



WASHINGTON, D.C. June 6, 2008

TO: NCSJ Leadership and Interested Parties

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

In Brief: Tracking Russia's Foreign Policy

Dear Friend,

Every few weeks, I write about Russia's expanding foreign policy agenda. On many issues of concern to the United States, Russia can have a positive influence or a play a more negative role. This becomes clearer and clearer as we watch both Russian President Medvedev and Russian Prime Minister Putin travel around the former Soviet region and the rest of the world, articulating the interests of the Russian Federation. Sometimes they are heavy-handed and sometimes they exhibit the touch of a skilled diplomat.

Leveraging Russia's abundant natural and financial resources to advance their country's agenda is becoming the hallmark approach of the Medvedev/Putin regime. In this week's update there are several stories highlighting this approach. In particular, read the article describing Russia's latest efforts to bring Moldova back into its sphere of influence and away from the United States and the European Union. We continue to hope that the presidential candidates will focus on the U.S.-Russia relationship during the upcoming fall debates.

On Wednesday, the U.S. government issued its [latest Trafficking in Persons Report](#) and many former Soviet countries continue to be criticized for their unwillingness or inability to tackle this problem effectively. A number of NCSJ member agencies and partners have been actively engaged in supporting efforts to end this terrible and inhumane crime.

Finally, I also want to encourage you to join us on Tuesday, June 17th, in our Washington offices, for the Spring Board of Governors meeting featuring U.S. Under Secretary of State William Burns and Euro-Asian Jewish Congress President Alexander Mashkevich. Please [click here](#) for all the details on this event or visit http://www.ncsj.org/AuxPages/061708BOG_notice.shtml.

Chag Sameach,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads 'Mark B. Levin'. The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Mark B. Levin
Executive Director



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

NCSJ WEEKLY NEWS BRIEF
Washington, D.C. June 6, 2008

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

1. *It Isn't Magic: Putin Opponents Are Made to Vanish From TV*
By CLIFFORD J. LEVY
The New York Times, June 3, 2008
2. *Russia-Israel visa-free travel deal to enter force late summer*
Ria Novosti, June 4, 2008
3. *Vandals attack Russian synagogue*
JTA Brief, June 3, 2008
4. *Suspended sentence for Russian cult leader*
JTA Brief, June 5, 2008
5. *Putin Maintains Presidential Air in Paris Trip*
By STEVEN ERLANGER
The New York Times, May 31, 2008
6. *Iran not seeking to build nuclear weapons: Putin*
AFP, May 31, 2008
7. *Putin backs Abkhazia autonomy, Russian troops sent*
By Gleb Bryanski
Reuters, May 31, 2008
8. *'We're waiting for the young generation to show us what Russian Jewry is'*
By Haviv Rettig,
THE JERUSALEM POST, June 1, 2008
9. *Holocaust Torahs dedicated in Ukraine*
JTA Brief, May 30, 2008
10. *West softens stance on Uzbekistan*
By Sabrina Tavernise
International Herald Tribune, May 29, 2008
11. *Lithuania signals firm stance in EU-Russia talks*
By Nerijus Adomaitis
Reuters, May 30, 2008
12. *Moldova: Back In The Kremlin's Shadow*
By Valentina Ursu and Brian Whitmore
RFE/RL, May 31, 2008

13. *GUAM Countries Intend to Obtain Support of 'Serious Players' in UN Discussions on 'Frozen Conflicts' Resolution*
Trend News Agency, May 30, 2008
14. *Turkmenistan: NATO Finds New Partner In Central Asia*
By Bruce Pannier
RFE/RL, May 30, 2008
15. *Kyrgyzstan interested in Russia's naval presence-chief of staff*
Ria Novosti, May 30, 2008
16. *Catholic students restore Belarus cemetery*
JTA Brief, June 3, 2008
17. *Belarus helping to restore cemeteries*
By Grant Slater
JTA, June 3, 2008
18. *United States Cites Moldova for Failure to Stop Human Trafficking*
By John Schaffer
U.S. Department of State, June 5, 2008

#1

It Isn't Magic: Putin Opponents Are Made to Vanish From TV

By CLIFFORD J. LEVY

The New York Times, June 3, 2008

On a talk show last fall, a prominent political analyst named Mikhail G. Delyagin had some tart words about Vladimir V. Putin. When the program was later televised, Mr. Delyagin was not.

Not only were his remarks cut — he was also digitally erased from the show, like a disgraced comrade airbrushed from an old Soviet photo. (The technicians may have worked a bit hastily, leaving his disembodied legs in one shot.)

Mr. Delyagin, it turned out, has for some time resided on the so-called stop list, a roster of political opponents and other critics of the government who have been barred from TV news and political talk shows by the Kremlin.

The stop list is, as Mr. Delyagin put it, “an excellent way to stifle dissent.”

It is also a striking indication of how Mr. Putin has increasingly relied on the Kremlin-controlled TV networks to consolidate power, especially in recent elections.

Opponents who were on TV a year or two ago all but vanished during the campaigns, as Mr. Putin won a parliamentary landslide for his party and then installed his protégé, Dmitri A. Medvedev, as his successor. Mr. Putin is now prime minister, but is still widely considered Russia's leader.

Onetime Putin allies like Mikhail M. Kasyanov, his former prime minister, and Andrei N. Illarionov, his former chief economic adviser, disappeared from view. Garry K. Kasparov, the former chess champion and leader of the Other Russia opposition coalition, was banned, as were members of liberal parties.

Even the Communist Party, the only remaining opposition party in Parliament, has said that its leaders are kept off TV.

And it is not just politicians. Televizor, a rock group whose name means TV set, had its booking on a St. Petersburg station canceled in April, after its members took part in an Other Russia demonstration.

When some actors cracked a few mild jokes about Mr. Putin and Mr. Medvedev at Russia's equivalent of the Academy Awards in March, they were expunged from the telecast.

Indeed, political humor in general has been exiled from TV. One of the nation's most popular satirists, Viktor A. Shenderovich, once had a show that featured puppet caricatures of Russian leaders, including Mr. Putin. It was canceled in Mr. Putin's first term, and Mr. Shenderovich has been all but barred from TV.

Senior government officials deny the existence of a stop list, saying that people hostile to the Kremlin do not appear on TV simply because their views are not newsworthy.

In interviews, journalists said that they did not believe the Kremlin kept an official master stop list, but that the networks kept their own, and that they all operated under an informal stop list — an understanding of the Kremlin's likes and dislikes.

Vladimir V. Pozner, host of "Times," a political talk show on the top national network, Channel One, said the pressure to conform to Kremlin dictates had intensified over the last year, and had not eased even after the campaign.

"The elections have led to almost a paranoia on the part of the Kremlin administration about who is on television," said Mr. Pozner, who is president of the Russian Academy of Television.

In practice, Mr. Pozner said, he tells Channel One executives whom he wants to invite on the show, and they weed out anyone they think is persona non grata.

"They will say, 'Well, you know we can't do that, it's not possible, please, don't put us in this situation. You can't invite so and so' — whether it be Kasparov or Kasyanov or someone else," Mr. Pozner said.

He added: "The thing that nobody wants to talk about is that we do not have freedom of the press when it comes to the television networks."

Vladimir R. Solovyov, another political talk show host, said Mr. Pozner was complaining only because his ratings were down and he was looking for someone to blame if his program was canceled. Mr. Solovyov, a vocal supporter of Mr. Putin, said he had never been bullied by the Kremlin.

Yet last year, his show, "Throw Down the Gauntlet," regularly featured members of opposition parties. This year, the only politicians to appear have been leaders of Mr. Putin's party, United Russia, and an allied party.

Asked why he had not invited opposition leaders lately, Mr. Solovyov said: "No one supports them. They have nothing to say."

Vladimir A. Ryzhkov, a liberal and former member of Parliament who used to appear on the show, said Mr. Solovyov was covering up for the Kremlin.

"He lies, of course," Mr. Ryzhkov said. "My programs with him were among the highest rated programs of any in the history of his show."

Mr. Ryzhkov said he was usually allowed to appear in lengthy segments on only one major channel: Russia Today, the English-language news station, which the Kremlin established to spread its viewpoint globally.

"I can go on Russia Today only because they want to make it seem that in Russia, there is freedom of the press," he said.

After the Soviet Union's fall, several national and regional networks arose that were owned by oligarchs. Though they operated with relatively few restrictions, their owners often used them to settle personal and

business scores. One network, NTV, garnered attention for its investigative reporting and war dispatches from Chechnya.

Mr. Putin chafed at negative coverage of the government, and the Kremlin effectively took over the major national networks in his first term, including NTV. Vladimir Gusinsky, NTV's owner, was briefly arrested and then fled the country after giving up the network. From that point on, executives and journalists at Russian networks clearly understood that they would be punished for resisting the Kremlin.

All the major national and regional networks are now owned by the government or its allies. And since the presidential election in March, neither Mr. Putin nor Mr. Medvedev has indicated any interest in loosening the reins.

"Our television is very often criticized," Mr. Medvedev said in April. "They say it is boring, it is pro-government, it is too oriented towards the positions of state agencies, of those in power. You know, I can say that our television — in terms of quality, in terms of the technology used — is, I believe, one of the best in the world."

Valery Y. Komissarov, a former host on a state channel who is now a governing party leader in Parliament, said television coverage was a convenient scapegoat for opposition politicians and antagonistic commentators.

"These are people who are not interesting for society, who are not interesting for journalists," Mr. Komissarov said. "But they want publicity and perhaps they want to explain away their lack of creative and political success by the fact that they are persecuted, that they are included on the so-called stop list."

While the Kremlin has focused on TV because it has by far the largest audience, many radio stations and newspapers also abide by the stop list, either ignoring or belittling the opposition.

There are exceptions: a few national and regional newspapers regularly publish critical news and commentary about Mr. Putin and comments from those on the stop list. In addition, the Internet is not censored, and contains plenty of criticism of the government.

A small national network, Ren TV, pushes the boundaries, as does a national radio station, the Echo of Moscow, which has become the voice of the opposition even though Gazprom, the government gas monopoly, owns a majority stake in it.

The Kremlin seems to tolerate criticism in such outlets because they have a limited reach compared with the major television networks. The nightly news on Channel One, for example, is far more popular than any of its counterparts in the United States. It regularly is one of top 10 most-watched programs in Russia.

Mr. Delyagin, the political analyst edited out of the talk show last fall, said he was surprised to have been invited in the first place. He said he last appeared on a major network several years ago, before he began attacking the Kremlin and supporting the opposition.

"I thought that maybe she forgot to look at the stop list," he said, referring to the program's host, Kira A. Proshutinskaya.

(Last week, after a Russian-language version of this article was posted on a blog run by the Moscow bureau of The New York Times, Mr. Delyagin was invited to appear on a show on NTV.)

Ms. Proshutinskaya's program, "The People Want to Know," had been censored before.

Mr. Ryzhkov, the liberal former member of Parliament, went on the show last year, but its network, TV Center, refused to broadcast it.

In an interview, Ms. Proshutinskaya conceded that Mr. Delyagin had been digitally erased from the program. She said she had been embarrassed by the incident, as well as the one with Mr. Ryzhkov, explaining that the

network was responsible. The Kremlin had so intimidated the networks, she said, that self-censorship was rampant.

"I would be lying if I said that it is easy to work these days," she said. "The leadership of the channels, because of their great fear of losing their jobs — they are very lucrative positions — they overdo everything."

The management of her network would not comment. But the network's news director, Mikhail A. Ponomaryov, said journalists and hosts of talk shows had no choice but to comply with the rules.

"It would be stupid to say that we can do whatever we want," he said. "If the owner of the company thinks that we should not show a person, as much as I want to, I cannot do it."

#2

Russia-Israel visa-free travel deal to enter force late summer Ria Novosti, June 4, 2008

An agreement on mutual visa-free travel between Russia and Israel signed in late March could come into force in late summer or early fall, Russia's ambassador to Israel said on Wednesday.

"We hope the agreement on visa-free travel will become effective late this summer or in early fall," Pyotr Stegny told a Russian-Israeli business forum in the Jewish capital. "I am positive this would be a powerful impetus to the development of business ties between our countries."

The agreement, signed on March 20, will come into force 90 days after all procedures have been finalized. Russia has completed all the formalities, but the document needs to be ratified by Israel's parliament.

Israeli media earlier reported that Tel Aviv, which is keen to increase tourism from Russia, could unilaterally cancel visas for Russians after the deal has been ratified without waiting for the end of the three-month period.

More than 100,000 Russian tourists visited Israel last year, which is third place after the United States and France.

Observers said visa-free travel between the two countries would be both economically beneficial and historically natural. Immigrants from Russia and other former Soviet republics account for over 1 million of Israel's 7 million citizens, meaning that visits to friends and relatives are likely to rise dramatically.

#3

Vandals attack Russian synagogue JTA Brief, June 3, 2008

Investigators found a Molotov cocktail below the charred second-floor window of a Russian synagogue.

Vandals threw the bottle, but failed to break the synagogue window on Sunday night in Dzerzhinsk, a suburb of Nizhny Novgorod in Russia. Only the window frame was burnt, according to a report from the regional Ministry of Emergency Situations.

"At the scene of the fire, a bottle was found full of flammable liquid," the ministry said, Itar-Tass reported.

The synagogue is on the second floor of a four-story building in a residential area.

There were no injuries. Police are investigating the incident.

#4

Suspended sentence for Russian cult leader JTA Brief, June 5, 2008

A Russian court handed down a suspended prison sentence to the leader of an anti-Semitic cult.

The leader of Toward God's Kingdom was found guilty of forming an extremist group and inciting ethnic hatred in the Astrakhan district near Russia's southern border with Georgia, according to a report from the SOVA Information-Analytical Center. He was given a two-year suspended prison sentence.

Prosecutors accused Sergei Pospelov and three others -- a doctor, an engineer and a teacher at an aviation institute who are being tried separately -- of forming a group that collected anti-Semitic and extremist literature, the Regnum news agency reported.

The cult then sought to disseminate that literature through their workplaces, passing it on to students and co-workers, according to Regnum.

Prosecutors charged that the cult began in 2002.

Pospelov arranged for the rental of space for the group to meet. He also provided literature to its members that advocated genocide, deportation and other acts against Jews.

#5

Putin Maintains Presidential Air in Paris Trip

By STEVEN ERLANGER

The New York Times, May 31, 2008

It is Vladimir V. Putin's first trip abroad as Russia's prime minister, but he might as well still be its president.

To be sure, Mr. Putin met here with his official counterpart, the French prime minister, François Fillon. But he dined on Thursday with the head of state, President Nicolas Sarkozy, and on Friday he met former President Jacques Chirac, who praised him profusely.

In general Mr. Putin spoke for Russia as if he still ran it, which most analysts say they believe he still does.

With Mr. Sarkozy, Mr. Putin discussed "a wide range of bilateral issues," according to Mr. Putin's press secretary, Dmitry Peskov, especially in the light of "France's forthcoming presidency of the European Union," beginning July 1. In addition, Mr. Peskov said, the two discussed "possible military cooperation" and "exchanged their views on relations between Russia and the European Union in general."

Mr. Sarkozy's office said that the two men had a working dinner, and that Mr. Sarkozy telephoned Mr. Putin's handpicked successor as president, Dmitri A. Medvedev, and that he looked forward to meeting Mr. Medvedev in July at the Group of 8 summit in Japan. Mr. Medvedev recently made his first trip abroad as president to China.

On Friday, Mr. Putin smiled benignly as Mr. Chirac expressed his "very deep friendship" for him and said, "My esteem comes from the remarkable manner in which you governed Russia."

He grouped the time Mr. Putin was prime minister under Boris Yeltsin with his two presidential terms, saying, "These 10 years have been, unquestionably, great years for Russia."

Mr. Putin, prime minister again, certainly did not disagree.

#6

Iran not seeking to build nuclear weapons: Putin

AFP, May 31, 2008

Iran is not trying to acquire nuclear weapons but Tehran should avoid "irritating" its neighbours, Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin said Saturday in an interview with French newspaper Le Monde.

Putin, who was in Paris for two days of meetings with President Nicolas Sarkozy and other French leaders, said there was no indication Iran was building its own nuclear arsenal.

But he admitted that Iran's compliance with investigations by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) was still a "point to be resolved."

Asked if Iran was trying to acquire nuclear weapons, Putin replied: "I don't believe so. Nothing indicates it."

"The Iranians are a proud people," he went on. "They want to enjoy their independence and exercise their legitimate right to civil nuclear power.

"I am serious. On a legal level, Iran has infringed nothing at the moment. They have the same right to enrichment (of uranium). The paperwork says so. Iran is accused of not displaying all its programmes to the IAEA. This point remains to be resolved...."

Putin stressed that Russia was opposed to Iran achieving a nuclear-power status.

"That is our principled position," he said. "Using nuclear weapons in a region as small as the Middle East would be synonymous with suicide. Whose interests would it serve? The Palestinians? Hardly, the Palestinians would cease to exist...."

Iran is accused by Western powers, including the US and France, of seeking to possess nuclear weapons under the cover of a civil nuclear energy programme.

Earlier this week, the IAEA expressed "serious concern" that Iran is still hiding information about alleged studies into making nuclear warheads and defying UN demands to suspend uranium enrichment.

Putin underlined that he had repeatedly told the Tehran government that it "doesn't find itself in an antiseptic zone, but in a volatile region."

"We ask them to take that into account, and not irritate their neighbours or the international community, and prove they have no ulterior motives."

Tehran is already the subject of three United Nations Security Council resolutions imposing sanctions aimed at suspending its uranium enrichment programme and cooperating fully with the IAEA.

Moscow has recently called on the major powers involved in negotiations with Iran to give Tehran "guarantees" about its own security.

Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad is expected in Italy next week for a three-day UN Food and Agriculture (FAO) conference.

That has prompted the Israeli Ambassador in Rome, Gideon Meir, to call the Iranian regime "one of the worst in the world," in an interview with the Italian newspaper La Repubblica Saturday.

"We are facing one of the worst regimes currently in power in the world," Meir said. "I want to make one thing clear: no-one is referring to the Iranian people, but to their regime.

"To see an international organisation like the FAO invite and welcome a leader like Ahmadinejad, who has clearly and strongly declared that Israel must be destroyed, that a state which is a member of the United Nations must be destroyed, is a great sadness to me," he added.

#7

Putin backs Abkhazia autonomy, Russian troops sent

By Gleb Bryanski

Reuters, May 31, 2008

Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin said he approved of a plan to give Georgia's breakaway region of Abkhazia autonomy but not full independence.

But Georgia accused Moscow of trying to annex the impoverished Black Sea region after Russia sent unarmed troops on Saturday to rebuild a railway in Abkhazia.

Russia called the deployment "humanitarian aid". Georgia said on Friday it had stopped spy plane flights over Abkhazia to quell Western fears that tensions between Tbilisi and Moscow could degenerate into war.

Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili has offered Abkhazia, which broke away in a war in the 1990s, a package that would return it to Georgian control but give it autonomy, the post of vice-president, free trade zones, and seats in parliament.

"I very much hope that the plan that Saakashvili proposed will gradually be introduced because overall it is the right plan," Putin said in an interview with France's Le Monde newspaper, given on a visit to Paris and attended by Reuters.

"It just needs the other side to agree to it. You need to conduct a dialogue," he said.

Putin's apparent support was surprising because Moscow backs the separatists. However, his condition that Abkhazia must agree to the plan is unlikely to be fulfilled: the separatists rejected the Georgian plan when it was first presented.

Russian state television broadcast footage on Saturday of columns of military trucks arriving in Abkhazia, where most of the population have been issued with Russian passports.

"We have organised for the restoration of (Abkhazia's) roads and infrastructure, and have sent unarmed railway troops to carry this out," Russia's defence ministry said on its Web site www.mil.ru.

It was not clear whether the railway would bring building materials needed for Russia's 2014 Olympics in nearby Sochi, or if the infrastructure would be used to facilitate military equipment. Georgia said the move was illegal.

"This is one more aggressive step by Russia against the territorial integrity of Georgia... Annexation of Abkhazia is under way," Georgia's Deputy Foreign Minister Grigol Vashadze told reporters in the ex-Soviet state's capital Tbilisi.

Putin was Russian president until May when he handed over the job to his protege Dmitry Medvedev. Some diplomats hope the handover could lead to a more conciliatory approach towards Georgia, an aspiring NATO member.

Medvedev is expected to hold talks with Saakashvili in Russia's second city of St Petersburg early next month.

PLAN REJECTED

The row over Abkhazia has pitted Russia against Western states that support Georgia and want to see it join NATO.

Abkhazia's separatists say they will settle for nothing less than full independence from Tbilisi.

Since the start of this year Russia has sent in extra peacekeeping troops to Abkhazia and intensified ties with the separatist administration.

"Nobody needs to deploy railway troops on another country's territory unless a military invasion is being prepared," Vashadze said on Saturday.

"The annexation of Abkhazia is being carried out in all directions - trade, social, economic and legal."

An unmanned Georgian spy drone was shot down over Abkhazia by what a United Nations report said was a Russian fighter plane. Moscow denied involvement.

Russia says its priority is to prevent bloodshed and protect Abkhazia from possible Georgian aggression. Some observers say its real aim is to punish Georgia for its NATO ambitions and seek revenge for Kosovo's split from Serbia, which it opposed.

The conflicts over Abkhazia and a second Georgian rebel territory of South Ossetia fuel instability in a region of strategic importance to the West because it is a transit route for oil and gas from the Caspian Sea.

#8

'We're waiting for the young generation to show us what Russian Jewry is'

By Haviv Rettig,

THE JERUSALEM POST, June 1, 2008

Mikhail Bezeliansky, the Russian Jewish billionaire you've never heard of, wants you to know one thing: Russian Jewry isn't all that bad.

"Russian Jews look terrible in the newspapers - this one investigated by Interpol, that one connected to the Mafia. But Russian Jews are like everyone else. Some are good, some bad," the London-based Russian-Israeli retail tycoon says.

Russian Jewry is misunderstood by the rest of the Jewish world because of the antics of a handful of colorful characters, he explains. Couple this with the language barrier and political organizations' penchant for hogging the spotlight, and it's hard for Israeli, American and European Jews to resist the unflattering stereotypes.

But "Russian Jews are as diverse as Americans," Bezeliansky insists. "Some are in mixed families, some not; some are connected to politics, some not. Outsiders don't see these differences."

Partly to correct these misimpressions, Bezeliansky funded a month's worth of Israeli cultural events in Moscow organized by the Israeli Embassy, including the city's first Russian-language Yad Vashem exhibit, a film festival, an exhibit of 60 original Israeli paintings, and an Idan Raichel concert in a trendy nightclub. The point was to cast Israel in a "normal, modern" light, while showing the rest of world Jewry that "there isn't anything surprising about a Jewish cultural event in Moscow."

This was also the reason the tycoon agreed to sit down with The Jerusalem Post for an interview last week that marks his introduction to the English-speaking Jewish world.

Bezeliansky's biography encapsulates something of the complexity of Russian Jewish identity. He lives in London "for tax reasons and business connections," but displays his Israeli ID card with a proud smile and makes a point of stocking his retail stores with Israeli products. His London home contains a mikve (ritual bath), but he seems completely comfortable as the father of non-Jewish daughters.

An energetic 43-year-old, Bezeliansky's fortune is based on the Mosmart retail store chain, a Russian version of Wal-Mart. He started Mosmart in 2000 after selling his assets in Alfa Group, one of Russia's largest holding companies, which he cofounded. On his own after the move, the businessman (then just 35) suddenly found the time to think about new questions, "about myself." The result was aliya.

His journey to Jewish life did not begin at 35. "My grandmother spoke Yiddish at home, but I thought it was Byelorussian," he recalls.

This ignorance ended abruptly - the memory still lingers - when, at age seven, he noticed his name on a class list with "Jew" written next to it. There were other Jewish children in the class bearing names such as

Chazanoff and Aharonov, "but they were marked 'Russian.' Only I was marked 'Jew.' In those days, the system decided [arbitrarily]. People tried to marry non-Jews to advance their careers, to have a quiet life."

So little Mikhail went home and asked his father what "Jew" meant. "He said, 'Shh... quiet.'"

The father, who discouraged travelling to Israel, "was very far from Judaism." But the discovery stayed with Bezeliensky.

Later in life, his return to Judaism was triggered by a tourist visit to Israel in 1999 that sounds like a hassidic anecdote. "All my friends had already been to Israel," he relates. "I was last." Kept away by business and by stories from his parents that "the climate was bad and life was dangerous," Bezeliensky's 10-day visit was a whirlwind tour of the country - from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem, the Dead Sea to the Sea of Galilee.

Walking down a narrow cobblestone street in Safed, "a Chabad guy called me over and asked me if my mother was Jewish." At the hassid's encouragement, "I lay tefilin for the first time. It was the first time I'd ever seen tefilin."

Now he lays it every day, keeps Shabbat and kashrut, and insists that Israel is the cornerstone of his identity. "Every Jew must be Israeli," he believes, "not politically, just as part of Jewish life." Even his father is now Israeli, having made aliya in 2006.

The conversation turns often to the Jewish state, a topic that is sometimes difficult to discuss with Russian Jews.

Asked why a vociferous Russian Jewish lobby for Israel - of the Western type - does not exist, the avowedly apolitical Bezeliensky explains that "the Russian mentality makes it impossible to understand lobbying for another country while being Russian. You can say to the government, 'Being close to Israel is better for Russia because Israel has hi-tech and so forth,' but they won't understand why you would talk to them about Israel's interests."

The lack of a Jewish political voice in Russia is noted often by world Jewish leaders, and usually seen as a reflection of the growing authoritarianism in Russia, an observation that is quickly becoming self-evident in Western media and politics.

So is Russia a free country? Are Russian politics, the Post asked, open to those opposing the government? Bezeliensky's response, shared by other Russian Jewish leaders in quiet conversations, speaks volumes: "Political opposition has to be based on something going wrong," he says. "If the economy is growing, if national productivity and income per capita are growing, why oppose? The national authorities must be doing a good job."

It is important to note that this sentiment is not merely an excuse offered by a businessman with significant interests in the country. Most Russians questioned, including rabbis and Jewish activists, believe that the government's job is not to offer a safe arena for ideological competition, but to manage a chaotic country effectively, without too much sentiment or strife.

Russian Jewish "oligarchs" such as Bezeliensky remember a time when arrest and even assassination contracts were put on their heads by fellow oligarchs - including Jewish ones, often through bribing the police to do the dirty work. Under Putin, many Russian Jews explain quietly, the rules of the game may not be democratic, but they are known and enforced. "Nobody is hunting the billionaires," Bezeliensky says, "since they are building the economy."

Rather, when the Russian state acts against industry barons such as Mikhail Khodorkovsky, "this isn't persecution against Jews or against businessmen, but against him and his group personally."

Complaining that each Jewish Russian billionaire creates his own umbrella Jewish "congress" - "they will soon make one for tall Jews, for fat Jews, for Yiddish-speaking Jews," he jokes - Bezeliansky believes it is the younger generation of Russian Jews who will create the future.

Though he is a close friend of European Jewish Congress president Moshe Kantor - he was the one who first suggested that Kantor enter Jewish politics - Bezeliansky doesn't like politics. A brief stint as vice president of the Euro-Asian Jewish Congress was not repeated. "Culture and tradition are more important," he insists, and he has turned his philanthropy toward the next stage of the expanding Russian Jewish cultural renaissance.

Now he wants to make sure young Russian Jews will have the help they need to build the institutions and programs of Jewish life. The community needs institutions of Jewish life, he explains, not for political grandstanding, but for welfare and Jewish education. "We have a lot of Jews, but few institutions."

Even so, he says, these institutions must be developed gradually. "Russian Jewish tradition was restarted more or less from zero - from one old synagogue with 20 old Jews." Unlike American Jews, whose "religious development was continuous, natural," in Russia "it was stopped by force, forbidden. Even when Russia gave us freedom, there was no foundation for new Jewish life."

Bezeliansky speaks of "many families I know personally who had some small object that survived hidden during Soviet times. When people find out I'm observant they bring me these objects, like tefilin, and ask me what it is."

In the next 10 years, he believes, the community will attain a kind of critical mass that will make it a self-sustaining cultural world.

"The future is created by Russians. You can come in [from overseas] and open offices, but you won't have programming if locals aren't involved," he insists. Donors from abroad don't understand what's happening in Russia, he adds. As an example, he cites Jewish organizations that are funding food shipments to poor Russian Jews rather than empowering the local community.

"Every country has its poor people," he says, "and we can send food parcels back to them now."

Yet, though "some Russian Jews have come back, Russia is stabilized and Jewish life has restarted, you still can't compare us to the US or UK, because their institutions have existed for a century. It takes a generation or two to establish them."

In the meanwhile, Bezeliansky says, "people my age, who grew up in Soviet times, don't know yet what Russian Jewry is," and are waiting for the young generation to show them.

#9 Holocaust Torahs dedicated in Ukraine JTA Brief, May 30, 2008

Two Holocaust-era Torah scrolls were installed in Ukraine's Golden Rose synagogue.

The Torahs came from Jewish communities in Ukraine and Belarus where the local residents were lost to the Holocaust.

After restoration in Israel they were returned to the Jewish community of Dnepropetrovsk on Tuesday.

"These two Torah scrolls came from Jewish communities that died out in the Holocaust," said rabbi Shmuel Kaminetzky, chief rabbi of Dnepropetrovsk. "This fact is proof as to the rebirth of Jewish life here."

The main sponsors of the restorations are the families of Arkady Golda, Mikhail Katz, Boris Gelman and Mikhail Redkov.

#10

West softens stance on Uzbekistan

By Sabrina Tavernise

International Herald Tribune, May 29, 2008

The theater that burned has a fresh coat of paint. Bullet holes have been plastered over. Newspapers talk of cattle farming, tennis courts and World War II victories.

Three years ago this month, the government in this eastern Uzbek city turned its guns on its own citizens, killing hundreds and drawing condemnation and sanctions from the West for what was the bloodiest repression since Tiananmen Square.

In a Soviet-style sleight of hand, however, the Uzbek government has deleted the event from this city's past, and in recent months has taken some unusual steps: It allowed the International Committee of the Red Cross back into its prisons, released a number of human rights advocates and enacted laws canceling the death penalty and introducing habeas corpus.

This is Uzbekistan, however, a repressive country where laws mean little, rights are relative and torture is endemic, human rights advocates say. They argue that the government's gestures are designed to distract attention from the fact that it never allowed an independent review of the killings in Andijon.

"Saying everything is O.K. in Uzbekistan is like saying it's peaceful in Baghdad," said Vasila Innoyatova, a human rights worker in Tashkent, the capital.

But Western governments say further ostracizing the state by extending sanctions - those imposed by the United States will come up for consideration in June - will cause it to close back up, increasing instability in a region of vital energy transit routes and strategic proximity to the war in Afghanistan.

A newly softened tone has already paid dividends. After Andijon, and harsh criticism from Washington, the country ejected the United States from a military base that was supplying the war effort in Afghanistan. Though there are not yet plans for the base to reopen, the Uzbeks have allowed the Americans limited access to a German base at Termez, and Uzbekistan recently granted NATO the use of its railroad to ship goods to Afghanistan.

That highlights the difficult questions that relations with Uzbekistan raise for U.S. foreign policy: How much influence, if any at all, should the United States try to exercise over another country's behavior? And will that country be receptive, given the abuse, indefinite detentions and closed tribunals that have been part of the United States' record in recent years?

As the gateway to Afghanistan and Iran, and an area where both China and Russia vie for influence, the five Muslim countries of Central Asia have a strategic importance to the United States well out of proportion to their size. Uzbekistan is the region's heart, with its most religious population, and also, at 28 million, its largest.

The killings in Andijon tested that strategic bond with the United States. The government acknowledged 187 deaths, but dealt so viciously with those who gave information about it - a gravedigger who spoke to an Uzbek journalist was stabbed to death shortly after the article's publication, and the journalist fled the country - that the true figure was impossible to establish. Human rights groups put the toll at around 750.

Western nations pressured Tashkent to allow an independent investigation. The European Union imposed a visa ban on officials involved in the crackdown, and the United States resettled a large number of refugees and is considering a visa ban of its own. Yet, three years later, the Uzbeks have not budged. In a five-part report in 2006, it said perpetrators of the uprising - "terrorists" and "bandits" - were responsible for the deaths of the 62 civilians it acknowledged were killed.

A spokesman for the Uzbek Foreign Ministry said there had been no response to a request for comment sent two weeks ago.

So when European and American attitudes toward President Islam Karimov began easing late last year - the European Union partially suspended the visa ban in October, and in January, Admiral William Fallon, the most senior U.S. military commander in the region at that time, visited Tashkent, the first high-level visit in two years - many human rights advocates were bitterly disappointed.

"To be honest, they abandoned us," said one, a former ecologist who fled Uzbekistan in April because he believed a criminal case was being built against him.

Supporters of engagement with the Karimov government argue that punishing the country with sanctions only leads to less leverage over its policies.

"Uzbekistan is simply too important to ignore," said one Western official. "People on the ground want contact with foreigners. They value it. Once you go into isolation mode, you lose the ability to engage with the rest of the population."

Karimov, 70, who has been in power since the Soviet Union collapsed nearly two decades ago, is not known for his democratic instincts, and many analysts are skeptical that any policy would encourage him to open up. He won a third term in a tainted election in December, though Uzbek law allows only two terms. Some say the ruling elite is so paranoid that Karimov has not chosen a successor for fear the president-in-waiting would kill him.

"He is totally fixated on remaining in power," said Paul Quinn Judge, an analyst at the International Crisis Group and a former journalist who has observed Karimov since the 1980s. "He is not the kind of person who would allow things to seriously open up."

Indeed, some Uzbek human rights advocates say that Karimov has increased the pressure on them since the warming with the West began. In December, the authorities arrested a poet, Yusuf Juma, on what human rights advocates and family members say were trumped-up charges, after he and his sons held up hand-lettered signs in a one-family protest against Karimov's candidacy. In April, Juma was sentenced to five years in prison.

In March, the authorities broke up a small group of protesters who had been gathering for weekly demonstrations since last year. The government then seized the offices of the group, Human Rights Movement of Uzbekistan. Two members fled.

"The silence of the West gave a good opening to Karimov to arrest my father," said Alisher Yusufjon Ugli, Juma's son.

Andrea Berg, a Central Asia specialist at Human Rights Watch, said that without the threat of sanctions, "Tashkent has no incentive to improve human rights."

But at a time when the United States is fighting an increasingly complicated war next door in Afghanistan, some analysts argue that realpolitik must prevail.

"It's a really bad set of choices that the U.S. faces," said Martha Brill Olcott, a Central Asia specialist at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace in Washington. "If we didn't have a war in Afghanistan, we might have the luxury to take a moral stance."

Nor is Uzbekistan quite the prison colony it is reputed to be. The overwhelming majority of its citizens are more concerned with making ends meet than with fears that the secret police will knock down their door.

"You can't compare Uzbekistan and North Korea," said a European who has lived in Tashkent for years and was not authorized to speak with the news media. "Not every right is violated all the time. It's not that systematic."

In Tashkent, a glittering city of fountains and clipped lawns, an Uzbek in his 20s, who is expanding his fashionable nightclub in central Tashkent, noted that there are long lines of Uzbeks in banks to apply for credit cards, and that construction is booming. He said he did not read newspapers but believed that Uzbekistan had press freedom because "there are fresh newspapers every day and they seem to be writing something."

But good cocktails are far easier to come by than independent political articles. By the end of 2007, after Andijon and the ensuing crackdown on civil society, a large portion of foreign nongovernmental organizations and news media outlets were forced to stop their work. Innoyatova estimates that about 900 organizations closed. In an Orwellian twist, government-controlled nongovernmental organizations sprang up.

Yet, with the economy outside the capital stagnating, wages below subsistence level and millions of people migrating to Russia and Kazakhstan for work, most Uzbeks do not count freedom of expression among their top concerns.

"None of this will work until there's a critical mass of people who feel they have rights and are ready to protect them," said Innoyatova, an ecologist turned human rights advocate, making the point that, as Soviet citizens, no one had rights.

Even the plight of Juma, the poet, left some residents from his southern town, Karakul, unmoved.

"He had money. Why did he do it?" said one young unemployed man.

Uzbeks have become poorer, less educated and more isolated in the 17 years since the Soviet Union collapsed. At the same time, the most religious parts of society have been brutalized by the regime. It is a combination that has proved poisonous in other countries, including Iraq.

Olcott argues that Uzbek society is much less inclined toward secular values than it was 10 years ago, a shift that could eventually lead to Uzbekistan becoming a religious state.

"There's a lot riding on transition," said Olcott, who has researched the role of religion in Uzbekistan. "I think you're going to get another Islamic state down the road. The question is whether it's going to be tolerant or intolerant."

The Bush administration's counterterrorism practices since 2001 have eroded its moral authority with countries like Uzbekistan, analysts said.

"The U.S. doesn't have the kind of leverage it had," said Sarah Mendelson, a Russia expert at the Center for Strategic and International Studies in Washington. "We've got this elephant in the room."

In Andijon, the policy of forgetting is rigorously enforced. On the anniversary, newspapers ran headlines about sports competitions and the grain harvest. Even those who took part in the uprising seemed to have rehearsed the government line.

"The past is in the past," said one of the participants, who lived in Baltimore as a refugee but returned to Uzbekistan in 2006. "People don't want to remember."

#11

Lithuania signals firm stance in EU-Russia talks

By Nerijus Adomaitis

Reuters, May 30, 2008

Lithuania signalled on Friday it would take a firm stance on talks between the European Union and Russia on forging a new partnership, saying any agreement must be as comprehensive as possible.

Lithuania, whose ties with Moscow are coloured by centuries of Russian domination, lifted its veto on the talks this month only when its concerns over oil supplies, frozen conflicts in Georgia and Moldova and cooperation on crime were considered.

But Foreign Minister Petras Vaitiekunas expressed reservations about a suggestion by Moscow that some issues could be resolved in individual agreements.

"The mandate for talks is concrete and the partnership agreement with Russia has to be concrete as well," he told Reuters in an interview. "I do not think it would be rational to split the negotiation process into separate pieces."

Negotiations on the new Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (PCA) with Russia, which covers energy, trade and political ties, are expected to start in June.

France, which takes over the EU's presidency on July 1, wants a deal with Russia by the end of this year.

A spokesman for Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin has said this is possible -- if the deal is a broad framework and specific issues are regulated by separate agreements.

Vaitiekunas, whose country declared independence from the Soviet Union in 1990 and joined the EU in 2004, said an agreement would be possible by the end of this year if it was of "good enough quality".

"We are interested in the quality of relations with Russia, not in the time frame (of reaching the agreement)," he said.

Most observers say it will take at least 18 months to reach a deal. A senior Lithuanian diplomat told Reuters the talks could last up to five or six years.

One of the main issues Lithuania had wanted taken into account was the closure in 2006 of a pipeline carrying oil from Russia to Lithuania.

Lithuania said Russia shut the pipeline for political reasons but Moscow said it was broken. Vaitiekunas said Lithuania had sent six letters to Russia about the pipeline, but had received no replies.

"We even proposed sending our technicians to repair the pipeline or to buy it, but no answer ... Does this silence mean Russia is punishing us, are they angry at us?" he said.

Asked whether the pipeline would force Lithuania to block a deal, he said it depended on progress in other issues.

Russia also had to put more efforts into solving frozen conflicts in Moldova and Georgia, Vaitiekunas said.

He said the EU should have a more active role in the settlement of the conflict between Georgia and its breakaway region of Abkhazia, which is supported by Moscow, and should send a police mission or peacekeepers.

Georgia has accused Russia of the "creeping annexation" of large chunks of its land after Moscow decided to step up ties with the rebel regions and sent more peacekeepers to Abkhazia.

#12

Moldova: Back In The Kremlin's Shadow

By Valentina Ursu and Brian Whitmore

RFE/RL, May 31, 2008

One way of looking at the recent flurry of diplomatic activity between Russia and Moldova is that Moscow is proposing a straightforward and mutually beneficial deal: You scratch my back and I'll scratch yours. A less benevolent interpretation is that the Kremlin is making Chisinau an offer it can't refuse.

Whichever is correct, the result is the same: Moldova appears poised to move back into Russia's orbit after flirting with the West for the past several years.

In a striking policy shift, Moscow has indicated that it will throw its considerable weight behind resolving the conflict over the breakaway region of Transdniestria in a way that preserves Moldova's territorial integrity. Russia has also indicated that it would be willing to withdraw some 1,500 troops from Transdniestria.

In exchange, the Kremlin is asking Chisinau to forswear any aspirations to join NATO. Russia is also asking Moldova to leave GUAM, an alliance with Georgia, Ukraine, and Azerbaijan designed to counter Moscow's influence in the region.

During a visit to Moscow this week, Moldovan Foreign Minister Andrei Stratan denied that Chisinau was caving in to Russian pressure.

"We are not surrendering," Stratan told RFE/RL's Romania-Moldova Service on May 29. "We want this problem to be solved in Moldova's interests, we want to reestablish justice [in Transdniestria], and we want to reintegrate Moldova's territory and reunite its citizens who live on the left and right banks of the Dniester River. We discussed this subject with our colleagues from Washington, we have discussed it in Brussels, and we have also discussed it with our colleagues in Moscow."

A Different Approach

Since the breakup of the Soviet Union in 1991, Moscow has used so-called frozen conflicts in pro-Moscow enclaves like Transdniestria and in Georgia's Abkhazia and South Ossetia regions to maintain leverage over its former vassals.

In Georgia, which is much firmer in its determination to leave Russia's sphere of influence and join the West, Moscow has used its proxies in these regions to sow instability and frustrate Tbilisi's desire to join NATO.

Analysts say the Kremlin appears to have settled on a different approach when it comes to Moldova.

"As far as Moldova goes, Russia has a choice," says Fyodor Lukyanov, editor in chief of the Moscow-based journal "Russia in Global Affairs." "It can count on a final break between Chisinau and Transdniestria. This would mean acquiring yet another enclave similar to Kaliningrad. It would be unclear what Russia would do with this. Russia doesn't border Transdniestria; it borders Ukraine. Or it can seek an agreement where Moldova could continue its pro-European course, but would not join NATO."

Such a strategy is more likely to work in Moldova, which has been less determined than Georgia to charge head-first into the West's sphere of influence and more open to reaching an accommodation with Moscow.

"Tbilisi doesn't hide its orientation, which is in opposition to Russia. Chisinau [on the other hand] does not aspire to join NATO and is trying to establish better relations with Russia in some way," Lukyanov says.

Diplomatic Flurry

The emerging deal between Russia and Moldova comes after a flurry of diplomatic activity and official visits between the two countries.

Russian Federation Council speaker Sergei Mironov was in Chisinau on May 19-20. On May 22, Moldova's parliament approved a national security strategy that reaffirmed the country's neutral status -- apparently foreclosing any future NATO bid.

President Vladimir Voronin signed the strategy into law on May 26, just before traveling to Brussels for a lackluster meeting with EU officials, where the Moldovan leader was urged to speed up the pace of reforms.

The EU this week also included Moldova -- together with Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Ukraine -- in its newly established Eastern Partnership program. The program provides a forum for discussing such issues as visa, trade, and strategic partnership agreements with Brussels.

More eyes, however, may have been on Foreign Minister Stratan's trip to Moscow this week -- as well as the visit by Aleksei Ostrovsky, chairman of the Russian State Duma's Committee for CIS Affairs, to Chisinau and the Transdniestrian capital, Tiraspol.

Friendly 'Neutrality'

In Chisinau, Ostrovsky praised Chisinau's commitment to "neutrality" and desire for better relations with Moscow.

"I think neutrality benefits Moldova and the Moldovan people," Ostrovsky said. "I am glad that Moldova's leadership, Vladimir Nikolayevich [Voronin] and others, understand that the country's interests lie in being close to Russia and in a partnership with the Russian Federation."

In Tiraspol, Ostrovsky informed Transdniester's de facto president, Igor Smirnov, that Russia was not prepared to recognize the province's independence.

He also stressed that Moscow wanted to Moldova to withdraw from its alliance with Georgia, Ukraine, and Azerbaijan:

"We hope that Moldova will leave GUAM. We also think that Moldova's leadership -- unlike leaders in Georgia and Ukraine -- are acting in the interests of their own people," Ostrovsky said. "A majority of Moldovans are opposed to their country joining the North Atlantic alliance."

#13 GUAM Countries Intend to Obtain Support of 'Serious Players' in UN Discussions on 'Frozen Conflicts' Resolution Trend News Agency, May 30, 2008

The GUAM countries intend to obtain the support of 'serious players' in the UN General Assembly's adoption of a Resolution on 'frozen conflicts' in GUAM countries, the Secretary General of 'Organization for Democracy and Economic Development – GUAM', Valery Chechelashvili, briefed the media in Baku on 30 May.

The project of Resolution on 'frozen conflicts' in 'Organization for Democracy and Economic Development – GUAM' member-countries will be discussed during the next session of the UN General Assembly, which will take place in September in New York.

"This time we intend to obtain support of majority of the UN member-countries, 'serious players', to regulate conflicts in GUAM countries," Chechelashvili said. GUAM Secretary General expressed his hope that this time Georgia, Ukraine, Azerbaijan and Moldova will be able to gain majority of votes during the UN General Assembly's discussions over the Resolution.

According to him, currently the GUAM member-countries are continuing to explain the essence of the Resolution project to the UN member-countries. "Over the past two years, the UN General Assembly's adoption of two resolutions on situation in occupied territories of Azerbaijan and Abkhazia testifies that our position in works gets stronger and more consolidated," Chechelashvili said.

The UN General Assembly supported the resolution developed by the Azerbaijani Government which provides immediate, complete and unconditional withdrawal of the Armenian troops from all occupied territories of

Azerbaijan. Thirty-nine countries voted in support of the resolution, 7 were against and 100 abstained from voting. The OSCE Minsk Group co-chairs voted against the resolution.

The UN resolution, adopted on 14 March, expresses serious concerns that armed conflict in the Nagorno-Karabakh region of Azerbaijan and around it continues posing a threat to international peace and security, and negatively impacts on the humanitarian situation in the South Caucasus countries. The General Assembly calls on the member-countries to respect and support the sovereignty and territorial integrity within the framework of internationally recognized borders. The resolution confirms the inseparable right of population, driven out from the occupied territory of Azerbaijan, for repatriation and underlines the necessity to establish conditions for their repatriation, including comprehensive rehabilitation of areas that suffered as a result of the conflict.

#14

Turkmenistan: NATO Finds New Partner In Central Asia

By Bruce Pannier

RFE/RL, May 30, 2008

NATO has a new and, some might say, unexpected partner in Central Asia -- Turkmenistan.

Just two years ago, the country was a reclusive place that few foreigners were allowed to visit, with UN-recognized status as a "neutral" nation.

The country's strongman leader, Saparmurat Niyazov, used that status as a reason to keep Turkmenistan from participating in any international groupings except those with a purely economic agenda.

Niyazov died in late 2006 and was replaced by Gurbanguly Berdymukhammedov, whose foreign policy is much more dynamic. But reports of NATO cooperation with Turkmenistan is a huge step away from neutrality, especially given how quickly the new relationship has evolved.

Turkmenistan is a former Soviet republic, a current member of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), a desert country rich in natural gas, and still mainly dependent on Russian-owned pipelines to export that gas. But Turkmenistan also shares a lengthy border with Afghanistan, which is where NATO comes in.

Turkmenistan was the first of the five Central Asian states to join NATO's Partnership for Peace program (in 1994), but under Niyazov it was a partnership in name only. Which is why it was a surprise when President Berdymukhammedov announced he would attend the NATO summit in Romania in early April.

Several high-ranking NATO, U.S., and EU officials have been making trips to Turkmenistan for more than half a year now, but most reports pointed to talks focusing on potential Turkmen natural-gas exports to Europe.

It is apparent now that energy exports were not the only topic of discussions.

The German magazine "Der Spiegel" this month printed a report about NATO planes landing at military air bases in Turkmenistan. Michael Laubsch, an expert on Central Asia and the head of the Bonn-based Eurasian Transition Group (ETG), concurs with the report.

He says the article "was based on our recent reports" and "we fully confirm this information. Starting with May 15, our correspondents and informants in Turkmenistan reported that the transport flights between Western Europe and Afghanistan via Turkmenistan increased by 20 percent. So [NATO] already started to focus more on the air bases in Turkmenistan to make transport flights from the West to Afghanistan via Turkmenistan. I think this is the first practical solution regarding the negotiations which took place between the Turkmen government and NATO."

Reaching Out To The West

In hindsight, there was a clue something new was happening when Berdymukhammedov went to Bucharest for the NATO summit, the first such visit by a Turkmen president. Farhat Ilyasov, an independent expert in

Moscow, tells RFE/RL's Turkmen Service that a one-on-one meeting that Berdymukhammedov had with U.S. President George W. Bush indicated Turkmenistan's relationship with the West was shifting.

"The active contact of Berdymukhammedov with the West, in particular with American officials, and the fact that at the last NATO summit, which Berdymukhammedov attended, and at which only Berdymukhammedov had a personal meeting with President Bush, such things do not happen accidentally in big politics," Ilyasov says.

"Who is Berdymukhammedov and who is Bush, that [Bush] would give him a personal meeting," he adds. "This indicates that by that time many questions were already worked out and it's highly probable that serious progress on the part of the U.S. and NATO had already been made."

The Bucharest summit paved the way for NATO to use land routes from Europe to Afghanistan through the CIS, and Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and Kazakhstan are all part of NATO's Euro-Afghan delivery corridor for nonlethal cargo. Still, the landing of military planes in Turkmenistan was again more than Turkmen or NATO officials had revealed publicly.

The ETG's Laubsch tells RFE/RL's Turkmen Service that this might just be the start of military cooperation between Brussels and Ashgabat. "I think the negotiations between the Turkmen government and NATO were finalized already and I think that we can expect in the nearest future that more NATO forces will be located in Turkmenistan, definitely," he says.

Allowing NATO the use of military air bases is already a bold move for Turkmenistan, which risks the wrath of Russia and southern neighbor Iran in forging closer ties with the Western alliance.

There is also the question of Turkmenistan's official status as a neutral country. Turkmenistan has always refused to participate in military alliances because of this special status.

Ilyasov says the Turkmen government and NATO might simply use special phrasing to preserve Turkmenistan's neutrality.

"Turkmenistan's status as a neutral nation is a big question but it does not obligate [Turkmenistan] to anyone or anything, it is not legally binding," he says. "For example, if a [military] base is established there, one can find a justification for it -- it's for peacekeeping, it helps stability in the region or the development of peace in the world, it helps the long-suffering Afghan people. There is no problem, everything can be explained."

But Laubsch says it is also possible that the new Turkmen president "will shift away from this neutral status of Turkmenistan because he wants to expect something from the West and therefore I think he will give any signs and signals to the Western countries -- especially to the EU, to the United States, but also to NATO -- that his government is a reliable partner also for the West and I think this also includes any plans for a military presence in Turkmenistan."

Pressure To Improve Rights Record

One major obstacle to this new Turkmen-NATO relationship is Turkmenistan's extremely poor human rights record.

Berdymukhammedov has been much slower to implement domestic reforms than he has been at changing foreign policy. He has restored some of the rights Niyazov took away, but the new Turkmen president has stopped short of introducing any real democratic reforms.

Western rights organizations have been pressing the Turkmen government to make democratic changes and, with Western troops using Turkmen military facilities, rights groups can be expected to call on NATO to pressure Turkmenistan on the issue.

But Laubsch says that the EU is already prepared to subordinate rights issues in favor of important geostrategic interests.

"I don't know how intense the pressure from NATO regarding changes and reforms in the sphere of human rights and democracy in Turkmenistan will [continue]," he says. "From the political aspect, I know that the European Union is now not focusing mainly on democratic reforms and transitions regarding human rights issues in Turkmenistan. So this will be one main factor for future relations between the EU and Turkmenistan. They focus on economic issues. I just had a meeting with [EU special representative for Central Asia] Pierre Morel and he definitely said this."

Rights activists are hoping that in moving away from its reclusive ways the Turkmen government will also pay greater attention to improving human rights -- and that perhaps Western organizations can use the new engagement with Ashgabat to bring about such changes.

#15

Kyrgyzstan interested in Russia's naval presence-chief of staff Ria Novosti, May 30, 2008

Kyrgyzstan is interested in the continued presence of Russian naval forces on its territory, the country's top military official said on Friday.

Maj. Gen. Boris Yugai, chief of the General Staff of the Kyrgyz Armed Forces, met with Adm. Vladimir Vysotsky, commander of the Russian Navy, who is currently on a visit to Kyrgyzstan to discuss the expansion of military-technical cooperation and strengthening of regional security with Kyrgyz top military officials.

"No one would benefit from a scaling down of military-technical cooperation between Russian and Kyrgyz defense agencies," Gen. Yugai said, adding that his country is interested in the "further development of Russia and its Armed Forces."

Adm. Vysotsky said the Russian Navy has \$4 million worth of contracts with Kyrgyz enterprises for the production of torpedoes, equipment, and components, but not ammunition.

He visited Thursday a naval research facility Russia rents on a lake in Kyrgyzstan.

The testing site near the city of Karakol, 380 km (240 miles) from the capital Bishkek, was set up during the Soviet era and is still used to test advanced torpedo propulsion and guidance systems for the Russian Navy.

It has reportedly provided both a test bed and production facilities for one of Russia's most advanced naval weapon systems, the super-cavitating 220 mph Squall or Shkval rocket-propelled torpedo, with a range of six nautical miles, designed to destroy large surface ships such as aircraft carriers.

Russia currently pays \$4.5 million annually to use these military installations.

On March 18, the Kyrgyz parliamentary committee for security approved a resolution on the ratification of protocols between Kyrgyzstan and Russia on the use of Russian military facilities in the country and the status of Russian service personnel in the Republic of Kyrgyzstan.

The agreement, concluded by Kyrgyzstan and Russia in 1997, allows the Russian military to use Kyrgyz territory for the next 15 years.

Russia currently has 41 intergovernmental agreements with Kyrgyzstan on security cooperation. Both countries are members of the two major regional security blocs in Central Asia - the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO).

#16

Catholic students restore Belarus cemetery

JTA Brief, June 3, 2008

A group from an American Catholic college restored a Jewish cemetery in a Belarusian village.

Fifteen students and four professors from the Franciscan Siena College in Albany, N.Y., found and erected 120 toppled gravestones at the Rubiazhevichi cemetery in three days. They also rebuilt the entrance to the cemetery with the help of local residents.

Those who worked on the reconstruction say the cemetery still needs much work. About 400 Jews from the local ghetto who perished during the Holocaust are buried there, according to Radio Liberty.

The American volunteers, all non-Jews, paid their own way to Belarus. The Voluntas international fund and American nongovernmental institutions sponsored the restoration.

U.S. charge d'affaires Jonathan Moore visited the site of the reconstruction and told JTA it offered an outstanding example of private cooperation between Belarus and the United States.

#17

Belarus helping to restore cemeteries

By Grant Slater

JTA, June 3, 2008

A smattering of the 7,500 residents of this village where Jews once lived huddle under their umbrellas as the rain falls.

They peer over their shoulders to catch a glimpse of Aaron Ginsburg, who traces his ancestors here, reciting a speech through tears.

"Dokshitsers made new lives in the United States, Canada, South Africa, Australia and what would become Israel," Ginsburg tells the crowd as a camera from Belarusian state television focuses on him. "Few came back. Those who did found all they had loved gone. We are their children and grandchildren."

Behind Ginsburg stand 170 gravestones etched with faded Hebrew inscriptions, the most recent reincarnation in a patchwork effort by local authorities, local Jewish communities and returning descendants to restore Jewish cemeteries across Belarus.

Ginsburg, a pharmacist and amateur genealogist from Sharon, Mass., played a vital role in the Dokshitsy project that is being marked on this May day.

Few, if any, Jews remain in Dokshitsy. Some 2,800 were rounded up and shot during World War II in a field across from where the cemetery stands. More than 800,000 Jews were slaughtered in Belarus during the Holocaust.

Now the Belarusian government -- often referred to as the last dictatorship in Europe -- appears to be taking a new direction to honor the victims.

The country maintains "troubling" ties with Iran that bear little benefit in economic or political spheres, says Jonathan Moore, who currently heads the U.S. Embassy in Minsk after the ambassador was forced to leave the country earlier this year in a diplomatic tit-for-tat.

Last October, President Alexander Lukashenko made anti-Semitic comments during a radio broadcast. But a month later, Lukashenko met with Lev Leviev, the diamond magnate and ardent financial supporter of the Chabad-Lubavitch movement in the former Soviet Union.

Since the sit-down, local officials -- with Jewish community leaders -- have taken some initiative in restoring several Jewish cemeteries that were threatened by construction, including Dokshitsy, according to American Jews interested in reconstructing hundreds of cemeteries across Belarus.

In Gomel, a city of 500,000 in southern Belarus, construction workers stumbled across hundreds of Jewish remains during a stadium expansion earlier this year. Moore said city officials consulted with Jewish leaders and recruited local Jewish students to relocate the remains in a "sign of wanting to do the right thing."

"The bar of expectations of the local community is low," Moore said.

Olga Baskina, a physician and member of Hillel Minsk, says the youth group has started making summer trips to clean up cemeteries. They have cleaned up eight in recent years, she said.

Ginsburg has spent the better part of a decade tracing his family back to Dokshitsy, a two-hour drive north of the capital Minsk.

Touring the village, it is easy to imagine rows of shtetl houses lining muddy roads in the early 20th century before the Nazis purged the town. Ginsburg says many of the Jews already had left by then for the United States or what would later become Israel. Hundreds of others met their tragic fate in the field.

The monument on the spot where the 2,800 were murdered memorializes the "victims of fascism" but does not mention the Jewish background of the victims.

The Jewish cemetery was demolished in 1965, a time of religious repression across the Soviet Union. Tombstones were removed or buried, and the park lay fallow for 40 years.

Upon unearthing the gravestones, town officials decided to preserve the cemetery and sought someone to help. In February 2006, Ginsburg received a letter from city officials saying the town wanted to right a wrong against the Jewish citizens of Dokshitsy.

Ginsburg created the non-profit Friends of Jewish Dokshitsy and raised more than \$28,000 to help fund the cemetery's reconstruction.

What had been a field of gravestones buried or strewn about is now a fenced-off area with more than 100 gravestones standing upright and a marble monument with inscriptions in Hebrew and Belarusian.

A smooth stone pathway leads from the road to the cemetery gate. All of it was built by the Dokshitsy city government.

For the trip, Ginsburg united 14 people with ancestors from Dokshitsy and brought them to the cemetery, where they recited the Mourners' Kaddish. The descendants came from South Africa, Israel, Russia and the United States.

The grandfather of Mark Izeman, an American lawyer who is currently based in Moscow for the Natural Resources Defense Council, was born in the Belarusian village.

As Izeman spoke to local residents in a City Hall ceremony and at a school assembly, he showed a portrait of his grandfather as his hand rested on the head of his young son.

"I wondered why they did all this," Izeman told JTA. "Is it guilt? But after being here, I think they are happy to help close the circle."

Town officials at receptions and official introductions for the 14 visitors tied the plight of Dokshitsy's Jews to a staple of Belarusian national pride -- the remembrance of World War II.

"The fate of the Belarusian people and of the Jewish people are one," said Oleg Pinchuk, the chairman of the Dokshitsy region. "We have gone through similar tragedies."

That spirit of shared struggle is a far cry from when Michael Lozman of Albany, N.Y., led his first group of American college students to Belarus for a cemetery restoration project in 2002. The group was detained by the KGB and questioned about their activities before being released.

Last week, Lozman led his latest group of 20 students and professors from Siena College in Albany, N.Y., to a picturesque hillside on the outskirts of Rubyazhevich, a village about 45 minutes southwest of Minsk.

The group from the Franciscan Catholic school unearthed some 300 gravestones and cut through more than 50 years of overgrowth.

Lozman, an orthodontist with fingers rough and worn from seven years of reviving cemeteries across Belarus, shook his head as he looked across the stones, each of which had been marred by a number scrawled in white paint by an earlier cemetery restoration effort.

"There's a difference between doing it and doing it well," he told JTA.

For eight hours, the Siena group and local children hacked away at the overgrowth and tugged at gravestones weighing hundreds of pounds.

They transformed one cemetery; over the hill were another 100 stones to dig up.

"Every time I complete a cemetery, I take some joy," Lozman said. "But mostly I think about the fact that there are hundreds more out their waiting."

#18

United States Cites Moldova for Failure to Stop Human Trafficking

By John Schaffer

U.S. Department of State, June 5, 2008

The Moldovan government has failed to protect its citizens from being exploited as sex slaves and forced laborers in other countries, according to the U.S. Department of State.

In its 2008 Trafficking in Persons Report (TIPS) issued June 4, the department reported that some 750,000 Moldovans working abroad are trafficking victims. Most of these victims are trafficked to western and eastern Europe.

The report, which aims to raise awareness about modern-day slavery, evaluates the efforts of 170 countries to combat slavery. It places countries in tiers based on the U.S. government's assessment of their actions to eliminate trafficking. Tier 3 countries are the worst offenders, followed by "Tier 2 watch list" countries that are in danger of falling into the Tier 3 category, and Tier 2 countries where trafficking remains a problem. (See "Reducing Demand Is Key To Curbing Human Trafficking, U.S. Says (<http://www.america.gov/st/hr-english/2008/June/20080604163846ajesrom0.3565332.html>).")

Moldova is listed as a Tier 3 country in the 2008 report, along with Algeria, Burma, Cuba, Fiji, Iran, Kuwait, North Korea, Oman, Papua New Guinea, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Sudan and Syria.

Among the Tier 2 "watch list" countries are Armenia, Azerbaijan, Montenegro, Russia, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. Another 12 European countries are in the Tier 2 group.

Moldova fell to Tier 3 for the first time, reflecting its government's failure to tackle adequately the handling of several high-profile cases of complicity by government officials in trafficking, the report says.

"This failure created a significant impediment to the government's ability to fight trafficking overall," Ambassador Mark Lagon, the director of the State Department's Office to Monitor and Combat Trafficking in Persons, told reporters June 4 following release of the report. "Now, we're hopeful that the newly appointed government in Moldova will take significant steps to address complicity by government officials and, furthermore, to improve law enforcement and victim protection efforts. We'll be engaging with them for that."

The TIPS report said Moldova remains "a major source, and to a lesser extent a transit country, for women and girls trafficked for the purpose of commercial sexual exploitation."

It said the trafficking situation in the breakaway region of Transnistria in eastern Moldova is particularly problematic, as it remains outside of central government control.

The department said some modest progress seen in a new program to help trafficking victims was more than offset by the government's failure to follow up on allegations, prosecute or criminally punish any government official complicit in trafficking persons.

It further said that even though the Moldovan government claimed it encouraged victims to assist in the investigation and prosecution of traffickers, little was done to provide for victims' safety. The report said the government has avoided its responsibility to nongovernmental and international organizations to make the public aware of the dangers of trafficking.

EASTERN EUROPE AND THE RUSSIAN FAR EAST

Moldova was just one of the many eastern European countries cited for failure to address trafficking. The department said the Russian Far East is a major source of men and women trafficked to China, Japan, the Middle East and South Korea for forced labor, particularly in the agricultural and fishing industries, as well as for sexual exploitation.

It highlighted the Russian cities of Moscow and St. Petersburg as destination centers for children trafficked from within Russia and from Ukraine and Moldova for sexual purposes. It also said Belarusian men are being exploited for forced labor in the construction, textile and food industries.

"The ILO [International Labor Organization] reported that an estimated one million illegal migrant workers may be victims of labor trafficking in Russia. Moscow remains a transit point for women trafficked from Uzbekistan and Armenia to the United Arab Emirates for purposes of sexual exploitation," the State Department said.

The department said that despite some progress in Armenia's anti-trafficking law enforcement, the country remains a primary source for women trafficked to the United Arab Emirates and Turkey for sexual exploitation, and for women and men trafficked to Turkey and Russia for forced labor.

In Azerbaijan, like Moldova, the government failed to address alleged involvement of government officials in trafficking, according to the report. Victims often were treated as criminals in courtrooms and the number of law enforcement efforts fell in 2007.

The report said Azerbaijan serves as a transit country for victims from Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan and Moldova trafficked to Turkey and the United Arab Emirates and that the Azerbaijani exclave of Nakhchivan serves as a transit point for women trafficked to Turkey.