Belarus and for being owned or controlled by Lukashenko, who was previously designated under Bush's executive order.

Lukashenko, who has been in power since 1994, is often branded by Western countries as "Europe's last dictator." He won a third term in 2006 in an election that Western governments deemed fraudulent. The Bush administration, which had called for new elections at the time, said Lukashenko's victory resulted from fraud and human rights abuses.

**#23**

### **U.S. Said to Be Hurting Ordinary Belarusians**

**By Andrei Makhovsky**

**Reuters, May 19, 2008**

Belarus accused the United States on Friday of harming the interests of ordinary citizens by imposing new sanctions on the country's industry in a dispute over human rights.

The U.S. Treasury Department imposed punitive measures on Thursday on three Belarusian companies linked to state-run oil refiner Belneftekhim as part of efforts to intensify pressure on President Alexander Lukashenko over purported rights abuses.

Belarus has been subject to various sanctions for several years but is especially aggrieved at moves against Belneftekhim.

The U.S. ambassador left Minsk last month at the urging of officials and 10 diplomats were expelled.

Foreign Ministry spokesman Andrei Popov, in a statement on the ministry's web site, said: "Through its actions, the United States has shown beyond all doubt that its measures are aimed at ordinary Belarusian citizens and hit the interests of plants included on the list."

Popov said the step was all the more striking after Lukashenko's "unambiguous" call this week for "a dialogue of equals and of mutual respect" with Washington.

"The situation clearly shows just who is working in positive terms and who in negative terms," the statement said.

The U.S. Treasury banned Americans from doing business with the companies identified as enterprises of Belneftekhim.

It also sought to freeze any assets under U.S. jurisdiction held by the firms -- Lidskaya Lakokraska, a paint and varnish producer, Polotsk Steklovolokno, a glass and fiber plant, and Belarusian Oil Trade House, a clearing house for transactions.

The sanctions seek to prevent Belneftekhim from using other corporate entities to skirt the U.S.-imposed sanctions.

Lukashenko earlier in the week accused U.S. diplomats of applying pressure on Belarus and working to worsen relations.

"If the Americans think they can build relations from a position of strength, then we don't need such diplomats or relations," he said in an interview.

"If the United States wants to see us as an independent state and build relations on that basis ... the country is open to them," he said.

The head of Belarus' central bank, Pyotr Prokopovich, said the sanctions could persuade potential investors to reconsider their plans.

The United States and European Union accuse Lukashenko of crushing fundamental rights by shutting down media outlets, holding political prisoners and rigging elections.

Since 2006, Washington has barred entry to Lukashenko and other senior officials and blocked their personal assets.

It added Belneftekhim, which has more than 50 separate petroleum and petrochemical businesses, to the blacklist in November.

Belarussian police quickly dispersed about 50 opposition activists who attempted to hold a rally Friday on Minsk's central square to urge the release of political prisoners, The Associated Press reported.

## **#24**

### **Russia: Moscow Pushes Ahead With Pipeline Bypassing Belarus RFE/RL, May 16, 2008**

Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin says Russia is building a new oil pipeline that will bypass Belarus en route to Europe.

Russian media quote Prime Minister Vladimir Putin as announcing on May 14 that the state pipeline monopoly Transneft has chosen the port of Ust-Luga, in Russia's northern Leningrad Oblast, as the terminal for the new pipeline.

The idea for the Baltic Pipeline System-2 (BPS-2) was first floated in January 2007 following a bitter dispute with Belarus over oil-transit fees that briefly disrupted supplies to Europe.

Once the pipeline is completed, Russia is unlikely to fully suspend oil transit through Belarus. But Yury Drakakhrust, a correspondent for RFE/RL's Belarus Service, says the new pipeline will severely dent Belarus's economy and bargaining power:

"Russia will be able to maneuver transit, send some of its oil here, some of its oil there," Drakakhrust says. "So this undoubtedly undermines Belarus's economy. Many steps that Minsk has taken over the past year -- the feverish search for oil delivery partners in Venezuela, in Iraq, in Azerbaijan -- are attempts to compensate for this Russian blow, for this loss of monopoly status as a transit country."

The pipeline certainly threatens to deprive Belarus of its current leverage vis-a-vis both Russia and Europe.

Speaking in an interview with Reuters news agency earlier this week, President Alyaksandr Lukashenka used the energy card to press Europe to oppose a U.S.-led campaign to impose sanctions on the authoritarian regime in Minsk.

"The United States wants the European Union to impose sanctions against Belarus," he said. "And now they want the Europeans to join in. ... You can if you wish. But don't forget that 50 percent of your oil and oil products and 30 percent of your gas passes through Belarus."

#### **Freeing Russia From Transit Fees**

The BPS-2 would be part of the Baltic Pipeline System, an existing pipeline that pumps oil from western Siberia to the Primorsk port on the Gulf of Finland. It would branch off the Druzhba pipeline near the Belarusian border and travel through the Russian regions of Bryansk, Pskov, and Leningrad before reaching Ust-Luga on the Gulf of Finland.

Yevgeny Volk, who heads the Moscow branch of the U.S. Heritage Foundation, says the BPS-2 route also aims at freeing Russia from transit fees to Baltic countries:

"The idea is to get rid of the dependence on terminals located in the Baltic States," Volk says. "This is part of [Russia's] drive to ensure that the profits from the transportation and processing of Russian energy resources go to Russia and not to the Baltic States, which objectively received handsome profits from the transit of Russian deliveries through their territories."

Putin said Transneft had examined six routes before opting for Ust-Luga, which it claims is the most environmentally friendly.

Transneft reportedly estimates the cost of BPS-2's construction at around \$3 billion.

**#25**

**Kazakhstan: President's Former Son-In-Law Offers To Testify In 'Kazakhgate' Probe**

**By Bruce Pannier**

**RFE/RL, May 17, 2008**

Rakhat Aliev, the exiled former son-in-law of Kazakhstan's President Nursultan Nazarbaev, says he's ready to give evidence in a U.S. investigation into whether Nazarbaev and other Kazakh officials took bribes from U.S. businesses to receive lucrative oil contracts more than a decade ago.

Aliev's offer comes the same week that "The Wall Street Journal" reported that Aliev's former wife -- and President Nazarbaev's eldest daughter, Darigha Nazarbaeva -- hired U.S. firms to monitor the investigation into those bribery allegations, known as "Kazakhgate."

It is a scandal few countries want to see in the news.

Kazakhstan is becoming a major oil exporter at a time when everyone, including Western democracies, is seeking new suppliers for their energy needs.

Kazakhstan is also due to receive the rotating chairmanship of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) in 2010. The OSCE made that decision in late November 2007. By that time, Aliev had already been charged with illegal business activities, kidnapping officials from a Kazakh bank, and other crimes. But Austrian authorities rejected a Kazakh request to extradite Aliev to Kazakhstan for trial. Other, more serious charges of treason and plotting a coup soon followed and, in two separate trials earlier this year, Aliev was sentenced in absentia to 40 years in jail.

Man Of Privilege

Aliev remains in Austria where he worked as Kazakhstan's ambassador until May 2007, when he was dismissed from his post, the charges against him surfaced, and notice was delivered to him in Vienna that Darigha Nazarbaeva had divorced him.

Aliev was a man of privilege in Kazakhstan. He worked as a doctor and then later headed the country's tax service. He also served as first deputy security minister, first deputy foreign minister, and in other key posts, including as Kazakhstan's representative to the OSCE during the years Kazakhstan was negotiating to obtain the presidency.

When charges continued to pile up against Aliev, he struck back. Recordings of taped phone calls purportedly between high-ranking Kazakh government officials -- some allegedly with the voice of Nazarbaev -- were leaked to opposition websites. The conversations allegedly concerned bribes involving millions of dollars and also contained references to physical retaliation against political opponents. The appearance of the tapes caused Kazakh authorities to block those sites and initiate legislation to change the laws governing Internet sites.

The tapes first appeared late last year, and then more appeared ahead of Aliev's January trial when he was convicted, in absentia, of illegal business activities, kidnappings, assault, illegal possession of weapons, and other charges. He was sentenced to 20 years in jail.

More tapes surfaced after Aliev was convicted in absentia in March on charges of plotting to overthrow the government, selling state secrets, and treason. He received another 20 years in jail.

### Questions Of Legality

On May 12, "The Wall Street Journal" published an article headlined "Kazakh Leader's Daughter Monitored U.S. Bribe Case." The article said Darigha Nazarbaeva "used well-connected Washington private security consultants to gather information on a U.S. bribery probe involving her father."

Darigha Nazarbaeva There are now questions about the legality of this "monitoring," since information about the investigation is confidential. The article mentions former high-level U.S. intelligence and security officials -- including a former CIA chief and former FBI directors -- having worked with at least one of the firms, and it questions whether such people could have used their contacts in the Justice Department to gain information about Kazakhgate and pass it to Nazarbaeva.

Former New York banker James Giffen is alleged to have been a middle-man passing money from U.S. oil companies to President Nazarbaev and other Kazakh officials in exchange for oil contracts in Kazakhstan. The case has raised eyebrows not only for the accusations themselves but for the slow pace in which the investigation has progressed in the United States, a country with great interests in Kazakhstan's oil industry. Kazakhgate is a taboo subject in Kazakhstan, and several media outlets that reported on it were victims of vandalism or crippling financial investigations that resulted in their closure.

Aidos Sarym, director of the Altynbek Sarsenbaev Foundation, told RFE/RL's Kazakh Service that Nazarbaeva's interest in the case would be natural, especially given her ambitions.

"Darigha Nazarbaeva is one of the persons who would return to Kazakh politics in the future," Sarym says. "Anyway it's clear for me that she wants to stay in politics after [her father's] era, and she wants to be in politics and to be the first person in politics. From this point of view, it's clear that if she thinks about her future, if Kazakhgate continues, if the trial starts, it will work against her political interests. But it isn't clear how much of what she did was legal."

### Playing Double Game?

Long-time opposition politician Zhasaral Kuanyshali agrees that it could be simply a case of a loyal daughter seeking information to help keep her father out of trouble. But Nazarbaeva was married, seemingly happily, to Aliev while the investigation was proceeding and being monitored. He wonders whether Nazarbaeva might be playing a double game.

"If her intentions toward her father are honorable, then it's understandable that she would want to become aware and defend her father in the Kazakhgate affair," Kuanyshali says. "And the second possibility is whether her intentions toward her father are different and she wants to use [the monitoring] in a struggle against him."

"We know, we take into consideration that there are conflicts within the [Nazarbaev] family. There is also the situation around Rakhat Aliev," Kuanyshali continues. "Darigha may have some resentment connected with her husband's treatment, and it's possible she could carry out her own policies against Nazarbaev because Rakhat Aliev is struggling for power, wants to return to head Kazakhstan. I think Darigha wouldn't disown him. Probably they have some agreements."

Aliev's threat to come to the United States and give evidence that could clearly link President Nazarbaev to the scandal seems to have been prompted by "The Wall Street Journal" article. On May 15, Aliev posted copies of what kaztoday.ru says are an Interpol warrant, issued by Liechtenstein, against Nazarbaev, his former prime minister, the former head of the state oil company, a former presidential adviser, and another of Nazarbaev's

daughters, Dinara. Also posted was a photocopy of a check for \$1 million made out to the "bearer" that is supposed to be from one of the payoffs to Kazakh officials.

Aidos Sarym said posting the warrant and check and Aliev's apparent willingness now to present his evidence in U.S. courts bodes ill for President Nazarbaev.

'Ready To Show What He Has'

"There is a possibility that this is to demonstrate their power because it is clear that they have information and documents," Sarym says. "Rakhat Aliev is only showing a small portion of it, but there is a nuance in this in that Rakhat Aliev is ready to go to the Kazakhgate trial in the United States and show what he has. I think it will force Nazarbaev's inner circle to think about it.

"Rakhat Aliev has already posted some documents on the Internet and in the newspapers, but he never said to whom, exactly, they pertained," Sarym continues. "The first documents he has published were already known, but this check, of course, is a new thing. These documents were published to demonstrate he has a lot of documents in his possession."

One of Aliev's accomplices in his alleged criminal activities is former Kazakh security chief Alnur Musaev, who has also been sentenced in absentia to a lengthy jail term. Aliev's connection to Musaev explains how the former presidential son-in-law may have obtained such damning evidence on the Kazakh president.

**#26**

**Russia claims to arrest a Georgian spy**  
**By Francesca Mereu and Alexander Osipovich**  
**The Moscow Times, May 18, 2008**

The top Russian security agency, the Federal Security Service, is claiming that its agents caught a Georgian spy, and accused Tbilisi of aiding rebels in the North Caucasus, in an episode likely to heighten tensions between the two former Soviet republics.

On Sunday, the two sides continued to snipe at each other, as Georgia accused Russia of deploying heavy weaponry alongside its peacekeeping forces in Abkhazia and briefly detained a group of Russian soldiers in the breakaway region.

Officials from the Russian security service, known as the FSB, said that a Chechen man working for Georgian intelligence had been giving money to fighters in the unstable North Caucasus, news agencies reported Friday.

According to the Interfax news agency, an FSB source said the suspect had admitted to working for Georgian security services. The source identified the man as Ramzan Turkoshvili, an ethnic Chechen born in the Georgian Soviet Republic in 1974 who holds Russian citizenship.

A Georgian government spokeswoman dismissed the accusations as "another provocation from the Russia side."

"We don't finance rebels in any country," the spokeswoman said by telephone from Tbilisi.

A Georgian Interior Ministry spokesman, Shota Utiashvili, also denied the accusations, describing them as "mere disinformation meant to discredit Georgia," Interfax reported.

The latest accusations come at a time when the countries are wrangling over the breakaway Georgian regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, and as the Georgian reintegration minister, Temur Yakobashvili, arrived in Moscow on Friday for a two-day visit to try to find a solution to the problem.

Underlining the difficulty of his task, three bomb blasts hit Georgian-controlled areas of South Ossetia on Friday, one of which wounded a Georgian police officer, The Associated Press reported.

Despite the diplomatic efforts, the two sides continued to trade accusations Sunday after an incident in which Georgia briefly detained a group of Russian peacekeepers.

Georgia said it had detained the five peacekeepers along the administrative border with Abkhazia after their armored personnel carrier crashed into a Georgian woman's car in the town of Zugdidi, The AP reported.

The Georgian television station Rustavi-2 said the peacekeepers had been drunk and had entered Zugdidi as part of a column of six armored personnel carriers and 42 trucks loaded with ammunition.

Alexander Diordiyev, a spokesman for the Russian-led peacekeeping force, said the Georgian authorities had staged the car accident as a "provocation," and he denied that the detained soldiers had been drunk.

## **#27**

### **Tensions Heated for Abkhaz Leader Visit**

**By Nikolaus von Twickel**

**The Moscow Times, May 20, 2008**

Heated tensions over Abkhazia showed no sign of waning Monday as the breakaway region's leader arrived in Moscow for talks over closer ties with Russia.

Abkhaz leader Sergei Bagapsh will discuss Moscow's proposal to establish direct institutional links with Abkhazia, the foreign minister of the self-styled republic, Sergei Shamba, said by telephone from the regional capital of Sukhumi.

Bagapsh was scheduled to meet with Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov on Tuesday afternoon, Shamba said.

Last month, then-President Vladimir Putin signed a decree on deepening relations with Georgia's two breakaway regions, Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Putin ordered his government to establish closer trade, economic, social and scientific links with the two regions, though he stopped short of offering them diplomatic recognition.

The decree angered Tbilisi, which claims that Moscow is siding with the separatists and disregarding Georgia's territorial integrity. Abkhazia and South Ossetia have enjoyed de facto independence since two secessionist wars in the early 1990s.

Shamba denied a report that Bagapsh would seek Moscow's approval for a peace deal with Georgia. "The president is on a working visit to discuss Putin's decree," Shamba said.

Kommersant reported Monday that Georgia's ambassador to the United Nations, Irakli Alasania, had proposed a wide-ranging deal to the separatist authorities in Sukhumi last week.

The deal, the paper said, citing sources in the Abkhaz leadership, consisted of a mutual nonaggression pact mediated by Moscow, the return of Georgian refugees who fled Abkhazia in the 1990s and the withdrawal of Georgian forces from the Kodor Gorge.

Bagapsh denied the report, saying no such agreement existed between Sukhumi and Tbilisi and that he would accept no less than full independence.

"Our position is that Georgia first needs to withdraw its forces from the upper Kodor, and only after that we will be ready for a nonaggression agreement," he was quoted as saying by Interfax.

The Kodor Gorge is a sliver of land that has become a flash point between Tbilisi and Sukhumi.

Shamba described the Kommersant report as flawed. A phone call to Georgian Reintegration Minister Temur Yakobashvili, who handles relations with the breakaway regions, was disrupted by a bad connection Monday and follow-up calls were unsuccessful.

The latest flare-up in Russian-Georgian relations comes as Georgia is set to elect a new parliament this Wednesday.

Tensions over Abkhazia increased last month when a Georgian spy plane was shot down over the region. Georgia said the unmanned plane was shot down by a Russian jet violating its airspace.

Russia has since stepped up its rhetoric and sent reinforcements to its peacekeeping forces, which control Abkhazia's boundary with the rest of Georgia, saying that a Georgian invasion is imminent.

Moscow's military leadership over the weekend authorized peacekeepers to conduct armed operations on their own behalf if necessary, Nezavisimaya Gazeta reported Monday.

The Defense Ministry did not answer repeated calls Monday, but Shamba, the Abkhaz foreign minister, called the report "credible."

Georgia has reacted to Moscow's stance by blocking negotiations over Russia's accession to the World Trade Organization.

In another step likely to hamper any agreement with Georgia, Abkhazia signed a cooperation agreement Friday with the neighboring Krasnodar region over construction work for the Winter Olympics in Sochi in 2014.

Georgia has warned that such joint projects that exclude Tbilisi would call into doubt the rightfulness of the selection of Sochi as the Olympics.

## **#28**

### **West Will Scrutinize Georgian Elections**

**Reuters, May 20, 2008**

The West will closely watch Georgia's parliamentary election Wednesday for signs the country is committed to democracy, four months after Mikheil Saakashvili won a presidential vote described as flawed.

Some Western countries questioned Saakashvili's democratic credentials after he sent riot police to crush anti-government demonstrators last November. A mixed report from monitors at January's election only partially repaired his tarnished image.

"The democratic conduct of the upcoming parliamentary elections in Georgia ... is crucial to restoring public confidence in the democratic process," a delegation from the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe wrote last month.

In January's presidential election, which Saakashvili won with more than 52 percent, the head of the Western observation mission described the vote as flawed though an accurate representation of the will of the people.

But the opposition said the presidential election had been rigged and was unfair.

"We have the support of people, while the ruling party uses all its power and the state budget for its vote," Levan Gachechiladze, head of the main opposition coalition, said ahead of Wednesday's vote.

In an interim report released Friday, the main Western election monitoring group said it had received allegations of intimidation, illegal campaigning by officials and the use of administrative resources to support Saakashvili.

"Several allegations of intimidation could be substantiated," the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe's election monitoring body said.

"[But] the president and the Interior Ministry have issued strong statements calling on public officials and law enforcement bodies not to interfere in the election process."

Opinion polls suggest that Saakashvili's party may also struggle to retain its majority, although it will almost certainly remain the biggest party in the 150-seat parliament.

**#29**

## **Diplomatic Effort Seeks to Ease Tensions and Lead to Talks in Georgian Enclave**

**By C. J. CHIVERS**

**The New York Times, May 22, 2008**

The long military standoff in Abkhazia, where a separatist dispute has threatened to escalate this year into a renewed war, has entered a phase of quiet diplomacy aimed at easing tensions and urging negotiations, officials on each side of the conflict said.

No agreement to negotiate has been reached, and the differences between the Abkhaz and Georgian governments remain vast. Each side cautions that an act of significant violence or other provocation could lead to war.

But this month, after Russia sent paratroopers and artillery across its borders to reinforce its peacekeeping contingent in the enclave, and as Georgian remotely piloted planes flew reconnaissance missions overhead, an American and a Georgian delegation traveled separately here to the Abkhaz capital to discuss the possibility of talks.

The dialogue appeared to reduce for the moment the risk of large-scale fighting and to create a chance to discuss confidence-building measures — even as military incidents continued along the contested zone.

On Wednesday, for example, as parliamentary elections were being held in Georgia, a fire in the village of Kurcha destroyed two buses and wounded at least two civilians, Georgian officials said.

The diplomatic push seems also to have shifted some attention from tit-for-tat diplomatic and military escalations toward a recognition of the consequences of renewed war in the Caucasus, where two wars between Russian forces and Chechen separatists raged for most of a decade before subsiding in 2005.

Russia plans to host the Winter Olympics in 2014 in Sochi, about 15 miles from Abkhazia. A war near the city's limits, which would almost certainly involve Russia, could threaten the Games on political and security grounds. And any sustained war could devastate Georgia, which is recovering from post-Soviet disorder but lacks the resources or military capacity to withstand a determined Russian attack.

The first delegation to Abkhazia, on May 10, was led by Matthew J. Bryza, an American deputy assistant secretary of state. The second, on May 11, was led by Irakli Alasania, Georgia's representative to the United Nations.

Abkhaz officials have said the core of the dispute — Abkhazia's insistence on independence — is not negotiable. But they hinted at possible economic cooperation and an agreement on the non-resumption of force. "The situation has come, I would say, to a red line," said Sergei Shamba, Abkhazia's foreign minister. "But our conversation with the Georgian representative, which I regard as private, reduced tensions."

Abkhazia, a ribbon of sub-tropical and alpine territory on the Black Sea that once was a cherished vacation spot for the Soviet elite, lies within Georgia. It achieved de facto independence, and withering economic isolation, in a brief but ferocious war after Georgia's effort to subdue the region by force in 1992.

The Abkhaz are a tiny ethnic group. They were initially routed by Georgian forces and subjected to what they call war crimes, including mass looting and the destruction of their homes. A special prosecutor's office in Sukhumi says it has evidence of the killings of hundreds of civilians and dozens of rapes.

With help from Russia's military and a confederation of fighters from the Caucasus who were sponsored by Russian intelligence agencies, the Abkhaz repelled Georgian troops in 1993.

Georgia contends that a retaliatory pogrom followed its army's defeat, with hundreds of thousands of Georgians being chased from their homes in Abkhazia. Last week, the United Nations labeled the Abkhaz actions against Georgians a campaign of ethnic cleansing.

Since 1993, the conflict has devolved into a stalemate punctuated by occasional violence.

The tensions increased sharply in 2004, when President Mikheil Saakashvili of Georgia came to power. Mr. Saakashvili made national unification a centerpiece of his agenda, a position Abkhazia considers a prelude to war.

Tensions escalated further this year after Kosovo declared independence in February and was recognized by several Western nations. The Kremlin, which opposed an independent Kosovo, reacted by saying it would increase cooperation with Abkhazia and South Ossetia, another breakaway enclave in Georgia.

A season of brinkmanship has ensued, with each side accusing the other of massing forces, and Georgian drones on reconnaissance drawing fire from both the ground and from what Georgia said was a Russian fighter jet.

Russia has reinforced its peacekeepers, although their number and role remain in dispute. Russia and Abkhazia say that 2,500 Russian soldiers are in Abkhazia — well within the Commonwealth of Independent States peacekeeping mandate of up to 3,000 troops.

Georgian officials say that at least 3,500 Russians are in the conflict zone, as well as advisers who are surreptitiously training and leading Abkhaz units. Independent verification of these claims is not readily possible.

Each side insists that its troop movements have assured peace, and that the other's have increased the risk of war. "We often hear that Russia's actions destabilize the situation," Mr. Shamba said. "This is not an objective assessment. We can say clearly that Russia's tough actions stopped Georgia's aggression."

Abkhazia has also offered to allow Russia to station permanent forces at an Abkhaz air base in exchange for guarantees of protection. "Of course we dream of being a neutral state," Mr. Shamba said. "Unfortunately we live in such a region where that is impossible."

Georgia has been unwavering in its position that Abkhazia will be returned to Georgian control.

During Mr. Saakashvili's presidency, Georgia has upgraded military equipment and intensified military training. It says it has 28,000 regular troops, including units that were trained by American marines and that have served in Afghanistan and Iraq. It also has private Israeli advisers.

Moreover, Mr. Saakashvili, who needs little urging to speak in populist tones, is ringed by young advisers, many of whom have taken a hard line. Although they say they do not want to resume fighting, they invariably add that Abkhazia must reintegrate with Georgia, or fighting might be inevitable.

At the center of the talks this month was a list of proposals by Mr. Saakashvili that would grant broad autonomy to Abkhazia in exchange for recognizing Georgian rule. These included constitutional changes and security guarantees that Georgia says would protect Abkhaz power, interests, language and culture.

Among them would be the creation of a Georgian vice presidency to be granted to an Abkhaz official, power-sharing arrangements to award Abkhazia control of some Georgian ministries and the merger of the Abkhaz and Georgian police and customs services. Abkhazia previously rejected the proposal. But Mr. Alasania said he focused on smaller steps that require no ideological concessions.

Daniel Fried, the United States assistant secretary of state for European and Eurasian affairs, said in a telephone interview that after Mr. Alasania's visit there appeared to be a chance to move beyond "the frankly moribund diplomatic process that we had been in for some time."

### **#30**

#### **Exit Poll: Saakashvili's Party Wins Big Reuters, May 22, 2008**

An independent exit poll showed Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili's party overwhelmingly winning parliamentary elections Wednesday, but a senior opposition leader claimed victory and protests were expected.

"In Georgia our democracy is alive and well," Saakashvili said after casting his ballot with his Dutch wife, who voted for the first time as a Georgian citizen.

The exit poll gave Saakashvili's United National Movement party about 63 percent of the vote, and the main United Opposition bloc 14 to 16 percent.

However, the opposition, which has accused Saakashvili of rigging the elections, said it had won.

"I would like to congratulate Georgian society on the fact that the opposition has won in all of Georgia," David Gamkrelidze, one of the leaders of United Opposition, told reporters. "The authorities have totally lost."

The first preliminary results are expected Thursday. If the exit poll is accurate, Saakashvili's party will win more than half the 75 seats up for grabs in party-list voting. The exit poll put the Christian Democratic Movement third with 8 to 9 percent and the Labor Party fourth with 5 to 6 percent.

In the 75 district races whose winners will fill the parliament's other 75 seats, the poll predicted Saakashvili's party would win more than 53 percent, with the United Opposition trailing with nearly 16 percent.

Opposition officials said before polls closed that they would rally 100,000 people in central Tbilisi to protest after the election.

The election was colored by tension over Russia's growing support for breakaway Abkhazia province, where gunfire broke out Wednesday along the border with Georgia, wounding several people trying to vote, a Georgian official said.

Abkhaz forces fired on two buses carrying Georgian residents from Abkhazia's Gali district across the border into Georgia so they could vote, Georgian Interior Ministry official Shota Utiashvili said. Georgia's Rustavi-2 television showed footage of a burned-out bus and another with blown-out windows, along with several people it said had gunshot or shrapnel wounds.

The West sees the election as a test of Saakashvili's commitment to democracy as he steers his country toward NATO membership, a path that has riled Russia. Saakashvili's democratic credentials were badly tarnished when he sent riot troops to crush protests last November. Opponents say he stole victory in a snap January presidential poll, a charge he denies. Saakashvili, who has Western support in a dispute with Russia over its support for Georgia's two separatist regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, said he wanted a "beautiful" vote.

"Georgia is really a role model for many countries in this region, and we intend to stay this way despite all the external pressures we are coming under," Saakashvili said after voting.

The exit poll was conducted by a consortium of public organizations: Ilia Chavchavadze State University; Caucasus Institute for Peace, Democracy and Development; Georgian Institute for Public Affairs; and Georgian Foundation for Strategic International Survey.

It was based on interviews of about 11,000 voters at nearly 400 polling stations across the country and had a margin of error of plus or minus 2 percent, according to the executive director of the Caucasus Institute for Peace, Democracy and Development, Avtandil Dzhokhadze. The same consortium conducted exit polls during the January presidential election in which Saakashvili won a second term. That poll's findings corresponded closely to the official results.