

WASHINGTON, D.C. October 3, 2008

TO: NCSJ Leadership and Interested Parties

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



In Brief

Dear Friend,

On Sunday, Belarusians went to the polls to elect a new parliament. Some in both Belarus and the West thought that this election might be more open and fair, and the opposition hoped to gain some representation in the national legislature. But, believe it or not, President Lukashenka's party won every seat in the election. They made a clean sweep, leaving most observers and activists shaking their heads. One positive note is that the opposition parties organized a post-election protest without government interference. We have included several stories about the Belarus election highlighting how the government missed opportunities to run a better election.

Another important election that has received too little attention in the U.S. and elsewhere is the presidential campaign in Azerbaijan. President Ilham Aliyev is running for a second term and is expected to win. Azerbaijan is a close U.S. ally and plays a pivotal role in regional and global energy issues. The government also strongly supports the Azeri Jewish community and is an increasingly important friend to Israel.

In Russia, former Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev and well-known businessman Alexander Lebedev announced the formation of a new political party, to develop and promote a platform that diverges from the current government. I'm interested to see what message they can fashion that appeals to Russia's electorate, which overwhelmingly continues to support the Medvedev-Putin team. Mr. Gorbachev is still viewed by many older Russians as being responsible for the problems of the 1990s and Mr. Lebedev is an oligarch who has benefited from close Kremlin ties.

The week's update continues to include stories on the aftermath of the Georgia conflict, which remains a major source of tension between Russia and the United States and our European allies. While neither side is yielding on how best to resolve the Georgian issue, there is some willingness to move forward on other issues like non-proliferation and Iran. It remains to be seen if anything can be accomplished with Russia before the U.S. presidential election.

Finally, Harry Hurwitz died in Israel this week. A well-known, sometimes-controversial but always entertaining personality, he played a role in the Soviet Jewry movement as one of Menachem Begin's closest aides. Please see his obituary in the update for details about his life.

On behalf of NCSJ, I want to wish everyone an easy fast.

Regards,

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. October 3, 2008

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

1. *Kosher market opens in Kiev; Nachman gravesite dispute settled; Medvedev wishes Jews Happy New Year; Putin accuses Ukraine of aiding Georgia*
Briefs, September 28- October 2, 2008
2. *Ukraine city building toward prominence*
By Grant Slater
JTA, September 25, 2008
3. *Russia in Moldova: A Counter-Example to Ukraine and Georgia?*
By Vladimir Socor
Eurasia Daily Monitor, September 26, 2008
4. *Parliamentary elections in Belarus fell short of OSCE commitments*
Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights, September 29, 2008
5. *Belarus Pressures EU For Closer Ties*
By David Maples
Eurasia Daily Monitor, October 2, 2008
6. *Belarus: Parliamentary Elections*
Press Statement by Sean McCormack
U.S. Department of State, September 29, 2008
7. *Dictator at Bay*
Economist, October 2, 2008
8. *Israel's Olmert to visit Russia next week*
AFP, September 28, 2008
9. *Excerpt from the first Presidential debate [re Russia]*
CNN transcript, September 26, 2008
10. *Ukraine-Russia tensions rise in Crimea*
Los Angeles Times, September 28, 2008
11. *Russia woos Georgian territory with jobs, tourists*
By Shaun Walker
Christian Science Monitor, September 29, 2008
12. *Bush Warns Moscow Against 'Bullying' Neighbors*
By Olivier Knox
AFP, September 29, 2008

13. *Russia says U.S. blocking nuclear arms reduction talks*
By Louis Charbonneau
Reuters, September 29, 2008
14. *Suleymanov: A view on America's diverse elections*
By Elin Suleymanov
Rocky Mountain News, September 28, 2008
15. *Russia proposes steps for Georgian 'demilitarization' - minister*
ITAR-TASS, September 30, 2008
16. *Gorbachev to form political party in Russia*
By Steve Gutterman
AP, September 30, 2008
17. *EU Monitors Take Up Positions in Georgia After War With Russia*
By Helena Bedwell
Bloomberg, September 30, 2008
18. *Babi Yar massacre remembered at Kiev monument*
European Jewish Press, September 30, 2008
19. *Is Yushchenko's Ukraine Ready for a NATO MAP?*
By Pavel Korduban
Eurasia Daily Monitor, October 1, 2008
20. *Anti-Extremism Agency Proposed*
By Natalya Krainova
Moscow Times, October 1, 2008
21. *Medvedev: No grounds for Cold War with US*
By Irina Titova
AP, October 1, 2008
22. *EU says Georgia's S. Ossetia likely closed to monitors*
By Matt Robinson
Reuters, October 2, 2008
23. *Key question lingers: Who started the war in Georgia?*
By Fred Weir and Olga Podolskaya
Christian Science Monitor, October 2, 2008
24. *Russia: Religious freedom survey [excerpt]*
By Geraldine Fagan
Forum 18, October 1, 2008
25. *Congress Joins Fight on "Durban II"*
NGO Monitor, October 2, 2008
26. *Netzer Hosts Well Over a Thousand at Annual FSU Summer Camps*
World Union for Progressive Judaism, October 2, 2008
27. *Russian march again*
Moscow Bureau for Human Rights, October 2, 2008

28. *Liberals Must Come to Grips With New Russia*

By Boris Kapustin

Moscow Times, October 2, 2008

29. *Russian-Israelis explore their Jewishness*

By Dina Kraft

JTA, October 2, 2008

30. Begin aide Harry Hurwitz dies

By Tovah Lazaroff

Jerusalem Post, October 2, 2008

#1a

Kosher market opens in Kiev

JTA, September 28, 2008

A new kosher supermarket opened in Ukraine's capital.

The store opened in Kiev last week under the auspices of the city's Chabad-Lubavitch community.

It is located on the property of the "Perlyna" Ohr Avner Day School headed by Rabbi Jonathan Markowitz, the Lubavitch emissary who leads the local community.

Markowitz told JTA that the store is not a for-profit venture that is trying to keep prices under control for consumers with low incomes.

#1b

Nachman gravesite dispute settled

JTA, September 29, 2008

The dispute surrounding Rabbi Nachman's gravesite in Uman has been settled.

The four-year conflict between the Bratslov Chasid group that oversees the Nachman site in Uman, a central Ukrainian town of about 100,000 some 120 miles south of Kiev, and Chance Private Construction Company, which threatened to shut down the site, was settled with the help of Aleksandr Mashkevich, leader of the Euro-Asian Jewish Congress.

Chance, the company hired a few years ago by the Rabbi Nachman Foundation to expand facilities at the site in Uman, first took the Breslov foundation to court in 2005 over unpaid debt. The owner of the company threatened to take control of the property, triggering fears that the Uman site would become inaccessible to the tens thousands of Chasidim who visit every year.

Rabbi Nachman, spiritual leader of the Breslov Chasidim, was born in the city of Medzhybizh in 1772 and died in 1810 in Uman. Since then, Uman has become a mecca for Breslovers.

About 150,000 people visit Nachman's grave every year. Some 20,000-25,000 Chasidim from all over the world have recently arrived in Uman to celebrate Rosh Hashanah this year. A security system organized by Ukrainian police and Jewish groups has been put into place.

The foundation claimed it did not owe Chance anything since, according to the foundation, the company has not fulfilled its contractual obligations. Several court rulings in the past four years have found in favor of Chance.

Ukrainian President Victor Yushchenko intervened following his state visit to Israel and a meeting with the Breslovers in mid-November 2007. He put a moratorium on declaring the site a national heritage site that cannot become private property or be used as collateral in any property dispute.

Mashkevich, who will serve as guarantor of the agreement, declined to discuss the financial part of the agreement.

"We signed an amicable agreement with the construction company and now, through court rulings, the property, including the synagogue and the site, will be returned to the Breslov group and the Chasidim will get an opportunity to fulfill the construction of the great synagogue in Uman," Mashkevich said at a news conference Sunday.

Mashkevich said that during his meeting with the mayor of Uman, they discussed the development of infrastructure for the pilgrims.

#1c

Medvedev wishes Jews Happy New Year Interfax, September 29, 2008

Russian President Dimitry Medvedev congratulated Russian Jews on the Rosh Hashanah, the Kremlin press service has reported on Monday.

"This year has been very successful for Russian Jewish community as new synagogues, educational and social establishments opened. It proves that culture of your nation has been revived and developed," the greeting reads.

"It is joyful that you managed to keep traditions of tolerance, peace, inviolability of family bonds and to contribute in strengthening mutual understanding and accord in society, in international and interconfessional dialogue," Russian president said.

The Jewish New 5769th year is celebrated at night on September 30 in Jewish month of Tishrey.

#1d

Putin accuses Ukraine of aiding Georgia Associated Press, October 2, 2008

NOVO-OGARYOVO, Russia: Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin is accusing Ukraine of sending military personnel to fight against Russia in Georgia.

Putin asserted Thursday that Ukrainian specialists operated anti-aircraft missile systems used against Russian aircraft during the August war.

Russia has said Ukraine helped arm Georgia before the war, but Putin said missile sales may have been conducted after the war already stated. And he said the systems were operated by Ukrainians.

Ukrainian Prime Minister Yulia Tymoshenko said a parliamentary panel in Ukraine would investigate allegations of arms sales.

She said that under Ukrainian law the president and his Security Council is in charge of arms sales abroad and her Cabinet has no say.

#2

Ukraine city building toward prominence

By Grant Slater

JTA, September 25, 2008

DNEPROPETROVSK, Ukraine – With the cautious enthusiasm that pervades his community, Rabbi Shmuel Kaminetsky quotes from Psalms, "Those who sow in tears shall reap in joy."

The harvest is coming to Dnepropetrovsk, long considered the most organized Jewish community in the former Soviet Union. Now it's the site of myriad construction projects that surely will change the landscape in Ukraine and put the city back on the map of world Jewry.

Kaminetsky, the 43-year-old Chabad emissary who spurred the first wave of growth here after his arrival in 1990, now wants to do it all over again.

The local Chabad community estimates that there are 50,000 Jews living here. In Kiev, the capital of Ukraine, estimates run between 70,000 and 100,000 Jews.

In Dnepropetrovsk, several factors have aligned to trigger a second wave of development. The centerpiece is the planned Menorah Center -- at nearly 400,000 square feet it would be the largest community center in the former Soviet Union and perhaps the world.

The 20-story building with seven terraced roofs will tower above the existing synagogue on Shalom Aleichem Street, casting the shadow of a menorah on the tree-covered hills leading down to the Dnepr River.

Construction began last month on the \$70 million tower.

Three of Ukraine's four richest men are members of the city's Jewish community and they have bankrolled a raft of construction projects. Two partners in the Privat group industrial holding, Gennady Bogolubov and Igor Kolomoysky, are funding the center and an attached Holocaust museum, respectively.

Community leaders say the billionaires, including metals magnate Viktor Pinchuk, have bought into the idea of giving back to the local Jewish community, a relatively new and sporadic development in the former Soviet Union.

Bogolubov is the president of a meticulously organized community parliament with 60 members, seven committees, a chief executive and a \$7 million annual budget.

Kaminetsky recalled with delight a recent Shabbat spent in Vienna at Bogolubov's second, glatt kosher home. They walked 40 minutes together to the synagogue and studied Torah, the rabbi said.

"The idea is to identify who can do what the best way, and squeeze them out and use them up as maximum as possible, in a good way," Kaminetsky told JTA in his office overlooking the construction of the new center.

The Menorah Center will house the headquarters of Bogolubov's charitable foundation on its top floor, as well as the nerve center of the Ukraine-wide Federation of Jewish Communities and a host of local organizations.

Alexander Sorin, the architect of the tower, is the son of a prominent Soviet-era architect who designed many of the major buildings in this industrial city. Foreigners stayed away during the Soviet era because of weapons technology research and construction facilities.

The first floor leading through the Holocaust museum and the center will resemble a Jerusalem alleyway with brown stone and a slightly claustrophobic feel, Sorin said.

The center will have a kosher hotel and lobby with an elevator programmed to allow observant passengers to ride on Shabbat. The community is seeking an independent contractor to run the hotel.

There will be apartments for visiting Jewish educators and community workers, as well as office space to rent for Jewish-related entities such as the Jewish Agency for Israel, an Israeli consular office and other organizations.

The Holocaust museum will feature the research of a group of scientists known as Tkuma, or "resurrection" in Hebrew, who have been collecting testimonies, artifacts and names of the 11,000 Jews killed by the Nazis in Dnepropetrovsk on Simchat Torah in 1943.

The museum will accompany a sprawling monument in a local park with dozens of stones engraved with victims' names.

Activities run by the Dnepropetrovsk Jewish community are spread out across dozens of buildings. The Menorah Center will centralize that activity, though most outlying facilities will remain.

Kaminetsky keeps his office in a small annex off the main synagogue. The community's chief executive, Vyacheslav Brez, is down the road in the back lot of a synagogue, the city's only continuously running Jewish building that is tucked between two wings of a towering shopping center.

Brez manages the community's projects all over town: a Jewish day school, kindergarten, old-age home and yeshivas filled with local Jews.

In building this infrastructure, Dnepropetrovsk took its cues -- and a portion of its funding -- from Boston's Combined Jewish Philanthropies. Ten years of shared knowledge and work have brought Dnepropetrovsk to where it is today, but Brez says the locals have taken over and now projects like the community center provide hope.

"It gives us gasoline to keep going," Brez said. "This is very hard work."

It seems as though every Jewish building in Dnepropetrovsk is recently constructed or under construction, or blueprints are spread across the desks in older buildings.

"Our community is a monolith. This Menorah building is just what we need," said Anna Kaplunskaya, the director of a Jewish day school that is being overhauled.

Another example is Beit Hanna, a college dedicated to training women to become Jewish educators and a school for special-needs children.

Tamara Olychanskaya, the institute's director, stood before a map of the former Soviet Union dotted with LED lights, flipping switches in turn, one from where their students originated, one for where they went after graduating, one for each school under their umbrella. From Belarus to the Pacific Ocean, the board lit up like a switchboard.

Soon those students and teachers will come from all over to a new technology center and dormitory. The center's founder, Mayer Stambler, has plans to build a new center starting in 2009 that would draw even more than the school's 140-plus students to Dnepropetrovsk.

The center will cost \$15 million to \$20 million and be paid for partially by selling community assets -- another piece of this second wave of development.

Walking through the halls of old-age homes, schools and synagogues, portraits of the seventh Lubavitcher rebbe, Menachem Mendel Schneerson, stare down from the walls and shelves.

Dnepropetrovsk was his home before he fled the Soviet Union. His father was arrested 50 yards from where the community is now rebuilding the facade of his home and placing a memorial.

Kaminetsky said the rebbe wanted to see the community revived, a source of pride for the Chabad movement worldwide and a new center of gravity for the emissaries and local adherents that dominate much of Jewish life across the former Soviet Union.

"For many Chabadniks in the whole world, Dnepropetrovsk is a very special place because of the history," Kaminetsky said. "We give the rebbe all the credit because he sent me here and he gave me a plan, and he told me how to work and he gave us blessings."

#3

Russia in Moldova: A Counter Example to Ukraine and Georgia?

By Vladimir Socor

Eurasia Daily Monitor, September 26, 2008

Russia and Moldova are exploring a possible settlement of the Transnistria conflict on a bilateral basis, outside the international 5 + 2 format. Russia is the initiator of this approach, pulling a reluctant but still hopeful Moldova along.

The Russian-desired outcome would: reunify Moldova nominally, albeit under Russian oversight; show that Russia can single-handedly settle a "frozen" conflict in Europe's East, marginalizing the Euro-Atlantic community in the EU's own neighborhood; and demonstrate that countries such as Moldova that do not seek to join NATO can hope for a more lenient Russian treatment, unlike Georgia and Ukraine, which Russia threatens to dismember or partition if they progress toward NATO membership.

For its part, the Moldovan leadership pursues the twin goals of reunifying Transnistria with the rest of the country and winning the upcoming general elections in the spring of 2009. Commitment to reunification of the state is a defining policy of the Vladimir Voronin presidency (unlike the two predecessor leaderships). The president is now completing his second, final term of office. Constitutionally barred from seeking reelection, Voronin seeks instead a place in history as the re-unifier of the country and also to ensure his party's (communist in nothing more than name) continuity in power. To couple the country's reunification with the party's electoral calendar and power-retention strategy, however, is to risk compromising both goals, to Moscow's benefit.

Moscow is capitalizing on Chisinau's impatience, lack of Western initiatives on Transnistria and other conflicts, and the fright-effect of Russia's invasion of Georgia. Although Moldova does not border on Russia and is therefore not exposed to military strikes, the Moldovan leadership has drawn its political conclusions from the West's incapacity to deal with Russia's war on Georgia.

Russian President Dmitry Medvedev held talks with Voronin in Sochi on August 25 and with Transnistria's leader Igor Smirnov in Moscow on September 3. In those meetings, a new negotiating process was planned (Interfax, Moldpres, August 25-26, September 3-4).

The brunt of negotiations would shift from the 5+2 format (Russia, Ukraine, OSCE, the United States, European Union, the Chisinau government, and Tiraspol authorities) into a new, 1+2 format (Russia, Chisinau, Tiraspol). The new process would exclude the West while leaving Chisinau isolated to face Moscow and Tiraspol.

The process would begin with Chisinau-Tiraspol meetings at the level of experts; continue with a Voronin-Smirnov meeting, possibly with an official Russia-Moldova-Transnistria meeting; and culminate in a Medvedev-Voronin-Smirnov meeting for signing the conflict-settlement documents. Russia would act as facilitator at all stages and become the guarantor of a final settlement, if achieved. Almost certainly, Russia would insist on retaining a military presence as "guarantor" of that settlement.

The object of negotiations would no longer be Chisinau's 2007 "package" proposals, which Moldova's Western partners endorsed and which Russia sidestepped but never rejected. Instead, some kind of synthesis would be

attempted with the “package” and earlier proposals, including “elements” of Moscow’s infamous 2003 Kozak plan, as well as some new Russian contributions (“narabotki”).

Russia seeks a settlement that would confer to Tiraspol, i.e., to Moscow through its Tiraspol proxies, effective blocking powers against the policies of a reunified Moldovan state in the future. To that end, Russia will again seek to amend Moldova’s constitution and legislation, introduce numerical overrepresentation of deputies from Transnistria in a reunified Moldovan parliament, and enable Tiraspol authorities (under a new constitutional dispensation) to stop Moldova from harmonizing its legislative framework and policies with those of the European Union.

Moscow and Tiraspol also seem set to pressure Chisinau through pro-Russia leaders in the Gagauz autonomous territory. Those local leaders demand a status equivalent to Transnistria’s within Moldova, should it come to reunification under Russia’s auspices. On September 22 the Gagauz territory’s legislative assembly narrowly approved a resolution recognizing Abkhazia and South Ossetia and praising Russia’s recent actions in Georgia (Basapres, September 22, 23).

Chisinau easily concedes to Russia’s demand that Moldova should remain permanently neutral, assuming that this implies maintaining a clear distance from NATO. Indeed neither Moldova nor NATO can see valid reasons for Moldovan membership in the alliance in any foreseeable future. Russian representatives, however, told Moldovans in recent contacts that the European Union was not merely an economic and political union, but also potentially a political-military bloc, and that Moldova’s goal of accession to the EU would be incompatible with Moldova’s neutrality.

Within the moribund 5+2 format, and despite its agony, all sides say that it remains the only legitimate forum for negotiation and decision. But they attach differing meanings to this phrase. The Western representatives, Ukraine, and Moldova take the position that only the 5+2 format can produce a legitimate outcome. Russia takes the position that any format, including 1+2, can be considered legitimate if it produces a solution mutually acceptable to “the parties” (Moldova and Russia/Transnistria), i.e., if Moldova is cajoled or pressured into it. At the same time, Russia and, again, Moldova consider it possible to reach a political settlement directly in the 1+2 format and then refer it afterward to the 5+2 format for Western blessings (perhaps with minor editing) there.

Chisinau seems caught between these two interpretations at the moment. It is pressed for time and has lost its earlier confidence in a Western-delivered solution.

The United States and EU recommend patience and postponement of a solution until a more favorable context develops, both internationally and locally. In the aftermath of Russia’s war on Georgia, however, it seems difficult to persuade Chisinau that a favorable context can be created any time soon. And it seems correspondingly difficult for Chisinau to avoid the temptation of the Moscow-laid, 2+1 trap.

More than a decade ago, Moldova’s then-presidents Mircea Snegur and Petru Lucinschi embarked on appeasement of Russia in Transnistria after seeing the West leaving Georgia face-to-face with Russia in Abkhazia. As Snegur told this author at the time, “If [Georgian] President Shevardnadze with all his great diplomacy was not helped to retrieve Abkhazia, what can a Moldovan president do about Transnistria?”

#4

Parliamentary elections in Belarus fell short of OSCE commitments in spite of minor improvements Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights, September 29, 2008

Despite some minor improvements, the 28 September parliamentary elections in Belarus ultimately fell short of OSCE commitments for democratic elections, international observers from the OSCE concluded in a preliminary statement issued today.

The election took place in a strictly controlled environment with a barely visible campaign, said the observers from the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) and the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly (OSCE PA).

Voting was generally well conducted, but the process deteriorated considerably during the vote count. Promises to ensure transparency of the vote count were not implemented. The count was assessed as bad or very bad in 48 per cent of polling stations visited. Where access was possible, several cases of deliberate falsification of results were observed.

OSCE monitors were prevented or hindered from observing the vote count in 35 per cent of cases. This compromised the transparency of this fundamental element of the election process.

"The clear signals to improve the election process were not implemented and substantial improvements are required if Belarus is to conduct genuinely democratic elections in line with our common OSCE commitments. Unfortunately the repeated signals of good will did not seem to have been correctly given or received. Consequently the significant progress we hoped for in the democratic development of Belarus did not materialize," said Anne-Marie Lizin, Vice President of the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly and Special Co-ordinator of the OSCE short-term observers.

"I'm hopeful and disappointed at the same time. Hopeful because when we came here it seemed that there was some wind of change in the election environment; disappointed because we were unable to see a problem solved that has been with election observation in this country for a long time, and that is the non-transparency of the vote count. But we hope that the improved co-operation we have experienced during this election can be the basis for a genuine dialogue on implementing our recommendations", said Ambassador Geert Ahrens, Head of the OSCE/ODIHR election observation mission.

Positive developments included the slightly increased access of opposition representatives to election commissions, the decision to rebroadcast once the five-minute candidate spots during prime time, and the recommendation to seal ballot box slots overnight during the five-day early voting period. Some opposition candidates noted progress in their ability to conduct meetings in authorized locations without interference.

The legislative framework continues to present obstacles for elections in line with OSCE commitments. The media coverage of the campaign did not provide meaningful information for voters to be able to make an informed choice. Political parties played a minor role, and restrictions imposed by the state authorities did not allow for a vibrant campaign with real competition.

The OSCE deployed some 450 international observers from 43 countries, including more than 320 short-term observers and 58 experts and long-term observers fielded by ODIHR, as well as 66 parliamentarians and staff from the OSCE PA.

#5

Belarus Pressures EU For Closer Ties

By David Maples

Eurasia Daily Monitor, October 2, 2008

After the parliamentary elections in Belarus on September 28, both President Alyaksandr Lukashenka and his close ally, Lidziya Yarmoshyna, Chairperson of the Central Election Commission, have stated that they expect the EU to lift sanctions against Belarus's leaders and develop closer relations.

On the face of things, such desires seem far-fetched. The OSCE sent 450 short-term monitors to Belarus; they were reportedly denied access to over one-third of the polling stations and cited several cases of deliberate falsification of the results. Thus, the OSCE reported that the elections could not be considered free and fair (AFP, September 30). On its website, Charter 97 reported, somewhat hyperbolically, "total outrage" at polling stations, including 135 complaints about violations from opposition deputies (www.charter97.org, October 1).

Although rumors circulated at the national television station that victorious candidates from the opposition would have to be allowed air time (www.russiaprofile.org, October 1), not a single opposition candidate will have a seat in the new parliament. According to the Central Election Commission, 75.3 percent of the electorate took part in the process, with the highest turnout of 86.8 percent in the Vitsebsk region and the lowest in Minsk, where three electoral districts reported figures of 57-58 percent. According to official figures, of the opposition candidates, Ihar Rynkevich, chairman of the Social Democratic Hramada party received 15 percent; Syarhey Kalyakin of the Party of Communists, 15.6 percent; Anatol Lyabedzka of the United Civic Party, 9.7 percent; and Volha Kazulina, the daughter of the released political prisoner Alyaksandr Kazulin, 8.6 percent. Olga Abramova, a deputy in the previous parliament, polled 24 percent (Interfax, September 29).

On the evening of September 28, the United Democratic Forces held a protest on Kastrichnitskaya Square against what they called the falsification of the results of the parliamentary elections. About 700 people took part, carrying the white-red-white national flag and EU flags, as well as slogans that declared “Yes to free elections, no to the farce!” and “Long live Belarus!” (Belapan, September 28). The authorities took no action against this protest but have since noted that it was unsanctioned and that charges may be made against the initiators.

Despite the evident lack of change, there are some limited grounds for optimism on the president’s part. Lukashenka informed the EU that he expected sanctions to be lifted, claiming bizarrely that the country had lost one-third of its population defending Europe in the Second World War and that it had suffered 85 percent of the fallout of the Chernobyl disaster of 1986 (which is incorrect), thus identifying his own regime with sacrifices and tragedies of the Soviet past. Pleas were combined with threats: the president also said that Belarus did not necessarily need Europe; but if sanctions continue, “We will not let anyone into Belarus” (Belarusian Telegraph Agency, September 30).

According to one account, Poland and Lithuania are eager that Belarus be opened up to the Europeans. Both countries would like to see the country extricated from the Russian orbit and have been encouraged by Belarus’s apparent reluctance to support Russia in the Georgian crisis. The EU presidency has noted some positive developments prior to the election, including the release of political prisoners (AFP, September 30). The maverick ambassador extraordinary and plenipotentiary of Germany to Belarus, Gebhardt Weiss, commented on an official Belarusian website that the OSCE’s report was not totally critical and was notably milder in tone than in the 2004 and 2006 election years. Weiss stated emphatically that Germany would remain a “partner” of Belarus (National Legal Internet Portal of the Republic of Belarus, October 1). Two days after the election, Lukashenka held talks with Ann-Marie Lizin, Vice-Chairperson of the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly, the Special Coordinator of the OSCE’s short-term observers in Belarus (Belarusian Telegraph Agency, September 30).

Analysts concur, however, that Lukashenka may have been psychologically unprepared to concede parliamentary seats to the opposition, whatever the stakes involved. Vitali Silitiski, for example, writes that the “realpolitik” carried out by the EU and United States with regard to a new dialogue with Minsk may have been a singular act of self-deception. He notes that the October 6 visit of Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin to Minsk might provide a real indicator of whether Belarus’s leader has moderated his views. That should not, however, rule out efforts to seek a new dialogue or to pursue further the strategy of “change through engagement” (Belarusian Institute of Strategic Studies, September 30).

Throughout his long tenure as president, Lukashenka has shown great aptitude for political maneuvers and about-turns, particularly given uncertain relations with and mounting debts to Russia, dependence on Russian imports of oil and gas, and growing trade with the EU. Essentially, however, his presidency has not changed; and it would be naïve to expect him to abandon the lessons learned building an authoritarian regime over the past fourteen years. The president may point to the fact that the opposition was disorganized and divided over the issue of an election boycott and that perhaps its candidates would not have won seats in a fair election. It is equally obvious, however, that his methods have not changed. Belarus will never be a democratic state under his leadership. The EU and the United States provided an opportunity for Lukashenka to mend his ways but can hardly be surprised that, given the propaganda value of winning a parliamentary election, he opted not to take it.

#6

**Belarus: Parliamentary Elections
Press Statement by spokesman Sean McCormack
U.S. Department of State, September 29, 2008**

The United States is disappointed that the September 28 parliamentary elections in Belarus fell significantly short of international standards, and that the Government of Belarus failed to uphold pledges for a transparent vote count. According to the preliminary report of the OSCE's election monitoring mission, the conduct of the parliamentary elections in Belarus did not meet OSCE standards despite minor improvements. The vote count in particular was judged negatively at nearly one-half of the precincts where OSCE observers were present. Problems included election monitors being denied access to the vote count process, discrepancies between the number of voters observed and the number of votes recorded and outright falsification of votes.

The United States commends those individuals and members of political parties who participated fully in the elections. We note that a demonstration was held after the elections in a peaceful and orderly manner.

It is the intention of the United States to maintain our dialogue with the government and people of Belarus. We encourage the authorities to take steps to uphold Belarus' international commitments to promote democratic freedoms, including holding genuinely competitive elections, and to improving respect for internationally recognized human rights. Such steps are necessary in order for relations between the United States and Belarus to improve significantly.

#7

**Dictator at Bay
A deeply flawed election, but the West is softening its stance towards Belarus
Economist, October 2, 2008**

In a country the Americans have dubbed the last dictatorship in Europe, it is not surprising when an election is criticised by international observers. In Belarus's vote on September 28th, candidates loyal to the president, Alyaksandr Lukashenka, took all 110 seats. European monitors talked of only "minor improvements" on previous flawed votes, called the election campaign "barely visible" and found serious fault with the count.

This poses a dilemma for the West. America and the European Union must decide soon whether Belarus's minimal progress in a democratic direction is enough for them to curtail their sanctions on the country. Mr Lukashenka, a former collective-farm boss who has been in power for the past 14 years, says he is expecting the sanctions to go. Otherwise he threatens to stop talking to the West altogether. Russia's war with Georgia in August has made Mr Lukashenka, for all his flaws, a man worth courting.

Belarus has survived as an independent entity since the break-up of the Soviet Union thanks to cheap Russian natural gas. As the Kremlin prepares to impose a sharp rise in the price of gas, some European diplomats believe it is a good time to woo this on-off Russian ally, especially since Mr Lukashenka has made the first moves. To curry favour with the West, he released political prisoners, allowed some opposition campaigning and invited foreigners to watch. He hired a British public-relations firm, Bell Pottinger. And he resisted Russian pressure to recognise the Georgian enclaves of South Ossetia and Abkhazia.

Belarusian officials say the loosening of the reins reflect economics, not a sudden realisation that democracy is a good thing. The economy is feeling the strain. One of Mr Lukashenka's first post-election decisions was to pass an energy-saving decree. In Minsk public buildings fitted with movement sensors are shrouded in darkness after sunset. The roads are uncongested; the airport is more a museum than a transport hub.

Mr Lukashenka seems in a mood to bargain, an offer the opposition think should be ignored. "If Europe makes one step forward in political and economic co-operation, we will make three steps," he vowed after the poll, adding smoothly that "an election cannot be ideal."

#8

**Israel's Olmert to visit Russia next week
AFP, September 28, 2008**

Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert will travel to Moscow next week for talks about Iran's nuclear programme and other issues, a government official said on Sunday.

Olmert, who stepped down on September 21 but remains at the helm of a transitional government, will start his two-day trip on October 6, the source said.

Olmert and Russian President Dmitry Medvedev will discuss Iran and other issues, the official said.

Israel considers Iran to be its greatest threat because of Tehran's accelerating nuclear programme.

Both Israel and the United States accuse Iran of trying to develop nuclear weapons, while Tehran has insisted its atomic programme is entirely peaceful.

Media reports on Sunday said the United States recently deployed an anti-missile radar system in Israel mainly aimed at warning of incoming Iranian ballistic missiles.

Israeli officials have also expressed concern at reports that Russia was willing to sell weapons to Syria, a long-time foe of the Jewish state.

During a telephone conversation last month, Olmert told Medvedev it would be a waste for Syria to spend billions of dollars on buying weapons that Israel would eventually destroy, Israeli media reported.

#9

**Excerpt from the first Presidential Debate [re Russia]
CNN transcript, September 26, 2008**

JIM LEHRER, MODERATOR: New lead question, Russia, goes to you, two minutes, Senator Obama. How do you see the relationship with Russia? Do you see them as a competitor? Do you see them as an enemy? Do you see them as a potential partner?

OBAMA: Well, I think that, given what's happened over the last several weeks and months, our entire Russian approach has to be evaluated, because a resurgent and very aggressive Russia is a threat to the peace and stability of the region.

Their actions in Georgia were unacceptable. They were unwarranted. And at this point, it is absolutely critical for the next president to make clear that we have to follow through on our six-party -- or the six-point cease-fire. They have to remove themselves from South Ossetia and Abkhazia.

It is absolutely important that we have a unified alliance and that we explain to the Russians that you cannot be a 21st-century superpower, or power, and act like a 20th-century dictatorship.

And we also have to affirm all the fledgling democracies in that region, you know, the Estonians, the Lithuanians, the Latvians, the Poles, the Czechs, that we are, in fact, going to be supportive and in solidarity with them in their efforts. They are members of NATO.

And to countries like Georgia and the Ukraine, I think we have to insist that they are free to join NATO if they meet the requirements, and they should have a membership action plan immediately to start bringing them in.

Now, we also can't return to a Cold War posture with respect to Russia. It's important that we recognize there are going to be some areas of common interest. One is nuclear proliferation.

They have not only 15,000 nuclear warheads, but they've got enough to make another 40,000, and some of those loose nukes could fall into the hands of Al Qaida.

This is an area where I've led on in the Senate, working with a Republican ranking member of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Dick Lugar, to deal with the proliferation of loose nuclear weapons. That's an area where we're going to have to work with Russia.

But we have to have a president who is clear that you don't deal with Russia based on staring into his eyes and seeing his soul. You deal with Russia based on, what are your -- what are the national security interests of the United States of America?

And we have to recognize that the way they've been behaving lately demands a sharp response from the international community and our allies.

LEHRER: Two minutes on Russia, Senator McCain.

MCCAIN: Well, I was interested in Senator Obama's reaction to the Russian aggression against Georgia. His first statement was, "Both sides ought to show restraint."

Again, a little bit of naivete there. He doesn't understand that Russia committed serious aggression against Georgia. And Russia has now become a nation fueled by petro-dollars that is basically a KGB apparatchik-run government.

I looked into Mr. Putin's eyes, and I saw three letters, a "K," a "G," and a "B." And their aggression in Georgia is not acceptable behavior.

I don't believe we're going to go back to the Cold War. I am sure that that will not happen. But I do believe that we need to bolster our friends and allies. And that wasn't just about a problem between Georgia and Russia. It had everything to do with energy. There's a pipeline that runs from the Caspian through Georgia through Turkey. And, of course, we know that the Russians control other sources of energy into Europe, which they have used from time to time.

It's not accidental that the presidents of Latvia, Estonia, Lithuania, Poland, and Ukraine flew to Georgia, flew to Tbilisi, where I have spent significant amount of time with a great young president, Misha Saakashvili.

MCCAIN: And they showed solidarity with them, but, also, they are very concerned about the Russian threats to regain their status of the old Russian to regain their status of the old Russian empire.

Now, I think the Russians ought to understand that we will support -- we, the United States -- will support the inclusion of Georgia and Ukraine in the natural process, inclusion into NATO.

We also ought to make it very clear that the Russians are in violation of their cease-fire agreement. They have stationed additional troops in Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

By the way, I went there once, and we went inside and drove in, and there was a huge poster. And this is -- this is Georgian territory. And there was a huge poster of Vladimir Putin, and it said, "Vladimir Putin, our president."

It was very clear, the Russian intentions towards Georgia. They were just waiting to seize the opportunity.

So, this is a very difficult situation. We want to work with the Russians. But we also have every right to expect the Russians to behave in a fashion and keeping with a -- with a -- with a country who respects international boundaries and the norms of international behavior.

And watch Ukraine. This whole thing has got a lot to do with Ukraine, Crimea, the base of the Russian fleet in Sevastopol. And the breakdown of the political process in Ukraine between Tymoshenko and Yushchenko is a very serious problem.

So watch Ukraine, and let's make sure that we -- that the Ukrainians understand that we are their friend and ally.

LEHRER: You see any -- do you have a major difference with what he just said?

OBAMA: No, actually, I think Senator McCain and I agree for the most part on these issues. Obviously, I disagree with this notion that somehow we did not forcefully object to Russians going into Georgia.

I immediately said that this was illegal and objectionable. And, absolutely, I wanted a cessation of the violence, because it put an enormous strain on Georgia, and that's why I was the first to say that we have to rebuild the Georgian economy and called for a billion dollars that has now gone in to help them rebuild.

Because part of Russia's intentions here was to weaken the economy to the point where President Saakashvili was so weakened that he might be replaced by somebody that Putin favored more.

Two points I think are important to think about when it comes to Russia.

Number one is we have to have foresight and anticipate some of these problems. So back in April, I warned the administration that you had Russian peacekeepers in Georgian territory. That made no sense whatsoever.

And what we needed to do was replace them with international peacekeepers and a special envoy to resolve the crisis before it boiled over.

That wasn't done. But had it been done, it's possible we could have avoided the issue.

The second point I want to make is -- is the issue of energy. Russia is in part resurgent and Putin is feeling powerful because of petro-dollars, as Senator McCain mentioned.

That means that we, as one of the biggest consumers of oil -- 25 percent of the world's oil -- have to have an energy strategy not just to deal with Russia, but to deal with many of the rogue states we've talked about, Iran, Venezuela.

And that means, yes, increasing domestic production and off-shore drilling, but we only have 3 percent of the world's oil supplies and we use 25 percent of the world's oil. So we can't simply drill our way out of the problem.

What we're going to have to do is to approach it through alternative energy, like solar, and wind, and biodiesel, and, yes, nuclear energy, clean-coal technology. And, you know, I've got a plan for us to make a significant investment over the next 10 years to do that.

And I have to say, Senator McCain and I, I think agree on the importance of energy, but Senator McCain mentioned earlier the importance of looking at a record. Over 26 years, Senator McCain voted 23 times against alternative energy, like solar, and wind, and biodiesel.

And so we -- we -- we've got to walk the walk and not just talk the talk when it comes to energy independence, because this is probably going to be just as vital for our economy and the pain that people are feeling at the pump -- and, you know, winter's coming and home heating oil -- as it is our national security and the issue of climate change that's so important.

#10

**Ukraine-Russia tensions rise in Crimea
Los Angeles Times, September 28, 2008**

Residents of Sevastopol and the rest of the Crimean Peninsula have close ties to Moscow, and analysts say Ukraine could break apart if leaders push Russia away. By Megan K. Stack

SEVASTOPOL, UKRAINE - Skimming the Black Sea aboard a military motorboat, Russian navy spokesman Igor Dygalo turned to an entourage of television cameras. "The dirty ones, those are the Ukrainian ships," he said with a light smirk. "The clean ones are Russian."

Against a backdrop of simmering tensions, Dygalo led journalists on an unusual wide-ranging visit to Russia's Black Sea Fleet this month, complete with unprecedented access to the flagship Moskva, a guided missile cruiser.

The public relations tour came just as the strategically crucial Russian base here finds itself at the epicenter of an escalating political clash.

Alarmed by Russia's recent war in Georgia, the Ukrainian government has imposed new restrictions on the Russian ships' movements, and suggested raising the rent for the fleet.

The Ukrainian president has called the surrounding Crimean Peninsula -- historically a part of Russia and still home to a majority Russian population -- the most dangerous spot in the country because of separatist sentiment.

Russia has responded with icy vows to beef up its military forces in the Black Sea, eagerly showing off to reporters the firepower aboard vessels that were used to blockade Georgia -- and to remind the world of the deep Russian roots in this restive Ukrainian region.

"The military budget will be revisited so that we can exploit these ships better and build new ships," said Dygalo, aboard the Moskva. "The attitude toward the international situation has changed, of course. We understand quite well that Russia came under pressure."

Tensions have been climbing in this sleepy port since the fighting in Georgia brought into sharp focus two clashing interests: Russia's determination to take on a greater role in the former Soviet states, and the Ukrainian government's determination to join the North Atlantic Treaty Organization. The war in Georgia pitted a Western-friendly government against Moscow; meanwhile, Ukraine is painfully divided in loyalties to the West and Russia.

Crimea is Russian-friendly turf. Former Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev gave the peninsula to Ukraine back when the shared flag made the distinction between the two countries relatively unimportant.

Many residents of Crimea say they are Russian first, Ukrainian second. They vehemently oppose Ukraine's bid to join NATO, bristle over anti-Moscow rhetoric from national leaders and say they are embittered by government efforts to infuse Crimea with Ukrainian language and culture.

Because of Crimea's staunch pro-Russia sentiments, analysts warn that the country could break apart if politicians in Kiev continue their push toward NATO and the West.

"Most threats from Ukraine don't come from outside, but from inside," said Vladimir Kornilov, a political scientist in Kiev. "Ukraine is living on its own volcano."

Critics accuse the Black Sea Fleet of deliberately exacerbating the tension.

"All the anti-Ukrainian, pro-Russia blocs are closely tied to the Black Sea Fleet," said Miroslav Mamchak, the snowy-haired chief of a group called the Ukrainian Community of Sevastopol. "They struggle against the Ukrainian language. They support the separatists."

Mamchak is a rare voice of Ukrainian nationalism here. He says that he has received death threats, and that Russian loyalists plastered the town with his picture under the slogan, "I'm a traitor to Russia."

Black Sea Fleet officials deny any political tampering. But many Ukrainians worry that Moscow is stealthily working to stir up separatist sentiment. There have been reports that Russia has quietly begun to grant passports to some residents; Russian officials say it's not true.

Powerful Moscow Mayor Yuri M. Luzhkov, who has been banned from Ukraine for his rhetoric on Crimea, has said the region "doesn't belong" to Ukraine.

Moscow and Sevastopol have long had close ties, and the Moscow city government has built schools and apartments in the Ukrainian city. One opulent school is decorated with stained glass depictions of Moscow, and a university is affiliated with Moscow State University.

Pro-Moscow residents regard Mamchak's political organization as part of a Kiev-backed effort at "ethnocide."

Many people here complain about the mandatory teaching of the Ukrainian language in schools and its use in the media and for government paperwork. Pro-Russia leaders also accuse the Ukrainian government of slowly moving people into the region from other parts of the country and installing pro-Kiev leaders in the city government.

"Faster, faster, faster to make everybody a Ukrainian," said Raisa Telyatnikova, head of the Russian Community of Sevastopol. "They want to completely distance us from our historical motherland, Russia, and turn it into an alien state. . . . They want to change the ethnic composition and break the spirit of Sevastopol."

With its clusters of war memorials and Soviet awards from Vladimir I. Lenin still adorning the walls of the town hall, today's Sevastopol has the feel of a living monument to the U.S.S.R., or at least to the power of Moscow. Russian flags flutter throughout the city, a statue of Catherine the Great looms on the main street and Russian is heard on most every corner. Bookstores stock a paltry number of Ukrainian titles. "It's only the language of state business," one bookseller said with a shrug.

Despite the fleet's warm ties with the locals, politicians in Kiev have made it plain that the Russian navy could be asked to leave after its lease expires in 2017.

Russia, however, has other ideas. The fleet's presence here is woven into history, Russian military officials say. The ships will stay put, and multiply, they have said repeatedly.

"Nothing prevents us from building up our forces here in Ukrainian territory," said Rear Adm. Andrei Baranov, the fleet's deputy chief of staff. "The fleet will be renovated. . . . New ships will be arriving here."

On the grounds of St. Nicholas the Sanctifier Church, the bones of an estimated 60,000 Russian fighters, casualties of the Crimean War in the 19th century and World War II, lie in a vast, quiet cemetery that rolls downhill toward the sea. On the steps of the sanctuary, priests spoke of their emotional ties to generations of sailors and of their unwillingness to hoist a Ukrainian flag.

In a scene that seemed cut from tsarist times, Russian navy officials and Orthodox priests sat at a long table, knocking back shots of vodka and proclaiming emotional toasts.

"The West shuddered 150 years ago when Russia showed its sword, and the Black Sea turned red with blood," said Igor Bebin, a pink-robed priest who rose to his feet, vodka glass held high.

"That was the supreme truth. And the truth is that now, for the first time, the sword of Russia is shining again. Be afraid of the sword."

The Russians cheered, and took a deep drink.

#11

Russia woos Georgian territory with jobs, tourists

By Shaun Walker

Christian Science Monitor, September 29, 2008

PSOU, abkhazia - At Psou, a town on the border between Russia and Abkhazia, elderly women wheel trolleys of vegetables and household goods from Russia to sell in Abkhazia. A few Russian tourists - incongruous in their bright clothes and bikinis - bob between the shuttle traders, headed for sunny holidays amid the palm trees on Abkhazia's Black Sea coast.

Officials in Sukhumi, the capital of the breakaway Georgian region that has functioned as an independent state since 1993, are expecting an economic boom over the next few years that will reduce the number of those dependent on shuttle trading to make ends meet and boost the number of tourists exponentially.

After Russia officially recognized Abkhazia and South Ossetia as independent states last month, in the wake of the war with Georgia, the signs are that Russian capital will flood Abkhazia, raising living standards in the region and pulling it further away from Georgia's orbit and closer to Russia's.

"We're expecting massive economic development over the next few years thanks to this decision," says the Abkhazian foreign minister, Sergei Shamba. Already most of Abkhazia's trade is with Russia, and many of its citizens have Russian passports.

Russian President Dmitry Medvedev signed a friendship treaty with Abkhazian President Sergei Bagapsh on Sept. 17 that guarantees Russia will militarily defend Abkhazia in the event of an attack from Georgia.

But in addition to security guarantees, the deal also brings economic advantages. The treaty envisages a customs union and privileges for Russian businesses in Abkhazia. A further set of agreements will be drawn up in the coming weeks to finalize the details.

The governors of several Russian regions have journeyed to Abkhazia to talk about investing in the region, and Moscow Mayor Yuri Luzhkov will travel there Tuesday for a victory parade for Russia's war with Georgia in the early-1990s. Russian analysts say that the Kremlin has been signaling that investing in Abkhazia is a "patriotic" thing to do.

In 2014, Russia will host the Winter Olympics in Sochi, just a few miles from the border with Abkhazia. The massive effort required to prepare the city for the Games will be a further factor boosting Abkhazia's economy, with thousands of jobs created just across the border in the construction and service sectors. With the new agreements in place, Abkhazians will have the right to work in Sochi.

Movement in the other direction will also rise. During the Soviet period, hundreds of thousands of tourists relaxed in the sanatoria and hotels of subtropical Abkhazia. Over the past few years, Russian tourists who can't afford trips to Turkey or Egypt - and are willing to sunbathe amid war ruins - have started to return. The hope is that, with regeneration, a higher class of tourist will again be attracted to Abkhazia.

Abkhazian analysts welcomed the possibility of new investment but say that the Abkhazian authorities will have to be wary of ceding too much to Moscow.

"Of course, on the whole it's very positive for us, but we need to negotiate these agreements very carefully to retain as much of our independence as possible," says Irakli Khintba, an independent political analyst in Sukhumi.

Over the spring and summer, Abkhazia looked the most likely place for a spat to escalate into full-blown conflict between Russia and Georgia.

The Russians were accused of moving troops into the region, while the Abkhazians claimed to have shot down several unmanned Georgian spy drones. But when conflict came, it was in South Ossetia, and Abkhazia achieved its decade-old goal of being recognized without being subjected to war.

Russia's decision to recognize these territories surprised many people, including the region's leaders. Georgian officials have said that Russia's actions amount to the annexation of Georgian territory and protest that tens of thousands of Georgian refugees from the region are still unable to return.

But for now, Abkhazia has no interest in joining with Russia to form a single country. "The possibility of a genuine absorption into Russia is not there, in either the short or the medium term," says Mr. Khintba.

"It's not in Russia's interests," he continues. "They'd much rather have a friendly state on their borders than be accused of annexation."

South Ossetian leaders have expressed their desire to link up with their ethnic kin in North Ossetia, across the border in Russia. But the Abkhazians have no such desire, insists Shamba. "There is no pressure at all from Russia for annexation," he says.

Still, he accuses the West of holding a double standard by recognizing Kosovo but not Abkhazia. "The more the West pursues its hypocritical policies, the closer we are pushed towards Russia."

#12

Bush Warns Moscow Against 'Bullying' Neighbors

By Olivier Knox

AFP, September 29, 2008

WASHINGTON - US President George W. Bush met Monday with the leaders of Lithuania and Ukraine to discuss the fallout from Russia's war in Georgia and warned Moscow against "bullying" its democratic neighbors.

In separate White House talks, Bush sought to reassure the former Soviet republics of US support in the face of a newly assertive Kremlin, which some analysts warn may be sizing up other neighbors after the August conflict.

Bush, meeting with Lithuanian President Valdas Adamkus, said they had "talked about Georgia-Russia, and the need for democracies to be able to stand on their own feet without fear of bullying."

Bush also pledged help for Lithuania, as the former Soviet republic and NATO member looks to diversify its sources of energy, and restated the US obligation under the NATO charter to come to the aid of an alliance member under attack.

"It's important for the people of Lithuania to know that when the United States makes a commitment through, for example, Article 5 of the treaty, we mean it," the US president assured his guest.

With Lithuania seeking greater energy independence, Bush pledged the United States will "try to help you as best as we can." And the US president expressed "hope" that, by mid-October, Lithuanians would be able to travel to the United States without first seeking a visa.

Adamkus thanked Bush for his support for Lithuania joining NATO, which it did in 2004, saying that would not have happened without US leadership "and the entire security question in the region would be in doubt."

The Lithuanian leader also appealed for a lasting US presence in Europe, implying such a presence might be necessary to dissuade a newly assertive Moscow from any designs on former Soviet republics. "I hope that United States will be visible ... just to show our neighbors that we're definitely not alone, and we are building the democracy together," said Adamkus.

In talks with Ukraine President Viktor Yushchenko, Bush evoked US support for Kiev's accession to NATO over vehement objections from Russia, which has also denounced Washington's backing of alliance membership for Georgia.

"We discussed the NATO and membership application process. We discussed energy independence. We discussed ways that we can work together to bring stability and peace to parts of the world," said Bush.

Yushchenko sought to reassure his host about political turmoil in Ukraine, where the ruling post-Western alliance has collapsed and some officials warn that any snap elections could result in a victory for pro-Moscow forces.

The situation, "in my opinion, is far away from being tragic, and not dramatic. Ukraine has enough democratic resource and tools to give sufficient response to any crisis that may occur in the Ukrainian parliament," he said. "We raised the issue of energy cooperation, which is a very urgent issue for us," said the Ukrainian leader.

Moscow has seen relations with former Soviet republics and the West deteriorate sharply since its early August war with Georgia, after years of tensions over access to energy supplies controlled by Russia.

Russia has regularly been accused of using its control of a hefty slice of Europe's market for political ends, allegedly turning off the taps to punish governments in Moscow's communist-era stomping ground that are too critical of the Kremlin.

Lithuania, which broke free from the crumbling Soviet bloc in 1991 and joined the EU and NATO in 2004, has been sparring with Russia since August 2006, when the Russian pipeline monopoly Transneft cut supplies to the country's only refinery. And supplies to Europe were briefly disrupted in January 2006 as a consequence of a gas price dispute between Russia and Ukraine.

#13

Russia says U.S. blocking nuclear arms reduction talks

By Louis Charbonneau

Reuters, September 29, 2008

Russia accused the United States on Monday of stonewalling negotiations on a new pact on reducing the size of the two powers' nuclear arsenals, the latest sign of deteriorating Russian-U.S. relations.

"Negotiations between us and Washington to make sure that after START I treaty expires in December 2009 we have some meaningful strategic arms control regime, these negotiations are not so far heading anywhere," said Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov.

The Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty, or START I, between the United States and Soviet Union came was signed in 1991 and eventually resulted in an estimated reduction of around 80 percent of all nuclear weapons in existence at the time.

Speaking on the sidelines of the annual open debate of the U.N. General Assembly, which ends later on Monday, Lavrov said the reason the talks had stalled was that "our American colleagues do not want to keep limits on the delivery vehicles (missile) and on nuclear warheads in storage."

"They only want to keep some limits on the operationally deployed nuclear warheads," he told reporters.

START I signatories were allowed to keep no more than 6,000 nuclear warheads beyond a specific number of intercontinental ballistic missiles, submarine-launched missiles and bombers.

Lavrov's accusation comes as relations between Washington and Moscow grow increasingly icy after Russia's invasion of Georgia last month.

Russian forces thwarted an attempt by Tbilisi to re-establish control over its breakaway region of South Ossetia, which has since declared independence along with another separatist enclave. Only Russia and Nicaragua have recognized their independence.

The Russian minister also criticized the West for arming Georgia, a former Soviet republic that Lavrov said last week is in a geographic area where Moscow has "privileged interests."

The United States and other Western powers, Lavrov charged, had delivered large amounts of weapons to the Tbilisi government, "including by covert means," in violation of European Union rules and understandings within the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe

Russia's relations with its neighbor Georgia have been tense for years, partly because Georgia's pro-Western President Mikheil Saakashvili is determined to join NATO, something Moscow sees as NATO encroaching on its sphere of influence.

Lavrov said the eastward expansion of NATO, which now includes former members of the defunct Warsaw Pact as well as countries that once belonged to the Soviet Union, resulted in NATO becoming the key security forum for the world.

"This NATO centrism contradicts all the commitments of countries in the OSCE space ... not to ensure their own security at the expense of others," he said.

#14

Suleymanov: A view on America's diverse elections

By Elin Suleymanov

Rocky Mountain News, September 28, 2008

Among the factors which make this year's presidential contest in the United States truly special the most important, it seems, is the diversity of the both tickets.

Regardless of political views and opinions, the fact that an African-American stands as the Democratic presidential nominee, while a woman is the vice-presidential choice for the Republican Party embodies important symbolism for the world. Such symbolism should not be underestimated. After all, if specific policies may change or be forgotten years from now, the changing dynamic of who can become the leader of this powerful nation will be nothing less than historic.

Even today it is clear that the most outstanding characteristic of politics in 2008 is the prominent role of women's leadership. From Sen. Hillary Clinton's impressive primary campaign to Gov. Sarah Palin's nomination, women have energized and enriched America's political process. This resonates far beyond America's borders because the world is watching U.S. political process very carefully. Some because the United States is a global power, which has an impact on many nations; others because the diversity makes the election so much more interesting.

For the people of the Republic of Azerbaijan, the prominent role of women in the 2008 American election has an added significance. The reason is that, this year, the Azerbaijanis celebrate the 90th anniversary of establishing the first democratic parliamentary republic in the Muslim world. It was also 90 years ago that the Azerbaijan Democratic Republic, which soon afterward was annexed and abolished by the Bolsheviks, granted equal voting rights for men and women alike.

In doing so, Azerbaijan had pioneered a fundamental principle of equality for the region and beyond. Building on this tradition, Azerbaijan's first lady Mehriban Aliyeva initiated an international forum on expanding the role of women in cross-cultural dialogue in June of 2008. The event, organized jointly with the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and the Islamic Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (ISESCO) in Azerbaijan's capital of Baku, brought together leaders of diverse backgrounds to brainstorm how to promote global understanding through making women leaders more vocal.

It is hard to say whether the forum participants would agree with Gov. Palin's political views, but they, most likely, can relate to the challenge of being a working mother and would appreciate her strong leadership skills. That alone lays foundation for a different tone of global conversation. Today, I am not sure what were specific political positions of first voters in Azerbaijan in 1918, nor who they voted for. One thing is certain: 90 years ago, they made history by personally pioneering change. Almost a century later, that still matters a lot.

#15

Russia proposes steps for Georgian 'demilitarization' - minister ITAR-TASS, September 30, 2008

Russia has prepared a number of initiatives for the UN conference in Geneva that opens on 15 October on how to ensure "the demilitarization of Georgia", Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov has told Russian journalists onboard a plane on his way back from the UN General Assembly session in New York, ITAR-TASS news agency reported on 30 September.

"We have presented our partners with an idea as to how to develop our further work. There needs to be more detail on how the demilitarization of Georgia will be carried out: involving the role of observers on the ground and envisaging flight-free zones around the borders of South Ossetia and Abkhazia," Lavrov said.

Russia has also drawn up draft new agreements between Georgia and Abkhazia and between Georgia and South Ossetia and presented them for the consideration of its UN partners, a later ITAR-TASS report on the same day quoted Lavrov as saying. "Despite the fact that in the document agreed by the presidents of Russia and France, Dmitriy Medvedev and Nicolas Sarkozy, the European Union has assumed the role of the guarantor of the non-use of force against Tskhinvali and Sukhumi, real, legally binding agreements between Georgia and Tskhinvali and Georgia and Sukhumi would not come amiss," Lavrov said.

However, the EU has still not presented its proposals on the international meeting on South Ossetia and Abkhazia in October envisaged by the Medvedev-Sarkozy agreements, Lavrov said, as quoted by RIA Novosti news agency. "So far the French side, as the EU chairman, has not submitted any specific proposals," Lavrov said.

The Russian foreign minister also said he expected the discussion on extending UN and OSCE observers' mandate in Abkhazia and South Ossetia to be difficult, ITAR-TASS said. The UN observation mandate in Abkhazia and nearby Georgian districts expires on 15 October, while the OSCE mandate in South Ossetia and nearby Georgian districts expires on 31 December, he said.

"Therefore these mandates will need to be extended quickly and on the basis of new realities. Of course, the discussion of the new mandates should involve the opinion of the people of Abkhazia and South Ossetia," Lavrov said.

"Difficult work lies ahead: our Western partners categorically insist that the international presence should continue to be called 'missions in Georgia', whereas Tskhinvali and Sukhumi justly insist that this title be changed," he added. Lavrov explained that South Ossetia and Abkhazia supported observers' presence on their territories but wanted this presence to recognize the new reality and the new status of these two republics.

#16

Gorbachev to form political party in Russia

By Steve Gutterman

AP, September 30, 2008

A Russian billionaire said Tuesday he is teaming up with former Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev to form a new political party that will challenge the country's recent steps away from democracy.

Alexander Lebedev, a former lawmaker who has built a fortune in business and investment, said he and Gorbachev would work together in a political movement tentatively named the Independent Democratic Party.

Kremlin critics say that during his eight years as president, current Prime Minister Vladimir Putin reversed Russia's post-Soviet movement toward democracy and enhanced state control over the economy, courts and media.

Gorbachev could not immediately be reached for comment and it wasn't clear if the 77-year-old planned to seek an active political role more than 17 years after the Soviet Union collapsed around him, costing him his job as its last leader.

It would be an uphill battle: Gorbachev is popular abroad, but is reviled by many Russians who blame him for the Soviet breakup. He won less than 1 percent of the votes in the 1996 presidential election and has not run since.

In a statement on his Web site, Lebedev said the new party was Gorbachev's idea. "The initiative belongs to President Gorbachev. He gave our people freedom, but we have not learned how to use it."

Lebedev said the party would advocate a "return to a normal electoral system," calling for the restoration of gubernatorial elections, a stronger parliament, independent courts and media, and a smaller state role in the economy.

Gorbachev has generally praised Putin for lifting the nation out of the post-Soviet troubles that many Russians blame on the late Boris Yeltsin, a longtime rival of Gorbachev who replaced him in the Kremlin.

But he has cautiously criticized the political system put in place by Putin. The United Russia party of the immensely popular Putin dominates parliament and regional governments while Kremlin critics have been sidelined, sometimes through force.

Earlier this year, Gorbachev suggested that United Russia was in danger of becoming like the all-powerful Soviet-era Communist Party and called for major changes in the electoral system.

Lebedev, a major private shareholder in the Russian airline Aeroflot, joined with Gorbachev in 2006 to buy 49 percent of Novaya Gazeta, an independent newspaper that has challenged the Kremlin with penetrating investigative reporting. Anna Politkovskaya, a prominent investigative reporter murdered that year, worked for Novaya Gazeta.

In June, Gorbachev and Lebedev urged the creation of a national museum and memorial to honor victims of Soviet-era repression — a move seen as a challenge to the government, which critics say has glossed over the crimes of Josef Stalin to justify its own retreat from democracy.

#17

EU Monitors Take Up Positions in Georgia After War With Russia

By Helena Bedwell

Bloomberg, September 30, 2008

About 300 European Union monitors will begin patrolling in Georgia tomorrow following the former Soviet republic's war with Russia last month over the separatist region of South Ossetia.

The civilian, unarmed monitors will eventually replace Russian peacekeepers in buffer zones that extend into Georgia from South Ossetia and another breakaway region, Abkhazia, whose independence Russia recognized on Aug. 26.

Russian President Dmitry Medvedev on Sept. 8 agreed to withdraw troops from the buffer zones within 10 days after international observers are deployed. The agreement reached by Medvedev and his French counterpart, Nicolas Sarkozy, also called for Georgian troops to return to their bases by Oct. 1, the Russian Foreign Ministry said.

"The first part of the mission, which is a very important objective, is to have Russian troops withdraw," EU foreign policy chief Javier Solana told reporters in the capital Tbilisi. "I am very optimistic that all the parties involved will comply as it was done in the agreement."

The EU mission will meet with Russian officials tomorrow, Solana said. "The main purpose of this mission is to allow Russian troops to withdraw," he said.

An EU-brokered cease-fire agreement ended the fighting between Georgia and Russia. The EU and the U.S. condemned Russia's incursion into Georgia on Aug. 8 and its decision to recognize South Ossetia and Abkhazia. On Sept. 15, the EU announced plans to provide Georgia with 500 million euros (\$717 million) in aid to help resettle refugees and rebuild roads, bridges and buildings destroyed in the conflict.

Solana is scheduled to travel to the central city of Gori, near South Ossetia, where a part of the EU observer mission will be deployed. Groups of monitors will also be located in Zugdidi, near Abkhazia, the port city of Poti and Tbilisi.

#18

Babi Yar massacre remembered at Kiev monument European Jewish Press, September 30, 2008

About hundred people held a mourning ceremony Monday at the Babi Yar monument in Kiev, Ukraine, to mark the 67th anniversary of the beginning of the mass execution of Jews by the Nazis in September 1941. The ceremony took place at Babi Yar square where the Nazis shot more than 100,000 Jews in 1941-1944.

The massacre became a terrible symbol of the Holocaust.

Relatives of the victims laid flowers, candles and small stones according to Jewish tradition at a monument formed in the shape of a menorah, or seven-branched candelabrum.

On September 29-30, 1941 nearly 34,000 Jews, many of them elderly, women and children, were driven at gun-point to Babi Yar by German troops who told them they were to be resettled, just days after the Nazi invasion.

They were shot along the ravine's edge over two days, in what was the first systematic extermination of Ukrainian Jews.

The ravine continued to be used for executions and up to 60,000 more people -- Jews, Roma, resistance fighters and Soviet prisoners of war -- were killed there until 1943.

Before retreating from the advancing Red Army in 1943, Nazi troops exhumed and burned the corpses at Babi Yar in a bid to hide the atrocities.

But the secrets of Babi Yar became part of the accusations against senior Nazi officials at the Nuremberg trials and a monument was erected in Soviet times to the memory of the victims.

However Soviet authorities tried to play down the sensitive Jewish component of Babi Yar. Anniversary gatherings were banned at the site and there was an attempt to build a stadium there in the 1960s.

In all, some 800,000 Ukrainian Jews were killed in the war.

Today, around 180,000 Jews live in Ukraine.

Anti-Semitism remains a problem in the country where the Jewish community has enjoyed something of a revival. There are now about 60 functioning synagogues compared to 14 in the post-war Soviet era.

Earlier this year, the Council of Europe, a human rights body based in Strasbourg, issued a report expressing concern about growing racially motivated attacks in Ukraine and especially about attacks against rabbis and Jewish students, as well as the vandalism of synagogues, cemeteries and cultural centres.

#19

Is Yushchenko's Ukraine Ready for a NATO MAP?

By Pavel Korduban

Eurasia Daily Monitor, October 1, 2008

Ukrainian President Viktor Yushchenko paid two visits to the United States at the end of September. Among the main goals of his visits was to confirm Ukraine's hope to secure an Action Plan for NATO Membership (MAP) ahead of the NATO foreign ministers' meeting scheduled for December. Yushchenko failed to secure a MAP for Ukraine at the NATO summit in Bucharest in April, and he will probably fail again. Ukraine has hardly moved any closer toward this goal since April.

Speaking in an interview ahead of his first visit, Yushchenko expressed his disappointment at not receiving a MAP thus far. "Everyone needs to understand that everything Ukraine needed to do to obtain a positive answer [on NATO], if we speak openly and honestly, it has done that," he said. "We need to get a signal from the alliance itself that we are respected, that we are valued," Yushchenko added (The Washington Times, September 18).

Meeting with Jewish leaders in New York, Yushchenko claimed that Ukraine had fulfilled all conditions for NATO's MAP. "I do not know what else my country should do to put an end to discussions on this issue," he said. Yushchenko urged NATO to "expand the area of security further east" in the wake of the Russia-Georgia conflict.

The lack of popular support for NATO membership has been one of the strongest arguments in Europe against a MAP for Ukraine, especially in France and Germany. Yushchenko admitted that this was a problem as there "have been discussions in Ukrainian society"; but he promised that Ukraine would hold a referendum on NATO entry in due course, as the pro-Russian opposition demanded. Yushchenko argued that "there are increasingly more supporters of the membership each month, and increasingly fewer opponents" (UNIAN, September 23).

The most recent opinion polls have indicated that Yushchenko was not altogether wrong about popular support. A poll by the Sotsiomyr pollster revealed that popular support for NATO membership grew by some 10 percent over the past several months to 31 percent in early September (UNIAN, September 19). This was a very high figure for Ukraine, where popular support for NATO entry usually hovered around 20 to 25 percent.

Figures obtained by a different, arguably more pro-Russian, pollster, Sofia, were less positive, but they confirmed the trend. According to Sofia, which conducted its poll from September 9 to 17, popular support for NATO membership grew to 23.7 percent from 21.4 percent in May (Interfax, September 24).

The positive popular opinion trend may be temporary, prompted by Russia's actions in Georgia. Ukraine has hardly made any progress in most other respects since the Bucharest NATO summit. Internationally, Russia's opposition remains one of the main obstacles to Ukraine's MAP, and Yushchenko has done little to assuage

Russia's misapprehension. His reaction to the events in Georgia, for example, was viewed in Moscow as overly hostile (see EDM, August 15).

Most recently Vladimir Zhirinovskiy, the Russian ultranationalist leader who often acts as the Kremlin's unofficial spokesman, warned that "if someone attempts to drag Ukraine into NATO and the people start to protest against this and they are harassed...then Russia will have the right to defend its citizens in Ukraine." He added that "it would be ideal for both Georgia and Ukraine to remain neutral" (Ukraina TV, September 22).

Domestically, Yushchenko's pro-NATO efforts have failed. His Our Ukraine party, which is backed by hardly more than 10 to 14 percent of Ukrainians, has been the only consistent supporter of a MAP and NATO membership among the leading parties. The party of Prime Minister Yulia Tymoshenko has been less enthusiastic about NATO, as Tymoshenko apparently fears that a decisively pro-NATO course would prompt Russia to charge Ukraine more for gas. If the opposition Party of Regions, which has always been wary of NATO, emerges winner in the current political turmoil prompted by the demise of the Yushchenko-Tymoshenko coalition (see EDM, September 17), domestic support for NATO will be even weaker.

Yushchenko's NATO awareness campaign has been a flop. Several tenders to select a PR firm to organize pro-NATO events in two-thirds of Ukrainian towns have produced no result, as the government allotted a very small sum for this, the equivalent of \$100,000, said the acting head of the Foreign Ministry's NATO information department, Vladyslava Bondarenko. So far the Tymoshenko government has spent just one third of the dismal \$2 million earmarked in the state budget for advertising NATO, a Ukrainian business daily reported (Delo, September 30).

Finally, the Ukrainian army may not be quite up to NATO standards. Yushchenko recalled at a recent meeting of his National Security and Defense Council that Ukraine spends the least of all CIS countries on its army's needs, only 1 percent of GDP. "Experts say that when the critical level of funding is 1 percent, that is when the armed forces start to get ruined," he said. According to Yushchenko, only 21 of Ukraine's 112 fighters and only four of its 26 warships are fully operational (UT1, September 26).

#20
Anti-Extremism Agency Proposed
By Natalya Krainova
Moscow Times, October 1, 2008

The Prosecutor General's Office on Tuesday proposed creating a separate law enforcement agency to battle extremism.

Addressing the State Duma in hearings on extremism Tuesday, Deputy Prosecutor General Viktor Grin said such an agency is needed because federal and local authorities have been "ineffective" in preventing hate crimes in recent years.

There were 356 extremist crimes registered last year, up from 130 in 2004, Grin said, Interfax reported. Through the first six months of this year, authorities registered 250 extremist crime, 73 of which were committed in Moscow, he said.

The jump is due to an increasing number of hate crimes, even as the number of terrorist acts is falling, he said. From January through June, there were 19 religiously or racially motivated killings in Russia, all but two of which were committed in Moscow, he said.

Grin said the Internet and computer games are being used to promote terrorism and hate crimes. The Internet offers instructions on making explosives and blowing up buildings, while popular computer games promote racially motivated violence, he said.

Duma deputies issued a statement following the hearings calling the spike in hate crimes "a real threat to the foundations of the constitutional system" that "undermines social stability."

It was unclear whether the Prosecutor General's Office had formulated a concrete plan for the proposed agency. A spokeswoman there declined immediate comment Tuesday.

Lawmakers and human rights activists were skeptical about the effectiveness of a new agency to fight extremism.

"This is simply harmful," said Gennady Gudkov, a member of the Duma's Security Committee. "We would be relieving those who should be fighting extremism of their constitutional responsibility."

Galina Kozhevnikova, deputy head of the Sova Center, which tracks hate crimes, said she feared that the proposed agency would be "directed toward the political opposition" and be "a corruption machine."

The actual number of hate crimes in the country is much higher than the figures provided by authorities, Kozhevnikova said.

President Dmitry Medvedev, meanwhile, told Interior Ministry officials in the Kremlin on Tuesday that they must "step up the fight against extremism and ultranationalism."

#21

Medvedev: No grounds for Cold War with US

By Irina Titova

AP, October 1, 2008

Russian President Dmitry Medvedev said Wednesday that he sees no ideological grounds for a war with the United States → cold or hot → despite strained relations with Washington and the NATO alliance.

Russia's relations with the U.S. were already at a post-Cold War low when they were further damaged by Russia's war with U.S. ally Georgia in August. Russia has complained vehemently about what it says is a growing U.S. military presence near its borders.

But Medvedev said Wednesday that the Cold War was based on ideological differences between the Soviet Union and the NATO nations.

"We do not have such ideological differences around which a new cold or any other kind of war could start," Medvedev said after talks with Spanish Prime Minister Jose Luis Rodriguez Zapatero outside St. Petersburg.

Medvedev said he would not "dramatize" troubled ties between Russia and NATO, and warned that NATO needs Russia more than Russia needs NATO.

He also said the outcome of the U.S. presidential election should not affect relations between Washington and Moscow.

Regardless of who wins the U.S. presidency, "Job No. 1 is to deal with the situation in the economy → that's what must be done."

The top U.S. diplomat for Latin America, Assistant Secretary of State Thomas Shannon, said Wednesday that, despite Russia's diplomatic and military overtures in the region, the U.S. has "no intention of reviving Cold War images or Cold War rhetoric."

"This is a conflict that the region has thankfully left behind," he told The Associated Press in a telephone interview.

Asked how concerned Washington is about Russia's deepening ties with Venezuela and its dispatching of a naval squadron there on a visit, he said: "There is no doubt about who holds the preponderance of military power in the Caribbean, so we certainly don't see this activity as presenting a military or geopolitical threat to us."

Prime Minister Vladimir Putin continued Russia's repeated verbal jabs at the U.S. over the global financial crisis.

"Everything that is happening today in the sphere of economics and finance began, as is known, in the U.S.," Putin told a Cabinet meeting, according to an official transcript.

"This whole crisis, which has hit many countries and, most sadly, the inability to make adequate decisions → this is (the result) not of the irresponsibility of specific individuals but the irresponsibility of a system → a system that pretended to leadership," he said, clearly referring to the United States.

"But we see that it is not only unable to provide leadership but not even capable of making adequate, absolutely necessary decisions to overcome crisis phenomena," he said.

White House spokesman Tony Fratto, asked to respond to Putin's remarks, said: "We have dealt with this problem, a very complicated and far-reaching problem, in as aggressive a way possible. And I don't think there's any question of that, and I'll just leave it at that."

#22

EU says Georgia's S. Ossetia likely closed to monitors

By Matt Robinson

Reuters, October 2, 2008

The head of the European Union's monitoring mission to Georgia said on Thursday it would be unrealistic to expect Russian forces to grant the monitors access to breakaway South Ossetia in the near future.

German diplomat Hansjoerg Haber told Reuters the ceasefire monitors would try to deal with the South Ossetian police to make the de facto border more "porous" for trade and to mediate between police on either side.

But Russia's recognition of Georgia's two breakaway regions means "we will in all probability not be given access to patrol South Ossetia and Abkhazia," he said.

"We are a civilian, unarmed observer mission and we can only go where we are allowed to go," Haber, 55, said in an interview at the mission's Tbilisi headquarters, a hillside villa once home to Stalin's ruthless secret police chief, Lavrenty Beria.

"... we do not expect to be allowed to go there soon."

"The hope -- but this is still more a vague idea than a precise operational plan -- is to use the necessities on the ground to make the frontier a bit porous, with law enforcement authorities on both sides cooperating."

The more than 200 monitors began patrolling on Wednesday, gaining limited access to a Russian-controlled buffer zone adjacent to South Ossetia.

It is part of a French-brokered ceasefire deal that should see the withdrawal by Oct. 10 of Russian forces from two "security zones" in undisputed Georgian territory, created after the five-day war between Russia and Georgia last month.

Haber's comments are likely to disappoint the Georgian authorities, who insist the EU stick to a mandate that the bloc says allows it to patrol the whole of Georgia, including the rebel regions recognised by Russia.

"SOMEWHERE IN BETWEEN"

Skirmishes between separatists and Georgian troops erupted in war in August when Georgia's army tried to retake South Ossetia, which threw off Tbilisi's rule in 1991-92.

Russia responded with a powerful counter-strike that drove the Georgian army out of South Ossetia. Its forces then pushed further into Georgia, saying they needed to prevent further Georgian attacks.

The West, its relations with Moscow hitting a new low, has condemned Russia for a "disproportionate response" to Georgia's actions and demanded that Russian troops quit the buffer zones.

Russia plans to keep some 7,600 troops in South Ossetia and Abkhazia and says there is no need for EU monitors to go there.

Haber, who served in the German embassy in Moscow in 1999-2002, said the Russian military had indicated which checkpoints they would remove and in what order, "but we don't have the timeline yet."

The mission is expected to coordinate the simultaneous return of Georgian police to the area, in some parts of which human rights groups say paramilitaries have been looting and attacking ethnic Georgian villages, forcing thousands to flee.

"We have only a partial idea of exactly how the retreat will take place," Haber said, "the difficulty being that if they remove a checkpoint at the first line, we will then be able to go all the way from the relatively harmless first layer up to the administrative border, where conditions are difficult."

"The Russians will evidently want to have a certain distance between themselves retreating and the Georgians following, so we will probably be somewhere in between," he said.

Haber said there was some unease on the Russian side about the type of Georgian police that will deploy in the area and concern about some heavily armed special police units.

The Georgian Interior Ministry has assured him the police will be "more or less normally armed," he said, but added that "... in securing law and order in the adjacent area we can't just rely on the solitary policeman with his side weapon."

#23

Key question lingers: Who started the war in Georgia?

By Fred Weir and Olga Podolskaya

Christian Science Monitor, October 2, 2008

Tskhinvali, South Ossetia; and Moscow - Who started the Russia-Georgia war?

Ask residents of this now battered Soviet-era provincial capital, you'll hear only one answer: Georgia.

Just hours after announcing a unilateral cease-fire on Aug. 7, Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili ordered a massive artillery and armored assault aimed at restoring rebellious South Ossetia to Georgian rule.

"Thank God the Russians came in time," says Elena Khublova, who says she survived by hiding in a basement. "The Georgians were killing anybody who came into the street."

But new details contradict that version of events, according to a Russian investigative journalist. At the United Nations last week, Mr. Saakashvili also laid out a starkly different narrative, and pleaded for an impartial international investigation to gain "a clearer understanding of how this war started, and who started it."

Finding the answer is not merely an academic or historical exercise. Russian observers say the answer is critical to current global perceptions of a resurgent Russia. Is it a rational \neg if increasingly assertive \neg regional power protecting its flanks? Or is it reviving the international ambitions and military expansionism of the former USSR?

Much is also at stake for Saakashvili, who argued at the UN that "Georgia was attacked because it is a successful democracy," and who is asking the West to back his tiny Caucasus nation's drive to join NATO.

"In Georgian society, as well as around the world, exactly how the war started is the biggest question mark," says Archil Gegeshidze, an expert with the independent Foundation for Strategic and International Studies in Georgia's capital, Tbilisi. "We want to know whether this crisis was avoidable or not."

Was Georgia the aggressor?

The Kremlin insists that it intervened only to blunt the Georgian offensive and save South Ossetia's Russian-passport-carrying population under 1992 accords that designate Russia as the peacekeeper in the region. Most of the world accepts key elements of the Russian version, and very few contradict it.

South Ossetia, a Rhode Island-sized territory of about 70,000 people, declared independence from Georgia as the USSR was collapsing.

It defeated Georgian forces in 1992, and survived until last summer as a Russian protectorate with no chances of being recognized as an independent country, even by Moscow. Though the territory is Georgian under international law, Russian experts argue that Georgia's second attempt to seize it by force invalidate Tbilisi's claim.

Russian President Dmitry Medvedev recognized the independence of South Ossetia and Abkhazia following the August war, and Russia is now constructing permanent military bases in both regions.

"Russia had been actively preparing for Georgian aggression for the past six months, because our intelligence services warned us that Saakashvili was preparing an attack" on South Ossetia or Abkhazia, says Andrei Klimov, deputy chair of the Russian State Duma's international affairs committee. Mr. Klimov has compiled a detailed timeline of events leading up to the war, that shows the Russian 58th Army entering South Ossetia on the afternoon of Aug. 8, nearly 20 hours after massed Georgian armor and artillery began bombarding Tskhinvali.

Or had Russia started invading first?

"When it happened, we were not as ready as we should have been, and Saakashvili had time to destroy Tskhinvali," Klimov says.

But Saakashvili's version, backed by at least one dissenting Russian military expert, is that he flung his forces into South Ossetia in an attempt to head off a significant Russian invasion already in progress.

Saakashvili has repeatedly insisted that Georgian intelligence identified huge numbers of Russian tanks and troops inside South Ossetia on Aug. 7, before Georgian forces assaulted Tskhinvali.

Top US officials told him that they are unable to verify this, he explained in a televised statement recently, because "their satellites were directed mainly on Iraq ... and it was impossible to see what was happening on the ground [in Georgia] because it was cloudy."

Georgian officials argue that Russia has been preparing a military strike since the Saakashvili-led "Rose Revolution" five years ago put the little country on a path to join NATO; Georgia declared itself a key US ally in the energy-rich Caspian region.

That case is broadly supported by US officials, but unexpected details have been provided by a Russian investigative journalist, Pavel Felgenhauer, military correspondent of the independent Moscow weekly Novaya Gazeta.

Citing military sources, Mr. Felgenhauer says, "The decision to make war against Georgia in August was finalized by Russia's General Staff in April," and Russia began preparing for an invasion.

In subsequent months, he says, the Russian Navy began making its notoriously lax Black Sea fleet seaworthy.

The Russian Army inserted special troops into Abkhazia to repair the railroad lines, and in late July, the Vladikavkaz-based 58th Army began staging war games near the border with South Ossetia. "Those exercises were actually the final deployment of troops for the invasion," which began a week later, he says.

Russian officials say the Army exercises were routine, and that any longer-term preparations were due to an awareness that Georgian forces — who were also holding war games in July — were possibly preparing an attack.

"Those exercises take place two or three times a year," says Stanislav Kesayev, vice speaker of the Russian republic of North Ossetia's parliament. "It was well known that Saakashvili, who was desperate to show Georgia's readiness to join NATO, was getting ready to do something reckless," he adds.

Georgian experts say Russia's South Ossetian allies began a campaign of "provocations," including shelling Georgian villages and attacking Georgian police, in the days before the war began. "It was clearly Russia that wanted the war, and it made every effort to entrap Georgia through provocations," says Mr. Gegashidze.

However, most of the incidents cited by Georgian experts are matched by alleged "Georgian provocations," including assassinations and kidnappings of South Ossetian officials, detailed in Klimov's timeline.

Evacuations before the assault

South Ossetian officials admit that they evacuated much of their own civilian population from Tskhinvali in the days before the war began. Despite Russian claims of "genocide" by Georgian forces, human rights organizations have subsequently been able to document no more than 137 dead South Ossetians, most of whom appear to have been combatants.

"The war may have surprised the world, but we all knew it was coming," says Stanislav Dzheioyev, a South Ossetian official. "We could see the Georgian Army on the move, so we got our families out of Tskhinvali."

An investigation by the independent Russian human rights movement, Memorial, released last week suggests that the same thing happened in South Ossetia's Georgian-populated villages in the days preceding hostilities. "The villagers had all been warned by the pro-Georgian leaders to leave, and promised a swift return after it was all over," says Alexander Cherkasov, a Memorial activist.

Last week, standing near the fire-blackened shell remains of the huge, colonnaded parliament building that dominates Tskhinvali's central square, South Ossetian President Eduard Kokoity said the world can debate these questions as much as it likes, but he's only interested in rebuilding.

"We tried to achieve independence peacefully, but our neighbor didn't want it," he says. "Now we have won it, and it's something that's worth living and working for."

#24

Russia: Religious freedom survey [excerpt]

By Geraldine Fagan

Forum 18, October 1, 2008

The gravest current threat to freedom of thought, conscience and belief in Russia comes from the federal government's approach to combating religious extremism, Forum 18 News Service finds in its survey analysis of religious freedom. In the wake of the 2002 Extremism Law, moderate Muslim literature has been outlawed as inciting religious extremism - despite the reasoning behind this being questionable. This has led to harassment and sometimes prosecution of alleged authors, distributors or simply readers. The authorities have subsequently begun to level religious extremism charges against other confessions, including traditional pagans, Jehovah's Witnesses and a Baptist. Some religious communities continue to complain of restriction through petty bureaucracy, such as the loss of legal status for unlicensed educational work or not engaging in financial activity, even though the law is ambiguous on these points. Long-running problems – such as state disruption of religious events, obstruction of access to and retention of property for worship and bureaucratic visa problems for foreign religious personnel - persist.

(The full report can be read at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1196)

#25

Congress Joins Fight on "Durban II" NGO Monitor, October 2, 2008

On September 23, 2008, the US Congress adopted House of Representatives Resolution 1361 in anticipation of the Durban Review Conference (scheduled for April 20-24, 2009). This resolution calls on the US government to "lead a high-level diplomatic effort" aimed at "to defeat any effort by states to use the forum to promote anti-Semitism or hatred against members of any group or to call into question the legitimacy of any state."

The detailed text highlights the enormous damage to human rights that resulted from the 2001 conference in Durban, South Africa, and particularly at the NGO Forum, which "misused human rights language to promote hate, anti-Semitism, incitement, and divert the focus of the conference from problems within their own countries to a focus on Israel." Resonating with the analysis provided by NGO Monitor's Prof. Gerald Steinberg in a briefing to Congressional members one week before the adoption of the resolution, the text emphasized the damage done by the "'NGO Declaration' that contained abusive language, branding Israel an 'apartheid state' that is guilty of 'racist crimes against humanity.'"

The resolution, which was based on a draft written in the Foreign Affairs committee, is an impressive display of wide political consensus on 'Durban II.' This initiative gained the active support of Rep. Howard Berman, the leader of Democratic majority on the committee, and the Republican Ranking Member, Rep. Ileana Ros-Lehtinen. A total of 24 co-sponsors signed their names to the text, including leading African-American political figure Rep. John Conyers. This broad-based approach reflects opposition not only to the attacks against Israel that are embodied in the Durban process, but also the disastrous impact on genuine human rights concerns that results from these activities.

In sounding the warning, the Congressional resolution also highlights the declared intention of the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC) to use the Review Conference to again attack Israel, and to focus on "global blasphemy," which "would legitimize arbitrary restrictions of freedom of thought, conscience and religion, and the freedoms of expression and opinion, all in the name of protecting religions from 'defamation' and 'blasphemy.'"

On this foundation, the resolution goes on to propose a fifteen-point operational plan, including calling on "the President and the Secretary of State to lead a high-level diplomatic effort to ensure that the Durban Review Conference focuses on the implementation by states of their commitments to combat racism" and "to defeat any effort by states to use the forum to promote anti-Semitism or hatred against members of any group or to call into question the legitimacy of any state." It advocates pressure on US allies, such as Egypt (head of the African Group and very active in promoting the demonization of Israel, in violation of the 1979 peace treaty), to "ensure that the Durban Review Conference does not become a forum for anti-Semitism, incitement or hatred..."

While not calling for a boycott, the authors of the resolution commend American and European governments "that have declared their intentions not to participate in any ...Conference that sidesteps scrutiny of country commitments to combat racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia, and related intolerance, and that promotes hate, undermines human rights standards, and damages the credibility of the United Nations itself."

This provision, like others, reflects the compromise language designed to get a large number and range of co-sponsors. Ranking Member Ros-Lehtinen stated her reservations, noting that this version "places the emphasis on higher level U.S. diplomatic efforts on ensuring that Durban II follows up on the commitments made at the last conference, an effort that could be interpreted as legitimizing the first Durban meeting... it is imperative that we not imply, in hindsight, that Durban I was more positive than it actually was; neither should we pretend that Durban II will be less disastrous than it actually will be."

#26

Netzer Hosts Well Over a Thousand at Annual FSU Summer Camps World Union for Progressive Judaism, October 2, 2008

Over a thousand junior high, high school and college students in the former Soviet Union participated in this year's summer camp program of Netzer Olami, the World Union's international Zionist youth movement. In addition, there was a camp for young families and a camp/seminar for counsellors. The camps took place in June, July and August at eight locations in Russia, Ukraine, Belarus and Latvia.

"Despite the world economic crisis and budget cuts," says Alex Kagan, the World Union's director for the former Soviet Union, "we managed to maintain the number of participants as well as a high quality program - an indication of the importance of youth programs in the World Union strategic plan. As a result, we have been able to reach many young people and impart Jewish tradition in the modern world."

The camps were led by the World Union's resident rabbis in the FSU, with assistance from local professional staff. In addition, Rabbi Gregory Kotlyar, Rabbi Ilana Baird and Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Region rabbinic student Alexander Koifman flew in from Israel, as did Maoz Haviv, executive director of Netzer Olami. There were various camp themes, including Tikkun Olam, the six days of creation, the Torah, Jewish identity, Netzer Olami, Tisha B'Av and the Days of Awe, and Crossroads and Choices in Jewish History. All of the camps included typical summer camp activities, as well as prayer and study sessions.

Perhaps most noteworthy was the camp for young families, which was held in June at a resort outside Moscow. The program theme was Tikkun Olam, and it closely followed the goals of weekend seminars held throughout the year in order to introduce families with young children to Progressive Judaism. What's more, the camp integrated two important projects being conducted by the Progressive movement in Russia: one for families with children with special needs, the other for families in which members have hearing impairments.

"This cooperation was a very important educational element of our program, which taught tolerance, compassion and good deeds," says Evgenia Rozental, the Russian movement's executive director and fundraising coordinator. "All of the major activities were organised for everyone, and it was beneficial for all groups."

The group of hearing-impaired campers was taught the Shema, Oseh Shalom and other prayers in sign language. Later, all of the campers were taught to recite the prayers in this fashion. "It was a very moving moment for children and parents alike," says Rozental.

In addition, a mission from the Stephen Wise Free Synagogue in New York City, led by Rabbi Ammiel Hirsch, visited a camp for teens held in Kyiv, in addition to various Progressive congregations and institutions there and in Cherkassy, Moscow and St. Petersburg.

#27

Russian march again

Moscow Bureau for Human Rights, October 2, 2008

As it became known, DPNI is going to conduct a "Russian march" again this year. During recent years MBHR and Moscow anti-fascist center attracted the attention of the office of public prosecutor and militia more than once to the xenophobe rhetoric and slogans heard during these actions. But there was no response, and this consolidated the participants of "brown route" in their innocence and impunity.

The DPNI leader A. Belov (Potkin) was the first to announce the conduction of "march" – he declared the formation of an organizational committee to work over choice of place for the activity and coordination with the authorities. The organizational committee included the representatives of organizations "Russian national Union" (RONS), "People's Union", "Slavic Union", Moscow branch of the Union of Russian People, NPF "Memory", "Russian national-bolshevik front" (the two latter organizations are actually the organizations-satellites of DPNI). A. Belov (Potkin) himself announced that according to his calculations about 5 thousand people would participate in Moscow "march" and 3 thousand people – in St. Petersburg one (it should be noted that these figures seem much more realistic than those presented in applications of recent years for 10-15 thousand participants). Besides, it is supposed that processions will be conducted in all the seven federal districts. Regional DPNI branches got the recommendations to conduct the "Russian march" by their own strength provided that it would assemble 300 people at least. If there would be no sufficient number of people, than the nationalists from several neighboring cities would unite their efforts. At the same time it was proposed to conduct the processions just under black-yellow-white imperial flag without party symbolism. Probably one of the purposes of such a proposal is to present DPNI as the single organizer of the "march" depreciating the role of separate organizations. Consolidation of processions is apparently directed at gaining their larger weight.

"Russian marches" are conducted for already three years. First procession of this kind took place on November 5, 2005 with the name "right march" and was dated for the state holiday celebrated in the country – the Day of national unity. About three thousand people belonging to various right-radical nationalistic organizations walked around Moscow center then with transparencies "Let's clear Russia from uninvited guests!", "Expel the occupants!" and shouting of slogans: "Russia for Russians, Moscow without immigrants!" Adherents of national-socialist ideology included into the DPNI column got the instruction "to inflict maximally hard injuries to the enemies right up to lethal outcome in case of real collisions with anti-fascists". Indignant responses of rights defending organizations and mass media caused its official condemnation by deputies of "Unified Russia" and promise of Moscow mayor Yu. Luzhkov "to prevent the outburst of marginal forces".

Though the conduction of the march was prohibited next year, the competitive nationalistic organizations managed to conduct some meetings on November 4. Activists of "Russian march" led by deputies Nikolay Kuryanovich, Dmitry Rogozin and Viktor Alxnis assembled in Moscow underground and conducted a meeting after that with about fifteen hundred people assembled. Adherents of S. Baburin conducted their own meeting at Devichye pole. Though S. Baburin tried to make this meeting more respectable asking to avoid raising hands in Nazi salutation and not to turn the "holiday and protest against vicious laws into a farce of revolt", this didn't prevent the meeting participants from holding posters with anti-Semitic and anti-Caucasian slogans and speaking with national-extremist appeals. A meeting "Right march" arranged by All-Russian political public organization "Christin revival" Union took place at Slavyanskaya square under the slogans "For clean Yauza without Americans", "Orthodox Christianity or death". The seceded national-radicals (NSO, "Format-18", "Natstech") announced that they would prefer committing an attack at anti-fascist meeting that took place at Bolotnaya square, instead of "actually prohibited "Russian march". However neo-Nazists had to content themselves with shouting their slogans and insults addressed to the meeting participants due to the fact that the meeting approaches were blocked by law-enforcement forces. Except Moscow, the "march" of November 4, 2006 also took place in St. Petersburg assembling 400 people as well as in Kaliningrad, Volgograd and other cities where 100-200 people were assembled on average.

On November 4, 2007 two nationalistic actions took place in Moscow: activists of DPNI and Slavic union walked around it in the afternoon and a meeting of "People's union" of S. Baburin took place in the evening. According to various estimates, the mass demonstration was participated by 4-5 thousand people (official

figure of 900 people seems most underestimated). Despite of warning of the authorities about inadmissibility of extremist manifestations, the national-socialists who participated in mass demonstration raised their hands in Nazi salutation and shouted "Heil Hitler!" Mass demonstrations in St. Petersburg and other cities had the similar slogans. The observers note that the marches had much more number of participants and more organization this time.

What can be anticipated in the country with the connivance for such marches? It's enough to list just some of slogans that were common at the previous marches: "Glory of nation – death to enemies!", "Magadan – railway station – Baku!", "Death to Asians!", "Russia for Russians, Moscow for Muscovites!", "Putin is the Jews' protege", "Kondopoga is a hero-city", "Away with occupants!", "Let's clear Russia from uninvited guests!"

No doubt the march planned for this year won't be inferior to the previous ones in its misanthropic pathos. It will be indicative how the authority and society would behave as a result of this action.

#28

Liberals Must Come to Grips With New Russia

By Boris Kapustin

The Moscow Times, October 2, 2008

Russian liberalism is not just in crisis, politically speaking. It has ceased to exist. It is not represented in the parliament, it has disappeared as a focus of public debates, even among intellectuals, and its claims to be a credible and politically attractive ideology now seem vain if not preposterous. I use the term "Russian liberalism" as an umbrella concept embracing the political practices and mechanisms, both the neoliberal and social liberal types, which identified the Russian "exit from communism" with the establishment of the rule of law, political and ideological pluralism, the market economy and an openness to the West.

Neither the repressive nature of the present regime nor the innate hostility of the Russian "cultural tradition" toward liberalism can explain this calamity. These are pseudo-explanations that serve the country's liberals as pretexts for their own innocence. If liberalism is to be reborn in Russia, one must understand the political causes of its demise. Liberalism failed as an ideology in Russia in the wake of communism's collapse. Now liberals must free themselves from the burden of the Boris Yeltsin legacy -- its unabashed neoliberalism -- and confront the type of capitalism expressed by the present regime's "authoritarian capitalism."

Up to the end of the 1990s, the regime of authoritarian capitalism had not been consolidated. The future autocrats still needed the liberal intelligentsia as one of their props. So when Vladimir Putin took over as president, he was careful to preserve the semblance of the liberals' participation in politics, even co-opting some of them as "advisers," "experts" and functionaries of the regime. Those who were determined to put their liberal beliefs into practice were later ejected from their positions and the rest were assimilated into the rising and solidifying bureaucracy of authoritarian capitalism. The liberals' "moment of truth" arrived with the new century, when the regime realized that it could henceforth perpetuate itself without recourse to the liberal intelligentsia. The liberals were found politically redundant and the regime abandoned rather than persecuted them. On their own, the liberals could not survive politically. This is what predetermined the electoral failures in 2003 of parties like Yabloko and the Union of Right Forces.

The same liberals today castigate the regime, and with good reason. The absence of an independent judiciary, severe limitations of the freedom of the mass media, rampant corruption in all branches of bureaucracy and the systematic harassment of nearly all opposition are genuine ills. It is one thing, though, to articulate all these grievances and quite another to set out an attractive and politically mobilizing ideology. Russia's liberals have to send forth a message that resonates with the broader public, and this resonance can't just be some sort of rehearsal of people's "superstitions." It means coming up with a compelling alternative.

The burial of Yeltsin's democracy may have passed generally unnoticed, but the benefits the people have received from the Putin epoch are clearly visible. They can't be measured exclusively in terms of material advantage, but no less important is the fact that social life in Russia has ceased to be chaotic, and political life is no longer insultingly grotesque, even though it has become boring. Order has appeared as a buzzword of

the day -- with all its conservative overtones. Order is by no means an ultimate political good, but it is an indispensable prerequisite of all political progress and is appreciated as such. But it is doubtful that for many Russians Putin's regime has any intrinsic value. For them, it is nevertheless better than the unpredictability and buffoonery that was so typical of the Yeltsin epoch. This rational preference can't be ignored or misinterpreted, but it condemns Russian's liberals to a state of political nonexistence. Russians will only stand up in support of a different kind of democracy, providing it offers a tangible social content and has a bearing on their everyday lives.

It would also be unfair to the Putin epoch to turn a blind eye to the continuity it brought with what preceded it. This continuity saw a maturing of the type of capitalism introduced back in 1992. During the Putin epoch, it has rid itself of the extravagances and irregularities of its early years, when it was the public who were the most painfully affected, but despite that it has retained its oppressive, corporatist, oligarchic and profoundly unjust characteristics. The gap between Russia's rich and the poor has increased during the Putin years and is now exorbitantly wide. So although there is continuity, it is one that has preserved the symbiosis of property and power even though its institutional format has changed. Under Yeltsin, it saw the privatization of political power by several oligopolies, which in its purest form manifested itself in the "regime of seven banks," or semibankirshchina, that ensured the president's re-election in 1996 on condition that he should forfeit his "sovereign" power. Under Putin, this bargain was reversed. The clans controlling the upper echelons of the state acquired control over the main economic resources.

For the majority of Russians, these changes have proved to be important. State-based authority tends to be more sensitive to their sufferings than do the private sector's capitalist oligarchs. Russia's skyrocketing oil and gas revenues since the turn of the century have made policies for sharing out the country's newly acquired wealth financially possible. The regime has thus been able to reinforce its power.

If the opposition liberals want to escape from their confinement to the political salons of Moscow and St. Petersburg, they must come to grips with the country's new political and economic realities. They must disclose the present system's inherent tensions, and they must address actual grievances by proposing feasible and popular political courses of action. It is not enough to recycle the mantra of human rights violations because grassroots actions are required. Russia's liberals might find it worthwhile to begin with what former Czech President Vaclav Havel dubbed "small-scale work" when discussing how communism in the Soviet bloc could be resisted. It was a strategy of very concrete small deeds which although seemingly unambitious politically enhanced an alternative public morality, promoted independent networks of cooperation and steeped the reform movement's would-be leaders in a realistic and nonelitist democratic culture.

In Russia, the likelihood of such a development would seem meager unless a severe economic crisis were to undercut the stability of Putin's authoritarian capitalism. But do not human dedication and tenacity occasionally change the flow of history? After all, before 1989 very few people took Havel for a clairvoyant.

#29

Russian-Israelis explore their Jewishness

By Dina Kraft

JTA, October 2, 2008

ASHKELON, Israel -- In the 1840s, Shmeylin Valentin's great-great-great-grandfather was a student of the Vilna Gaon.

But Valentin, the son of a staunch communist, says he grew up in Lithuania with "no Yiddish and no religion" at home, even though his grandfather had been a rabbi.

Now living in Israel, Valentin is curious to know more. Last week he joined some 1,600 fellow Russian-speaking immigrants at a conference in Ashkelon to explore the Jewish roots that history almost washed away.

"It's important to me to learn," he said.

Valentin and his family, including his non-Jewish wife, spent two days learning about Jewish texts, culture and history at Israel's first Limmud extravaganza, a Jewish learning event for Russian-speaking immigrants to Israel organized by Limmud FSU.

Among the sessions were talks on the image of the Jew in Russian classical music, wine-making in Israel, the role of animals in Jewish texts and women in the Jewish tradition. As at other Limmud gatherings, programming and organization was undertaken by volunteers, most of them young, Russian-speaking immigrants.

Interest in the event, which had to be expanded after hundreds more than expected registered for it, reflects a growing curiosity among immigrants to Israel from the former Soviet Union about their Jewish heritage. Almost 20 years since the historic immigration of some 1 million Jews to Israel began, immigrants both old and young are examining their Jewish identity as they try to make sense of their place in the Jewish state.

"During the beginning of the great wave of aliyah in the early 1990s, people were busy with surviving and making a living. But now people want to know about their Jewish identity and why we are living in Israel," said Rabbi Gregory Kotler, the first immigrant from the former Soviet Union to be ordained in Israel as a Reform rabbi. "Maybe attending an event like this is the beginning of their way back to their Jewish roots."

Kotler, who immigrated from Ukraine in 1991, was among those who organized the two-day Limmud gathering in Ashkelon. Similar Limmud gatherings take place all over the world every year, but this was the first major Limmud conference in Israel.

In recent years, Jewish text-study groups and other Jewish-related programs have sprung up for Russian speakers in Israel.

The interest in Judaism among Russian-speaking Israelis mirrors increased Jewish activity in the former Soviet Union by Jews who have remained in their home countries. The Limmud FSU gathering here, for example, followed a similar event held outside of Moscow last fall and is to be followed by another large Limmud gathering in Yalta next month.

Sandy Cahn, co-chair of Limmud-FSU, said the Limmud model is "a diverse, pluralistic environment where everyone can find their way." It's "a virtual supermarket for people to connect to their Jewish roots and their Jewish identity."

Vadim Manov, 29, who came to Israel from Russia in 1994, said he only began to understand what it might mean to be Jewish when he was a 13-year-old attending a camp in Russia run by the Jewish Agency for Israel. Until then, all he knew was that he was Jewish and that an organization would send his family matzah for Passover.

Manov, who today works at the IT department of a major bank, says he feels like he's still playing catch-up on his Jewish identity. That's why he found it so beneficial to be able to choose between 150 lecture sessions during the two-day conference, he said. He attended sessions on Rabbi Nachman of Bratslav, investing in Israel and strategic threats facing Israel.

He also led a workshop on black humor during the Holocaust, discussing how Israelis use black humor to get through some of the country's darkest moments.

"I think that in the big picture, the fact that we have this country is not to be taken for granted," he said. "It was created only with monumental efforts and such efforts are needed to ensure it exists in the future. We need to be able to stop and find the source of strength for continuing to be here," he said.

In the former Soviet Union, religious identity was considered an ethnic or cultural affiliation more than a religious one.

Despite the perception that the majority of immigrants to Israel from the former Soviet Union are anti-religious, surveys indicate otherwise, according to Zeev Chanin, a political science professor at Bar-Ilan University with an expertise on Russian-speaking Jews in Israel and in the former Soviet Union.

Citing recent research, Chanin said the overwhelming majority of Russian-speaking Israelis define themselves as secular but have nothing against religion. About 25 percent see themselves as traditional when it comes to religious observance, he said.

The problem many have is with the Orthodox religious authorities, who control marriage, conversion and divorce procedures through the Israeli Rabbinate. Because as many as 250,000 Russian-speaking immigrants are not considered Jewish according to Orthodox Jewish law, or halachah, immigrants from the former Soviet Union have a hard time dealing with Israeli rabbinical authorities, who suspect their religious credentials or reject them outright.

"There is a conflict with the traditional religious establishment and a sort of unwillingness to be labeled within the existing frameworks," Chanin said. "But on the other hand, there is an interest in traditional roots and culture and Judaism in the broader meaning of the word."

For a group that feels increasingly Israeli, some Russian-speaking immigrants to Israel still feel unaccepted when it comes to their Judaism. This sense was expressed at the Limmud event at a session on conversion for young soldiers who are studying about Judaism as part of an army program called Nativ.

"I feel like I've paid my entrance to the Jewish world," said one of the soldiers at the session who immigrated to Israel at the age of 3 but said he was frustrated that he is still made to feel like an outsider.

#30

Begin aide Harry Hurwitz dies

By Tovah Lazaroff

Jerusalem Post, October 2, 2008

Harry Hurwitz, the founder of the Menachem Begin Heritage Center and a trusted adviser to the former prime minister, died Wednesday after suffering a heart attack on Monday evening.

Described as a "living Zionist" and a stalwart of the Anglo community in Israel, Hurwitz, 84, had worked at the center daily. Co-workers who wished him a happy New Year on Sunday could not imagine that they were seeing him for the last time.

"He gave a speech before Rosh Hashana at the gathering of the staff," his son Hillel told The Jerusalem Post.

"He worked a full day, every day. He continued to be involved in all of the activities of the Begin Center and its future planning," he said.

Hurwitz was already a member of the Betar movement when he arrived in South Africa in 1934, having heard its founder, Ze'ev Jabotinsky, speak the previous year in his native Latvia.

He once told The Jerusalem Post, "When I arrived in Johannesburg, there was very little Betar activity for the youngsters. This we set about remedying and by the time I was well into high school, I was head of Betar in Johannesburg and running new groups in the smaller satellite towns outside Johannesburg, where I used to travel by train each week."

For many years in Johannesburg, he edited the weekly Jewish Herald and was one of the pillars of the city's Jewish community.

But one of the most fateful meetings of his life occurred in 1946 in Basil, Switzerland, where he met Begin at a Zionist Congress.

Begin made an indelible impression on him, and a visit by Begin to South Africa several years later deepened the relationship.

The two remained in contact and were so close that in 1977, when Begin became prime minister, he asked him to come to work as his adviser.

Hurwitz served as information attache at the Israel Embassy in Washington, under then-ambassador to the US Moshe Arens, during the years Israel bombed Iraq's nuclear reactor in Osirak (1981) and invaded Lebanon (1982).

He was called back to Israel two months before Begin's resignation and was appointed his adviser on world Jewish communities.

Hurwitz was in South Africa on a lecture tour when Begin died in 1992, and immediately pushed for the creation of the Menachem Begin Heritage Center to document the history and legacy of the sixth prime minister of Israel.

He also wrote a book called, *Begin: A Portrait* and served as an adviser to former prime minister Yitzhak Shamir.

But it is for his work at the Begin Center for which he has been most known in the last years.

In 2001, *The Jerusalem Post* mistakenly published his obituary, after confusing him with someone else who had died who had the same name. Upon reading the obituary, he quipped, "You can't remove me from the scene with the stroke of a pen."

"The first thing I did after reading my own obituary [yesterday] was call up my friend Shmuel Katz who wrote it [at the paper's request] and thank him for all the lovely things he said about me," said Hurwitz. "Not everyone has the privilege of reading their own obituary, and it was a lovely one."

Hurwitz said at the time he had heard that premature obituaries are considered a sign of a long life, and added, "I still have a lot of work to do."

He is survived by his wife Frieda, their son Hillel, three grandchildren and two great-grandchildren. The funeral is planned for Friday at 11 a.m. at the capital's Har Hamenuchot Cemetery.

Shiva is at Hanahliel 4/2 in Jerusalem. For more details, call the Heritage Center at (02) 565-2020.