

WASHINGTON, D.C. October 10, 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: Economic Turmoil in Russia, Political Turmoil in Ukraine

Dear Friend,

This week's update includes several stories on the global economic meltdown's impact on Russia, and the Ukrainian President's decision to call for new parliamentary elections.

Russia's economy has experienced wild and unpredictable twists and turns since the conflict with Georgia and now with global economic crisis. Russia's government has periodically halted trading on the Stock Exchange and has pumped billions into the banking system.

Short term, Russia appears to have more than enough currency reserves, and outwardly there is no government panic. The long-term impact on the Russian economy remains unclear, but if oil prices continue to fall, it will force a reassessment of Russia's economic and political agenda. NCSJ has been watching the situation to see if Jews are being blamed for the economic crisis, by either the public or government. As of today, they are not.

If the economic crisis wasn't enough to concern average Ukrainians, they now get to focus on another election. The fragile coalition between President Viktor Yushchenko and Prime Minister Yulia Tymoshenko has been deteriorating since its earliest days. A poisonous atmosphere exists, and by the time President Yushchenko called for early parliamentary elections on Thursday, there was almost no communication between the two political leaders. The campaign officially kicks off on October 11 and concludes with elections on December 7. The stories in the update should provide a good perspective on Ukraine's ever-changing political environment.

I would like to call your attention to two additional stories in particular. The exchange excerpted from this week's Presidential debate provides good insights into Senators Obama and McCain's thinking on the U.S.-Russian relationship. There is also an Op-Ed by former Secretaries of State Henry Kissinger and George Shultz on the importance of maintaining open lines of communication, and beyond, with Russia.

Sincerely,

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 10, 2008

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#1a

Bush enacts refugees benefits law JTA, October 2, 2008

President Bush enacted a law that extends benefits for elderly refugees.

The act signed Wednesday, extending supplementary security benefits for two years, was championed by a number for Jewish groups led by the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society and United Jewish Communities.

It affects close to 50,000 "humanitarian" immigrants who failed to achieve citizenship in the requisite seven years under existing law, according to HIAS. Some 40 percent of the refugees are from the former Soviet Union, and the majority of that group is believed to be Jewish.

Some of the immigrants have been hindered in the application process because of difficulties learning English late in life, and others have simply been stymied by the bureaucracy.

"Each year, thousands of Jewish individuals legally move to this country in search of their own vision of the American," said William Daroff, the director of the Washington office for UJC, the federations' umbrella. "It is outrageous that legal immigrants who have taken honest steps towards naturalization have been denied SSI benefits simply because the federal government has been unable to process their application in a timely fashion."

HIAS thanked the president and the congressmen who pushed the legislation forward, including Sens. Gordon Smith (R-Ore.) and Herb Kohl (D-Wis.) and U.S. Reps. Jim McDermott (D-Wash.) and Jerry Weller (R-Ill.).

"This new law helps the most vulnerable individuals, formerly persecuted in their home country and invited to the U.S., to live their lives with dignity," HIAS president Gideon Aronoff said in a statement.

#1b

Ukraine: No arms sales in Georgian war AP, October 3, 2008

KIEV, Ukraine: Ukraine's military did not help Georgia or sell it weapons during its August war with Russia, a Ukrainian arms export official said Friday.

Ukraine is a top supplier of weapons to its ally Georgia. But the head of the state arms export company Ukrspetsexport, Sergei Bondarchuk, said "not a single bullet" was supplied to Georgia during the conflict, the Interfax news agency reported.

Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin said Thursday that Ukraine may have sent weapons to Georgia after the war had started and said that Ukrainian-supplied weapons systems were operated by Ukrainians. Russia urged Ukraine to investigate the matter.

Ukrainian Defense Minister Yuriy Yekhanurov denied sending military personnel to fight. On his Web site, he said 21 Ukrainian soldiers were in Georgia for military drills when the war started. They were sent to the capital Tbilisi and quickly flown out of Georgia, he said.

Yekhanurov said that about a quarter of Ukraine arms exports go to Russia.

#1c

Pensions hiked for Babi Yar righteous

JTA, October 5, 2008

Kiev authorities will increase city pensions for the righteous of Babi Yar.

The leaders of the Kiev city administration made the announcement last week at a reception for the Righteous of Babi Yar, non-Jews who assisted Jews in escaping the mass murder of about 33,700 Jews over several days in September 1941.

Those eligible will receive a larger bonus in addition to their pensions. An initiative of Mayor Leonid Chernovetsky, the bonus will take effect next year.

“But the amount of the bonus is not fixed yet and will be discussed in November-December during the budget building process for 2009,” Chernovetsky said.

Since 2006, each Righteous of Babi Yar has received quarterly aid of \$40, a representative of the Kiev city-state administration told JTA.

President Victor Yuschenko has bestowed state awards on 100 Righteous of Babi Yar.

#1d

Ukrainian foundation to help orphans

JTA, October 5, 2008

A Jewish-sponsored foundation will help Ukrainian orphans find families.

The Aleksandr Feldman Charitable Foundation recently launched its Let's Protect Childhood project.

Feldman, a Ukrainian lawmaker, told JTA that his foundation will start with orphans and children without parental custody living in Kharkovsky region boarding schools before spreading the project throughout Ukraine.

Informational materials will be screened on Ukrainian television. Stories about orphaned children also will be posted on the foundation's Web site, www.feldman.fund.org. Feldman believes that regional and other national mass media will join the project.

“Our aim is to help children without parental custody to create/find family, and to put an end to the outdated boarding school system in Ukraine,” Feldman told JTA.

Along with the foundation, the project will be managed by the Ukrainian ministry for family, youth and sport.

#1e

Israeli Cabinet votes to transfer Jerusalem land

JTA, October 5, 2008

Israel will transfer ownership of land in Jerusalem's Russian Compound to the Russian government.

The Cabinet on Sunday approved the transfer in ownership of Sergei's Courtyard to Russia after four years of negotiations over the land, which is claimed by the Russian Orthodox Church.

The Courtyard, which makes up about 10 percent of the Russian Compound, is the only part of the compound that was not purchased from the Soviet Union by Israel in a \$3.5 million deal in 1964. It houses the Israeli government Agriculture Ministry offices, the Nature and National Parks Protection Authority and the offices of the Society for the Protection of Nature in Israel.

Within hours, the Legal Forum for the Land of Israel petitioned Israel's High Court of Justice to halt the transfer, claiming that a caretaker government does not have the right to make such a decision.

Prime Minister Ehud Olmert is scheduled to leave for Russia on Monday for a two-day diplomatic trip.

#1f
Billionaire takes helm of Ukraine umbrella
JTA, October 6, 2008

Billionaire Igor Kolomoisky was elected president of an umbrella Jewish organization in Ukraine.

Kolomoisky was the choice of some 2,400 delegates gathered in Kiev for the 2008 Congress of the United Jewish Community of Ukraine. He succeeds tycoon Vadim Rabinovich, who retired after 10 years leading the group.

The election of Kolomoisky, an active member and sponsor of the Jewish community of Dnepropetrovsk, comes as little surprise for many Jews in Ukraine. He is a well-known businessman and media mogul who has donated millions of dollars to Jewish causes in Dnepropetrovsk.

During the congress Kolomoisky said he planned to continue to develop Jewish community and combat xenophobia and anti-Semitism in Ukraine.

While Rabinovich stepped down as the United Jewish Community's leader, he still heads another Jewish umbrella group in Ukraine, the All-Ukrainian Jewish Congress. There are as many as eight umbrella Jewish organizations in Ukraine.

#1g
Rabbi: Russia better than Israel religiously
JTA, October 7, 2008

Growing religious freedom makes Russia a better place to be Jewish than Israel, a Russian chief rabbi said.

The head Chabad rabbi in Russia, Berel Lazar, says he advises Jews to stay in Russia and not to immigrate to Israel.

In an interview with the European publication Naaseh V'Nishma, he cited growing religious freedom under Vladimir Putin as a disincentive for Russians considering a move to Israel. Lazar said it is becoming more difficult for Jews to uphold their traditions in Israel, while Russia is increasingly open to religious practice.

Chabad in Russia has cultivated close ties with the Kremlin, and Lazar lavished praise on Putin for his outreach to the Jewish community in Russia while serving as the country's president. Putin is now the prime minister.

"Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, the attitude toward Jews here has changed for the better," Lazar said. "These changes occurred alongside the rise of power of Vladimir Putin."

Lazar cited negative attitudes in Israel toward Russian speakers as the main reason for his recommendation that Russian-speaking Jews stay close to home.

Lazar's comments come as immigration to Israel from the former Soviet Union continues at an anemic rate and organizations such as the Jewish Agency for Israel refocus their efforts on increasing immigration.

"Just recently I spoke with people who had doubts about whether to repatriate," Lazar said in the interview. "I told him that it was important to maintain themselves as Jews than go to a physical place of residence. I advised him to consider this, and he remained in Russia."

#1h

Anti-racism conference opens in Paris

JTA Brief, October 8, 2008

A European-led organization to combat global racism, xenophobia and anti-Semitism launched its first meeting in Paris.

The European Council on Tolerance and Reconciliation will work closely with the European Jewish Congress, and includes several former heads of state, mainly from Baltic countries, Nobel laureates and others.

"This is a council of experience, which is why it's a very strong body," said Moshe Kantor, the council's vice chair and president of the European Jewish Congress, at a news conference Tuesday.

Former Polish President Aleksander Kwasniewski, the council's chairman, said the prestige of its still open list of more than 10 members will help push other world leaders to adhere to two documents outlining strategies for "tolerance," plus the adoption of an educational program for schools.

Kwasniewski added that the organization would not limit efforts to anti-Semitism, "in order to be effective."

Anti-Semitism, however, will be the focus of the council's first major co-organized event commemorating the 70th anniversary of Kristallnacht in a service held at the Great Synagogue of Europe in Brussels on Nov. 9.

Council events marking a "European Day of Tolerance" on Nov. 10 will include a policy meeting at the European Parliament in Brussels and a Tolerance Award dinner.

The council plans to fund global research on xenophobia, but has not specified how it will pay for its initiatives.

#1i

Extremists allegedly planned synagogue attack

JTA, October 8, 2008

A group of ultra-right extremists in the Ukrainian town of Kirovograd reportedly planned to blow up a local synagogue.

Sergey Tkachuk, the head of the local Ukrainian Security Service, or SBU, said at a news conference Monday in Kirovograd that leaders of the group, including a former officer of the local law enforcement agency, planned to attack and beat local Jews as well as other minorities of "non-Slavonic appearance" and to blow up Kirovograd's Choral Synagogue.

According to the SBU, the group included 14 youths, mainly university students aged 18 to 20, who studied Nazi literature.

"They ideologically prepared to commit crimes, studying literature of Nazi Germany and Hitler's books," Tkachuk said.

"Some non-identified persons rather often shattered windows of the synagogue and wrote anti-Semitic slogans," Emma Spektor, the leader of Kirovograd Reform Congregation, told JTA. "We informed SBU about such facts and worked closely with them. We appreciate the fact that SBU unmasked the group of ultra-right extremists and hope they will be punished according to the law."

SBU identified the group early this year but transferred the materials of the investigation to the local public prosecutors' office and announced that fact only this week.

It is still not clear what charges the alleged extremists will face.

#2

Russia finds unlikely ally in Ukraine's Tymoshenko

By Christian Lowe

Reuters, October 5, 2008

MOSCOW (Reuters) - The Kremlin has struck a tactical alliance with its former foe Ukrainian Prime Minister Yulia Tymoshenko designed to help her become the next president and help Russia rein in Ukraine's drive to embrace the West.

Tymoshenko and the Kremlin have put aside years of mutual suspicion to unite against Ukrainian President Viktor Yushchenko, the driving force behind Kiev's ambitions to join NATO and Tymoshenko's rival in a bitter struggle for power.

The new warmth was on show on Thursday when Tymoshenko -- who two years ago accused Russia of extorting cash from Ukraine in a row over gas -- had a cordial meeting with her Russian counterpart Vladimir Putin followed by unscheduled, late-night talks with President Dmitry Medvedev.

"The tactical interests of Moscow and Tymoshenko have coincided. They have the same main opponent and that is Yushchenko," said Fyodor Lukyanov, editor of the journal Russia in Global Affairs.

The calculations of both sides are focused on the next presidential vote, which must take place no later than January 2010. The field could include Yushchenko, Tymoshenko and Viktor Yanukovich, a former prime minister.

The Kremlin backed Yanukovich's failed bid to win a 2004 presidential election, but opinion polls suggest he does not have enough support outside the Russian-speaking areas of the country to win the presidency now.

"Moscow cannot find common ground with Yushchenko and is waiting for a new president to appear," said Oleksander Dergachyov, an independent analyst in Kiev.

"Tymoshenko is, of course, not the sole alternative, but her candidature is a good one against the background of Yushchenko."

After their talks on a new gas supply deal on Thursday, Putin said reports Tymoshenko could be investigated in Ukraine for treason were comical and joked that Yushchenko was a "trickster" for commandeering the aircraft in which Tymoshenko had been scheduled to fly to Moscow.

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That atmosphere was in marked contrast to the frostiness of the past. Tymoshenko, with then ally Yushchenko, led the 2004 "Orange Revolution," a wave of street protests that defeated Yanukovich and was lambasted in Moscow as a Western plot.

In a 2007 article in U.S. journal Foreign Affairs, she wrote that the West must contain Russia's "imperial designs" on its neighbors and accused Putin of suppressing dissent at home.

Russia's Foreign Ministry issued a statement calling the article an "anti-Russian manifesto, an attempt to draw new dividing lines through Europe and take the world back, at the least, to the atmosphere of the Cold War."

Charges of forgery and smuggling gas were brought against her in connection with her activities at the head of a private gas trading firm in the mid-1990s and an arrest warrant was issued for her in Russia. But Russian prosecutors dropped charges against her in December 2005.

Russia's brief war with Georgia in August turned Tymoshenko's relations with the Kremlin around.

Yushchenko went to Tbilisi to show support for Saakashvili, he reaffirmed his desire to take Ukraine into NATO despite opposition from many voters and told Russia's navy it must leave the Ukrainian base it leases by 2017.

But Tymoshenko took a more calibrated approach and criticized the president for backing Georgia too stridently.

"Tymoshenko behaved like a real Ukrainian," said Kirill Frolov of Moscow's Institute for CIS Countries, a pro-Kremlin think tank which studies ex-Soviet states. "Why should Ukraine take someone's side?"

Differences between Tymoshenko and Yushchenko over Georgia were an important factor in bringing down their fragile coalition last month. Yushchenko can call an early parliamentary election if efforts to resurrect the coalition fail.

Tymoshenko's new efforts to distance herself from Yushchenko's staunchly pro-Western line may have more than a little to do with her ambition to replace him as president, said Moscow-based analyst Lukyanov.

"For Tymoshenko it is very important to win extra votes in those parts of the country where they do not welcome NATO and all of that," he said.

#3

Ukraine will hold snap elections

By Michael Schwartz

International Herald Tribune, October 10, 2008

MOSCOW: President Viktor Yushchenko of Ukraine signed an order on Thursday to dissolve Parliament and hold snap elections, raising new uncertainties about Ukraine's tilt toward the West at a moment when the country has become a focal point of rising tensions with Russia.

The move resulted from a worsening rift between Ukraine's two top leaders, Yushchenko and Prime Minister Yulia Tymoshenko, one-time allies who have become bitter rivals with differing visions of how Ukraine should handle relations with Russia and West.

The vote, scheduled for Dec. 7, will test Yushchenko's drive to solidify ties with the United States and Europe and steer Ukraine, part of the former Soviet Union, toward membership in NATO, a step that would be likely to antagonize Russia.

Tymoshenko, who joined Yushchenko in leading the so-called Orange Revolution against the country's pro-Moscow government in 2004, now represents a political faction that favors warmer ties with Russia.

The split reflects a deep divide in Ukraine, which has a large ethnic Russian minority and influential business interests that favor closer relations with Moscow, but also a fervent nationalist movement that brought Yushchenko to power and sees Ukraine's future as tied to the West.

Strong gains for Tymoshenko in the parliamentary elections could jeopardize Yushchenko's efforts to join NATO, a step that has grown less popular in Ukraine, but is strongly supported by Washington.

The short war in August between Russia and Georgia has prompted urgent calls, particularly from Washington, for Ukraine and Georgia to be offered a NATO membership plan.

The elections will be the third parliamentary elections since Yushchenko came to power in 2004. At the time, he promised to wrest Ukraine from its corrupt, authoritarian past, though today it remains mired in political stagnation.

Yushchenko's decision followed weeks of raucous political infighting with Tymoshenko, whom he has accused of orchestrating a power grab at the expense of Ukraine's national interests. The two are likely to face off in the next presidential election, scheduled for 2010.

"I am convinced, deeply convinced, that the democratic coalition was destroyed by one thing — the ambition of one person," Yushchenko said Wednesday in a television address during which he announced the dissolution of Parliament. "The Yulia Tymoshenko bloc has become the hostage of its leaders, who are willing to sacrifice everything: our language, security and our European prospects."

Tymoshenko recently sided with Ukraine's opposition to pass measures limiting the president's powers, leading to the collapse of a fragile parliamentary alliance with Yushchenko's party last month.

The prime minister is considering whether to contest Yushchenko's decision to dissolve Parliament and hold new elections before Ukraine's Constitutional Court, her spokeswoman said. Tymoshenko's supporters have called for mass protests.

Speaking in Macedonia on Wednesday, Secretary of Defense Robert Gates reaffirmed Washington's support for Ukraine's NATO ambitions despite the government's instability and said the United States would work with any new coalition that emerged.

Russia has responded angrily to any indication of more NATO expansion, and it recently bolstered its military. In Russia, calls have increased for Moscow to take ownership of Ukraine's Crimean peninsula, a mostly ethnic-Russian region where Russia bases its Black Sea Fleet.

Tymoshenko recently began presenting herself as a centrist politician able to bridge the divide between pro-Western forces and those who want to maintain close ties to Russia.

She refused to back Yushchenko in his support for Georgia in the war with Russia, adopting a more neutral stance.

Tymoshenko recently went to Moscow for talks with Prime Minister Vladimir Putin of Russia on energy cooperation, a meeting that was almost thwarted when Yushchenko requisitioned her plane after his own plane was said to have had a technical malfunction.

Tymoshenko's overtures to Russia have prompted criticism from Yushchenko's supporters that she has been co-opted by the Kremlin, though Mikhail B. Pogrebinsky, director of the Kiev Center for Political and Conflict Studies, said she would rely heavily on her pro-Western supporters in the parliamentary elections, which he said her bloc would probably win.

Recent opinion polls give Tymoshenko's bloc a slight edge in popularity over the Party of Regions, the main opposition party, which is led by Viktor F. Yanukovich. Yushchenko's parliamentary bloc trails both.

Yanukovich, even more than Tymoshenko, has pushed for better ties with Russia. If his party wins the elections or becomes a partner in a coalition government, the chances of Ukraine pushing for an additional steps to join NATO would be sharply reduced.

NATO countries are to meet in December to discuss granting Ukraine and Georgia membership action plans.

#4

If Russia's leaving, S. Ossetia town asks: Why build a new road?

By Dan Catchpole

Christian Science Monitor, October 6, 2008

Akhalgori, Georgia - On Sunday, Russian troops began to vacate checkpoints in Georgia set up after the brief war in August. Russia faces a deadline of Friday to pull all of its troops from Georgia under cease-fire terms agreed upon with the European Union.

Russian soldiers are also supposed to leave Akhalgori, a small town strategically located just 25 miles northwest of Georgia's capital.

If that's the case, why are Russians now upgrading a dirt road connecting Akhalgori with South Ossetia's capital, Tskhinvali? ask town residents. They say it's part of a Russian plan to stay - or at least to be in a position to return rapidly.

"There's no real road there yet, but they're building it," says an elderly woman who would only give her first name, Yevgenia. She and nearly a dozen other residents interviewed separately confirmed that Russian troops are working on the road now. The residents have been told by Russian soldiers that the goal is to make it usable for military equipment.

Akhalgori is in a valley on South Ossetia's periphery, cut off by thickly wooded ridges from the rest of the de facto independent state. The valley had been under Georgian control since fighting began in the early 1992, but Russian troops and South Ossetian separatists seized the valley on August 17.

To resupply and rotate troops in the valley, the Russian military has had to either drive through Georgian-controlled territory or use helicopters. The improved road, which runs out of Akhalgori to the northwest, would provide a secure supply route.

In recent weeks, Russian and South Ossetian soldiers have started to use the dirt road, which requires four wheel-drive vehicles and is impassable in winter.

Russia is building the road because it and South Ossetia's separatist government aren't going to withdraw, says Alexander Rondeli, president of the Georgian Foundation for Strategic and International Studies.

Losing the Akhalgori region would be catastrophic for Georgia, because the capital, Tbilisi, is so close, he says. "They can come from Akhalgori with tanks on the highway into Tbilisi in half an hour," Mr. Rondeli says.

If Russia plans to leave by the Oct. 10 deadline, there is no reason to start the road work, which is likely to take several months to complete, says an official in Georgia's Interior Ministry, who spoke on condition of anonymity because he is not authorized to publicly discuss this issue.

Moscow plans to stay to back up South Ossetia's claim of independence, which only Russia and Nicaragua have recognized, he says.

"If Russia controls all of South Ossetia it will be easier to call for its independence. The region [of Akhalgori] is otherwise fully connected with the rest of Georgia," he notes.

"It's a very small district, which probably nobody had heard of before, that is now part of a big game," the official says.

The EU is confident Russia will honor the cease-fire agreement and withdraw, says Juri Laas, the interim spokesman for the EU monitoring mission in Georgia.

The EU has heard reports of road work but has not been able to independently confirm them and does not think it means Russia might stay in Akhgori, he says. "That is a bit of speculation because there's nothing wrong with improving a road."

Some 200 EU civilian monitors began patrols this past Wednesday inside the roughly four-mile-wide buffer zone around Georgia's two breakaway provinces, South Ossetia and Abkhazia. The unarmed monitors have not been allowed by Russian and South Ossetian forces into Akhgori, which lies a few miles beyond the buffer zone.

The monitors' mission is to report any violations of the cease-fire agreement. They have no executive authority to enforce the agreement.

On Sunday, EU monitors reported that Russian troops also pulled out of a base in Nadarbazevi, northwest of Georgia's capital. It wasn't clear how many Russian checkpoints or bases were to be dismantled in accordance with the cease-fire deal. At one point, Russia said it would set up 18 in each of the two breakaway provinces. But Russia has also made it clear that it plans to keep nearly 8,000 troops in Abkhazia and South Ossetia to protect those citizens from Georgia.

Many of Akhgori's residents fled during the fighting in August. The town's remaining Georgian residents say they are exhausted after nearly two months of intimidation, beatings, and lootings by Russian and South Ossetian troops.

"All the young people have left" because they were beating them, says Yevgenia, a short woman with a weathered face.

The soldiers "get drunk and aim their weapons at people and shoot in the air. They beat people" for no reason, says a middle-aged man who would only give his first name, Shota.

Like the rest of Akhgori's ethnic Georgians, he fears reprisal from the Russians and South Ossetians stationed here.

"We can't go on like this. We're psychologically sick," Yevgenia says. She begins to cry and covers her face with her trembling hands.

"We're in prison here," she says.

#5

Trans-Atlantic policy on Russia needed

By John Vinocur

International Herald Tribune, October 6, 2008

John McCain was talking about Russia's "KGB apparatchik-run government," its aggression against Georgia, and America's support for the entry of Ukraine and Georgia into NATO.

An underlying problem with the attack on Georgia, McCain said, was that it "has everything to do with energy" and Russia controlling Europe's energy supply. More: for McCain, the Georgia events underscored the Russians' threats "to regain their status as the old Russian empire."

What did Barack Obama think about all that hard language? His answer: "I think Senator McCain and I agree for the most part on these issues."

All the same, did Obama have any major differences with what McCain just said, the moderator of the presidential candidates' debate asked two weeks ago.

"No, actually."

Clear enough? Yes, actually, in spite of the razor-edged tone of the campaign exchanges since.

Reality says whoever gets elected next month - financial crisis, recession, ruin apart - the new president is headed for a clash with some of the United States' European allies, headed by Germany, over what Obama describes as a "resurgent and very aggressive Russia."

A fault line became clear last week when Chancellor Angela Merkel traveled to St. Petersburg to see President Dmitri Medvedev. Although an obvious second banana to Prime Minister Vladimir Putin, Medvedev is the Russian who, in explaining how Moscow's troops wound up in Georgia, asserted Russia's "privileged role" in the affairs of its neighbors, updating the Brezhnev Doctrine on the Soviet Union's eternal right to interfere.

Last week, seemingly timed to Merkel's presence, Russia announced that it planned next year to deploy a new offensive nuclear missile designed to penetrate antimissile defenses.

At the St. Petersburg talks themselves, a new, bilateral energy deal got added to an already long list of exclusive German-Russian arrangements. But nothing prickly was said about Russian rearmament, or Russia's plans to double its troop strength in the two Georgian provinces it has effectively annexed.

Verdict: for the Frankfurter Allgemeine, the meeting's bottom line was, "Thaw Follows Short Ice Age."

The result appears to be Merkel's readiness to urge reinstating postponed talks on a so-called Strategic Partnership between the European Union and Russia if Moscow's troops come out of "Georgia proper." (A decision which would smear EU vanishing cream on the Russian buildup to 7,600 men in South Ossetia and Abkhazia.)

Still in Russia, Merkel was also reported to have made clear she would not approve of Georgia and Ukraine receiving official status as NATO candidate members at a summit meeting of the alliance in December.

So much for push-back. Rather, here was Europe, with a German voice, adding another division to the list of its own disunity.

Not to mention the likelihood of a shuddering trans-Atlantic split during the new president's first 100 days in office

Indeed, in agreeing with McCain's debate statement on Russia - McCain said no to a new Cold War, and chose not to repeat his old call to kick Russia out of the G-8 summit group of industrialized nations - Obama insisted that Georgia and Ukraine "immediately" be given a plan for entry into NATO.

That action would effectively draw a red Western line for Russia in its attempt to rezone a region once under its total control.

But while the EU members of the old Soviet bloc see NATO membership for Georgia and Ukraine as an existential gesture in defense of their independence, Germany, and very probably France and Italy, do not like the idea because it ruffles Russia.

If this, for most countries, speaks of their lucrative contracts and a wariness to challenge re-establishment of Russian zones of influence, it can appear as a matter of creed in Germany. It involves centuries of real desire for good relations but also stubborn German fantasies about the range of positive Russian response.

In a harsh view of current German attitudes, Thomas Kleine-Brockhoff, a German who is a policy director of the German Marshall Fund of the United States, wrote:

"A mixture of wishful thinking and self-deception has become the basis of German Russia policy. It works hard at overlooking or talking away obvious changes. To all problems, rapprochement is the answer. If things go well, then relations should be deepened; when they go badly, all the more so."

Now the calendar is pressing the players to show their hands. The Russians are likely to try to demonstrate compliance with the agreement that requires that their troops be withdrawn by Oct. 10.

Interpreting what the Russians are actually doing should be at the heart of an EU summit meeting Oct. 15. The probability is that some EU members, regardless, will find an explanation sufficient to restart talks on a Strategic Partnership with Russia.

That pitches the Russia issue into the NATO summit meeting in Brussels in December, when President George W. Bush, who only saw soul in Putin's eyes, will still be representing the United States. It's not a good moment for decisions of profound importance, and points forward to another NATO summit meeting in April.

A senior NATO diplomat described dealing with the Russians then, combined with the issue of Georgia and Ukraine's entry process into NATO, as an imperative in terms of credibility for whoever is the new American president.

This allocates but a few months for the enormous political task of working out a trans-Atlantic line.

It also leaves the two American presidential candidates - Obama who said so, and McCain who did not contradict him - as pretty much in accord on tough, key aspects of a new approach to Russia.

Coming before a world audience of American voters and people affected by the election, their tacit flash of unity has the feel of an international engagement. Russia and the United States' allies in Europe might well take note.

#6

Business group hopes Russia can salvage WTO bid

By Doug Palmer

Reuters, October 5, 2008

WASHINGTON - Signs that Russia is honoring a ceasefire agreement could help get its longtime bid to join the World Trade Organization back on track, a business group promoting U.S.-Russian business ties says.

Despite tensions following the recent 5-day war in Georgia, the WTO working group on Russia's 15-year-old bid to join the world trade body held informal talks in Geneva on Sept. 18.

"The understanding is with Russia's compliance in meeting the terms of the cease-fire and the withdrawal, the talks will continue in November. We view that as a very positive development," Randi Levinas, executive vice president of U.S.-Russia Business Council, told Reuters ahead of the group's annual meeting in Washington on Monday and Tuesday.

EU ceasefire monitors in Georgia reported Sunday the dismantling of a Russian checkpoint near breakaway South Ossetia, which they called the "first open sign" of a promised Russian troop pullback by October 10.

That follows U.S. warnings that Russia would face a strong reaction if it fails to honor the ceasefire.

U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice also has said Russia's actions in Georgia jeopardize its longtime bids to join the WTO and the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, a rich nation's club.

Russian officials, including Prime Minister Vladimir Putin, have responded by saying Moscow wanted to renegotiate some of the commitments it has already made to join the WTO.

The U.S.-Russia Business Council believes that would be a mistake, Levinas said, arguing it is in Russia's economic and political interest to be a part of the rules-based international trade system.

Russia still has a lot of work to do to join the WTO, but it is not an insurmountable list, she said.

Since the war in Georgia, investor confidence in the Russian market has been shaken. Investors have pulled billions of dollars out of Russia because of worries about the global credit crisis and falling oil prices as well as deteriorating relations with the West.

William Burns, U.S. undersecretary of state for political affairs, is scheduled to speak on Monday at the group's meeting in a speech that Levinas said was closed to the press.

Burns served as U.S. ambassador to Russia for three years before taking his current job in May.

Many top U.S. companies with business interests in Russia are sponsoring the two-day meeting. They include Coca-Cola (nyse: KO - news - people), PepsiCo (nyse: PEP - news - people), John Deere, Caterpillar (nyse: CAT - news - people), Boeing (nyse: BA - news - people), Cisco Systems (nasdaq: CSCO - news - people), ConocoPhillips (nyse: COP - news - people), ExxonMobil (nyse: XOM - news - people), Ford and Microsoft (nasdaq: MSFT - news - people).

"The business relationship continues on a strong grounding. There's just been a lot of uncertainty cast into the overall environment" because of the war, Levinas said.

The U.S. financial crisis also is forcing companies to review their investment plans around the world and "Russia's not immune to that," Levinas said.

#7

Behind the Bluster, Russia Is Collapsing

By Murray Feshbach

Washington Post, October 5, 2008

The bear is back. That's what all too many Russia-watchers have been saying since Russian troops steamrolled Georgia in August, warning that the country's strongman, Vladimir Putin, was clawing his way back toward superpower status. The new Russia's resurgence has been fueled -- quite literally -- by windfall profits from gas and oil, a big jump in defense spending and the cocky attitude on such display during the mauling of Georgia, its U.S.-backed neighbor to the south. Many now believe that the powerful Russian bear of the Cold War years is coming out of hibernation.

Not so fast. Predictions that Russia will again become powerful, rich and influential ignore some simply devastating problems at home that block any march to power. Sure, Russia's army could take tiny Georgia. But Putin's military is still in tatters, armed with rusting weaponry and staffed with indifferent recruits. Meanwhile, a declining population is robbing the military of a new generation of soldiers. Russia's economy is almost totally dependent on the price of oil. And, worst of all, it's facing a public health crisis that verges on the catastrophic.

To be sure, the skylines of Russia's cities are chock-a-block with cranes. Industrial lofts are now the rage in Moscow, Russian tourists crowd far-flung locales from Thailand to the Caribbean, and Russian moguls are snapping up real estate and art in London almost as quickly as their oil-rich counterparts from the Persian Gulf. But behind the shiny surface, Russian society may actually be weaker than it was even during Soviet times. The Kremlin's recent military adventures and tough talk are the bluster of the frail, not the swagger of the strong.

While Russia has capitalized impressively on its oil industry, the volatility of the world oil market means that Putin cannot count on a long-term pipeline of cash flowing from high oil prices. A predicted drop of about one-third in the price of a barrel of oil will surely constrain Putin's ability to carry out his ambitious agendas, both foreign and domestic.

That makes Moscow's announced plan to boost defense spending by close to 26 percent in 2009 -- in order to fully re-arm its military with state-of-the-art weaponry -- a dicey proposition. What the world saw in Georgia was

a badly outdated arsenal, one that would take many years to replace -- even assuming the country could afford the \$200 billion cost.

Something even larger is blocking Russia's march. Recent decades, most notably since the breakup of the Soviet Union in 1991, have seen an appalling deterioration in the health of the Russian population, anchoring Russia not in the forefront of developed countries but among the most backward of nations.

This is a tragedy of huge proportions -- but not a particularly surprising one, at least to me. I followed population, health and environmental issues in the Soviet Union for decades, and more recently, I have reported on diseases such as the HIV/AIDS epidemic ravaging the Russian population. I've visited Russia more than 50 times over the years, so I can say from firsthand experience that this national calamity isn't happening suddenly. It's happening inexorably.

According to U.N. figures, the average life expectancy for a Russian man is 59 years -- putting the country at about 166th place in the world longevity sweepstakes, one notch above Gambia. For women, the picture is somewhat rosier: They can expect to live, on average, 73 years, barely beating out the Moldovans. But there are still some 126 countries where they could expect to live longer. And the gap between expected longevity for men and for women -- 14 years -- is the largest in the developed world.

So what's killing the Russians? All the usual suspects -- HIV/AIDS, tuberculosis, alcoholism, cancer, cardiovascular and circulatory diseases, suicides, smoking, traffic accidents -- but they occur in alarmingly large numbers, and Moscow has neither the resources nor the will to stem the tide. Consider this:

Three times as many Russians die from heart-related illnesses as do Americans or Europeans, per each 100,000 people.

Tuberculosis deaths in Russia are about triple the World Health Organization's definition of an epidemic, which is based on a new-case rate of 50 cases per 100,000 people.

Average alcohol consumption per capita is double the rate the WHO considers dangerous to one's health.

About 1 million people in Russia have been diagnosed with HIV or AIDS, according to WHO estimates.

Using mid-year figures, it's estimated that 25 percent more new HIV/AIDS cases will be recorded this year than were logged in 2007.

And none of this is likely to get better any time soon. Peter Piot, the head of UNAIDS, the U.N. agency created in response to the epidemic, told a press conference this summer that he is "very pessimistic about what is going on in Russia and Eastern Europe . . . where there is the least progress." This should be all the more worrisome because young people are most at risk in Russia. In the United States and Western Europe, 70 percent of those with HIV/AIDS are men over age 30; in Russia, 80 percent of this group are aged 15 to 29. And although injected-drug users represent about 65 percent of Russia's cases, the country has officially rejected methadone as a treatment, even though it would likely reduce the potential for HIV infections that lead to AIDS.

And then there's tuberculosis -- remember tuberculosis? In the United States, with a population of 303 million, 650 people died of the disease in 2007. In Russia, which has a total of 142 million people, an astonishing 24,000 of them died of tuberculosis in 2007. Can it possibly be coincidental that, according to Gennady Onishchenko, the country's chief public health physician, only 9 percent of Russian TB hospitals meet current hygienic standards, 21 percent lack either hot or cold running water, 11 percent lack a sewer system, and 20 percent have a shortage of TB drugs? Hardly.

On the other end of the lifeline, the news isn't much better. Russia's birth rate has been declining for more than a decade, and even a recent increase in births will be limited by the fact that the number of women age 20 to 29 (those responsible for two-thirds of all babies) will drop markedly in the next four or five years to mirror the

50 percent drop in the birth rate in the late 1980s and the 1990s. And, sadly, the health of Russia's newborns is quite poor, with about 70 percent of them experiencing complications at birth.

Last summer, Piot of UNAIDS said that bringing Russia's HIV/AIDS epidemic under control was "a matter of political leadership and of changing the policy." He might just as well have been talking about the much larger public health crisis that threatens this vast country. But the policies seem unlikely to change as the bear lumbers along, driven by disastrously misplaced priorities and the blindingly unrealistic expectations of a resentment-driven political leadership. Moscow remains bent on ignoring the devastating truth: The nation is not just sick but dying.

#8

Russia blames Georgia for S.Ossetia blast Reuters, October 4, 2008

MOSCOW - Russia blamed Georgia on Saturday for an explosion that killed Russian soldiers in Georgia's breakaway region of South Ossetia.

A senior Russian peacekeeping officer was among seven soldiers killed on Friday when a car blew up at the Russian peacekeepers' base in Tskhinvali, the South Ossetian capital, the Russian military said.

Russia's Interfax news agency quoted South Ossetia's Interior Ministry as saying a total of 11 people had been killed, including civilians. The RIA agency quoted a military spokesman as saying Colonel Ivan Petrik, the Russian peacekeepers' chief of staff, had been killed in his office.

Georgia sent troops and tanks in August to assert control of the pro-Russian separatist region, but was routed by Russian forces, which went on to occupy parts of the Georgian heartland.

Vladimir Markin, a spokesman for Russia's Prosecutor General's Office, told Itar-Tass news agency that the office had "all grounds to believe that the explosion in Tskhinvali was arranged by the secret services of Georgia and is aimed at Russian peacekeepers to destabilize the situation."

Russia's RIA news agency quoted the commander of Russia's forces in Georgia, Major-General Marat Kulakhmetov, as saying they had stopped two cars on Friday in the village of Ditsa, in a Russian-controlled buffer zone around South Ossetia, and escorted them to Tskhinvali.

As they were being searched, a bomb went off.

Georgia denied the charges, saying it would have had to find Ossetians to take the car into the area under Russian control.

"I don't understand the logic. How could the Georgian secret service plan that the Ossetians would steal the car and that the Russians would take it to their base. Are we geniuses or what?" Interior Ministry spokesman Shota Utiashvili said.

"The Georgians did not take any car to Ossetian territory or drive it to the Russian base."

Utiashvili suggested the Russians were trying to delay their withdrawal from the buffer zone, due to be complete by October 10 under a French-mediated ceasefire agreement.

Unarmed EU monitors have entered the buffer zone to monitor the agreement. A spokesman for the mission said they were patrolling as normal on Saturday.

#9

Rice: US not trying to undermine Russia

By Robert Burns

AP, October 5, 2008

ASTANA, Kazakhstan -- U.S. efforts to build closer ties to this energy-rich former Soviet republic are not meant to undermine Russian influence in Central Asia, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice said Sunday.

"We don't see any of this as a zero-sum game," she told reporters flying with her to the Kazakh capital from India. U.S. gains need not mean Russian losses, she said.

"First of all, Kazakhstan is an independent country. It can have friendships with whomever it wishes," she said. "That is, I think, perfectly acceptable in the 21st century, so we don't see and don't accept any notion of a special sphere of influence" for Russia in this region.

Later, at a news conference with Foreign Minister Marat Tazhin, Rice said no one should question Kazakhstan's desire to have good relations with all countries in its region. "This is not some kind of contest for the affection of Kazakhstan," Rice said.

Tazhin said his country's relationship with the United States was "stable" and had "strategic character." Kazakh ties with Russia, he said, are "excellent" and "politically correct." Asked by a reporter whether he considered his country to be in a Russian "sphere of influence," Tazhin said no and that he believed such a question was of interest mainly to academics and to journalists.

Rice later met with Prime Minister Karim Masimov and President Nursultan Nazarbayev, Kazakhstan's autocratic ruler who has maintained a military alliance and close relations with Russia. He also has kept a door open to the West and looked to develop new export routes to Europe for Kazakhstan's vast energy resources. But that balancing act has been in doubt since Russia's invasion of Georgia in August, which threatened to close off the corridor for pipelines around Russia.

In the interview en route to Astana, Rice disclosed that Deputy Secretary of State John Negroponte was in Iraq over the weekend for talks with the Iraqi government on planning for the transition as more U.S. forces withdraw and Iraqis take on more responsibilities.

The discussions also covered the remaining obstacles to a security agreement that would govern the U.S. military presence in Iraq beyond December, when the current legal authorities expire, Rice said. Negotiations "are going along" and are close to being finished, she added.

"We are close, but as you might imagine, because it's an important and difficult agreement when you're trying to work out arrangements that are both going to protect our people and be responsive to Iraqi sovereignty, that just takes time," she said.

Rice said Negroponte was "not doing anything particularly about it" on this visit beyond talking with Iraqi leaders. Her characterization of his role did not seem to indicate he was in Iraq to finalize a deal.

The Bush administration thought it had secured the deal last summer when negotiators submitted a proposed agreement for higher approval; Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki rejected it and assembled a new set of negotiators. A key point of disagreement is Washington's insistence that U.S. troops in Iraq remain under U.S. legal jurisdiction indefinitely; the Iraqis want limited jurisdiction.

On a related matter, Rice was asked in the onboard interview whether the administration has decided to drop plans to establish a diplomatic outpost in Iran. The U.S. has not had formal diplomatic relations with Tehran for nearly 30 years.

"We continue to look at the idea," she said. "We think it's an interesting idea. We are going to take a look at it in light of what it could do for our relationship with the Iranian people. We are still looking at the idea."

Since Russian forces pushed close to Georgia's capital before pulling back, the U.S. has tried to signal its commitment to countries in the Caucasus and Central Asia. Last month, Vice President Dick Cheney traveled to Georgia, Ukraine and Azerbaijan, another important energy exporter in the region.

The administration does not want to be seen as the one "that lost Eurasia and the Caspian region," said Ariel Cohen, an analyst at the conservative Heritage Foundation in Washington.

The United States also has sought to develop military ties with Kazakhstan as a regional power close to U.S. operations in Afghanistan. Kazakhstan's membership in a Russian-led Eurasian security bloc precludes the country from joining NATO. But it retains close contact with and regularly conducts joint military exercises with the Western alliance.

"In terms of our relationship with Kazakhstan, it's based on mutual respect, on transparency, and on the desire to see a more prosperous and open region here in Kazakhstan, as well as in Central Asia, more generally," Rice said in Astana.

#10

Kyrgyz opposition politician disappears AP, October 3, 2008

BISHKEK, Kyrgyzstan – Kyrgyz police have launched a search for a leading member of an opposition party who has gone missing, deputy Interior Minister Sabyrbek Kurmanaliyev said Friday.

Ruslan Shabotoyev's family and colleagues say he disappeared three days ago and has not been heard from since.

The search for Shabotoyev comes in an increasingly tense political atmosphere in the impoverished Central Asian country before a round of crucial municipal elections this weekend.

Shabotoyev left his house late Tuesday night after being called to an unexpected meeting and his cell phone has been disconnected since then, Social Democratic party leader Baktybek Beshimov said at a parliamentary hearing.

Police do not rule out the possibility he was kidnapped.

Shabotoyev is a leading member of the Social Democratic party, one of Kyrgyzstan's main opposition forces.

Parliamentary speaker Aitibai Tagayev has ordered an investigation into the disappearances of Shabotoyev and the son of another Social Democratic deputy two weeks ago.

Social Democratic party leader Beshimov played down any link between the two cases and called for calm.

Speculation is mounting among critics of President Kurmanbek Bakiyev that the government is trying to undermine opposition parties before the local elections to stave off any street protests this winter.

Electricity shortages and soaring food prices are causing widespread discontent in the impoverished Central Asian nation.

The former head of a state election-monitoring body, Klara Kabilova, said last week she was forced to resign her post and flee the country after receiving threats from Bakiyev's son.

Officials have dismissed the claims and said Kabilova had been dismissed for professional misconduct.

Bakiyev was elected after the March 2005 ouster of longtime President Askar Akayev. Since then, Kyrgyzstan has been roiled by political instability, deteriorating public security and budget deficits.

#11

Israel's Olmert brings security concerns to Russia

By Jim Heintz

AP, October 6, 2008

MOSCOW -- Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert will visit Moscow beginning Monday, aiming to focus on Russian arms sales to Israel's enemies. By contrast, Russia hopes the meeting will bolster its image as a Middle East peacemaker.

Olmert's trip, which will include a meeting with President Dmitry Medvedev on Tuesday, will probably be one of his last diplomatic ventures; he announced his resignation in late September. That leaves him with little apparent influence, and Medvedev's invitation may amount to a respectful farewell.

But Olmert said Sunday he would emphasize Israel's security concerns, including "the supply of arms to irresponsible elements whose activities worry us very much." He also said he would press for work to resolve "the Iranian problem, where Russia plays a special role."

Iran says it plans to buy from Russia advanced S-300 anti-aircraft missiles that could detect aircraft sent to destroy its nuclear facilities. Syria, which backs Hezbollah guerrillas who battled Israel in Lebanon in 2006, reportedly has asked to buy them, too.

Russia has not confirmed the reports, but Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov said recently his government was prepared to sell Syria arms with a "defensive character."

On sales to Iran, state weapons exporter Rosoboronexport said only that "we do not have such information," the ITAR-Tass news agency reported Monday.

Russia, meanwhile, is emphasizing its role as one of the "Quartet" of international mediators on the Middle East.

"The situation in the Middle East, the peace process and international priorities for its promotion ... will be among the central issue on the agenda," a Kremlin official said on customary condition of anonymity.

The official also said attention would be given to "maximizing the potential of the mutually beneficial business partnership between Russia and Israel," noting that bilateral trade exceeded US\$2.5 billion in 2007.

Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad has frequently called for Israel's destruction, and Israel suspects he means to carry out that objective by developing nuclear bombs with the help of a Russian-built nuclear power plant. Iran says its nuclear program is for peaceful purposes.

Israel hopes international diplomacy will persuade Iran to halt its nuclear program but says "all options are on the table" if diplomacy fails. In 1981, Israeli warplanes destroyed an Iraqi nuclear reactor.

The U.N. Security Council has approved three rounds of sanctions on Iran. But Russia, a council member with veto power, opposes tightening the sanctions any further.

After four decades of Cold War animosity, ties between Moscow and Israel improved significantly after the disintegration of the Soviet Union in 1991. Israel is also home to more than 1 million Soviet emigres.

But Moscow's position on Iran and arms sales to Syria have strained ties, as have Israeli weapons sales to Georgia, which Russia briefly invaded in August in support of pro-Russia secessionists.

#12

After Nearly a Century, Russian City Welcomes Torah Scroll Chabad.org, October 3, 2008

Hundreds of Jewish residents in the southwest Russian city of Stavropol celebrated the arrival of the regional capital's first Torah scroll in close to a century. Underscoring the significance of the event, the city's only other Torah scroll – confiscated by Soviet authorities close to 80 years ago – is housed in the basement of the local museum.

“Ever since the Communist regime relegated Judaism to a religious atavism, the Torah has been conceived by many locals as a museum piece: curious to look at, but nothing you could take home,” stated Rabbi Zvi Hershovich, a Chabad-Lubavitch emissary to the city since November 2007. “Until now.”

More than 300 members of the local Jewish community joined guests from Moscow and points overseas to witness the last few holy letters being written in the scroll by Rabbi Meir Nigberg, a scribe and members of the Rabbinical Alliance of the Former Soviet Union. The crowd then marched the new Torah through Stavropol's streets and on to the local synagogue.

Moscow businessmen Eli Ginsberg and Zev Sherman purchased the scroll for the community, while Peter Order underwrote the aron, an ark built to house the Torah.

With the arrival of the Torah scroll, Hershovich and his wife Chayale unveiled regularly-scheduled weekly services beginning with the just-concluded holiday of Rosh Hashanah. Other plans for the community include the establishment of a new kindergarten and a youth program affiliated with the highly successful STARS initiative used by Jewish communities throughout the former Soviet Union.

“One cannot help but imagine,” said Chayale Hershovich, “that someone in the depths of the Stavropol city museum, there is an old Torah scroll, happy to have a friend in town.”

#13

EU invites Belarus FM to landmark meeting AFP, October 4, 2008

BRUSSELS — The European Union has invited Belarus's foreign minister to meet his EU counterparts on October 13, the first invite since the bloc slapped sanctions on Minsk in 2006, a spokeswoman said Friday.

EU foreign policy chief Javier Solana "spoke this morning with (Belarus Foreign Minister Sergei) Martinov and invited him to come to Luxembourg on October 13," Solana's spokeswoman Cristina Gallach said.

The EU had raised the prospect of such a meeting ahead of last weekend's general elections in Belarus along with the possibility of lifting sanctions against hardline President Alexander Lukashenko's regime.

Even if the results of the election -- swept by Lukashenko loyalists -- were deemed "disappointing" by the EU and criticised by Western observers, the bloc highlighted some "positive developments which preceded the vote".

Those included the release of political prisoners and an invitation to the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe to monitor the polls.

The European Union has been seeking a way to reach out to what it sees as a key state at the outer reaches of Western and Russian influence, especially in the wake of Moscow's conflict with Georgia, where EU monitors are deployed.

Forty Belarussian figures, including Lukashenko, have been banned from entering the EU since the 2006 presidential election which was judged to contravene international norms.

Of all the 27 EU nations, Poland and Lithuania, neighbours of Belarus and particularly anti-Moscow, have been pushing the hardest to get the sanctions lifted.

Polish Foreign Minister Radoslaw Sikorski has made the comparison with Cuba, noting that the EU has lifted its sanctions there despite the fact that Havana is still holding political prisoners.

The Lithuanian foreign ministry has said that the elections do not change the fact that dialogue with Belarus is "indispensable".

Both countries are likely to call at the meeting for a selective review of the sanctions in place and other measures of encouragement in the form of visa facilitation and scholarships, according to European diplomats.

#14 Belarusian leader defends landslide vote AP, October 1, 2008

MINSK, Belarus — Belarus' authoritarian president on Tuesday defended the ex-Soviet nation's parliamentary elections despite the opposition's failure to win a single seat.

Alexander Lukashenko, dubbed "Europe's last dictator" in the West, cast Sunday's vote as a big step toward democracy.

But monitors from the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe said it fell short of democratic standards — an assessment echoed by the United States. Russia, however, praised the elections and criticized the OSCE assessment.

Lukashenko told OSCE observers Tuesday that the elections were conducted in line with Belarusian law. He said that Belarus now expects the EU to lift economic and travel sanctions against Belarus.

"Belarus expects Europe to lift sanctions which have offended us," Lukashenko said at the meeting.

Lukashenko has ruled Belarus with an iron fist for more than 14 years, quashing dissent and opposition parties and shutting down independent news media.

The United States and the European Union have imposed economic sanctions on the country and a travel ban on Lukashenko and his officials.

"Visa restrictions are a shame for Europe," Lukashenko said.

Election officials insisted the election was free and fair, even though none of the 70 opposition candidates won places in the 110-seat parliament.

Lukashenko's isolation deepened this year when his nation's main sponsor and ally, Russia, sharply increased energy prices for Belarus.

Signaling an apparent desire to mend the rift with the West, Lukashenko recently softened his anti-Western rhetoric and Belarusian authorities last month freed the last remaining political prisoners whose release the West had demanded.

"Let's cooperate normally. If Europe makes a step forward in political and economic cooperation, we will make three steps," Lukashenko said Tuesday.

In an apparent attempt to avert the Kremlin's anger over his efforts to mend ties with the West, Lukashenko added that "Europe would make a big mistake if it makes worsening of our ties with Russia a condition for improving ties."

The Russian Foreign Ministry said observers from the Moscow-led Commonwealth of Independent States found the vote was conducted "in accordance to international norms of democratic elections."

#15

Lithuania 'hurt' by U.S. resolution

By Talis Archdeacon

Baltic Times, October 3, 2008

VILNIUS - A Lithuanian foreign ministry spokesman has said that the country was "hurt" by a U.S. House of Representatives resolution condemning the country over its failure to halt construction on a Jewish cemetery near Vilnius.

The House passed a resolution on Oct. 2 criticizing the Lithuanian government for failing to address the controversial issue. Almost all members of the House of Representative voted in favor of the resolution.

"We've repeatedly asked the Lithuanians to stop construction until the cemetery's boundary disputes could be resolved... yet at every turn, the Lithuanian government has failed to be responsive and protect this sacred ground. It's my hope that this resolution will shine much-needed light on the Lithuanian government's failure to act and ultimately motivate them to do the right thing," Mike Ferguson, author of the resolution, was quoted as saying in the New Jersey Jewish News portal on Thursday.

The Lithuanian Foreign Ministry said that the resolution did not accurately reflect the situation.

"We are hurt by the resolution passed in the U.S. House of Representatives, which was initiated a year back and which fails to take into consideration that the Lithuanian government has given considerable attention to issues of enshrining cultural heritage in Snipiskes, all the while closely cooperating with Jewish experts. The former Snipiskes Jewish cemetery has been granted status of cultural heritage of the Republic of Lithuania, and with it the corresponding legal protection," said Violeta Gaizauskaite, Director of the Foreign Ministry's Information and Public Relations Department.

"We would see this type of a resolution by the U.S. House of Representatives as not reflecting the actual situation," she said.

Under agreement struck between Lithuanian and Israeli experts, an archeological dig was to set to determine the extent of the cemetery and whether construction had taken place over Jewish remains. Jewish representatives, however, requested to have the dig put to a halt due to discovery of human remains some 30 centimeters below ground.

The research was expected to reveal whether a luxurious apartment building on the bank of Lithuania's second largest river, the Neris, was built in the location of a former Jewish cemetery.

The said cemetery had been open in the center of Vilnius since the 16th century, was closed in the 19th century and dismantled in mid-20th century.

#16

Lithuanian academic blasts war crimes probe of ex-Yad Vashem chief

By Hagai Citroen

Haaretz, October 5, 2008

A prominent Lithuanian academic has blasted a decision by Lithuania to investigate an Israeli Holocaust historian for alleged war crimes while he was a partisan in World War II.

Philosopher, essayist, and activist Leonidas Donskis called the move "the most severe mistake made by the Lithuanian government since independence" from the Soviet Union.

Donskis' was referring to the Lithuanian government's decision to investigate Dr. Yitzhak Arad, a Holocaust historian and one-time partisan, a former brigadier general and a chief education officer in the Israel Defense Forces, and the chairman of the board of Yad Vashem over his time serving in the Soviet security service the NKVD.

The NKVD engaged in murder and looting, and the Lithuanian government alleged that Arad may have been involved in the murder of innocent Lithuanians while serving in the agency.

In the Lithuanian newspaper, Republika, they even published an article on Arad two years ago entitled "The expert with blood on his hands."

Arad has stated that the Lithuanian claims against him were false. The Foreign Ministry and Yad Vashem sharply protested the Lithuanian demand, and refused to cooperate with the request for help in the investigation.

However, there are some in Israel who believe that neither the Foreign Ministry nor Yad Vashem are acting with the determination expected of them, and are demonstrating weakness. There are voices who believe that Israel should lower its diplomatic contacts with Lithuania if it continues harassing Jewish and Israeli partisans.

Donskis has called for Lithuania to "deal with its past, including cases where Lithuanians collaborated with the Nazi occupiers in the extermination of Jews." Donskis also added that the revelations of Lithuanian collaboration with the Nazis, which came to light during the 1980's, led many in Lithuania to seek "defensive tactics" to clear the name of the Lithuanian people. These tactics, like the probe of Arad, included the attempt to draw parallels and relativism between the actions of Nazi collaborators and those who worked with the Soviet security forces.

#17

Kazakhstan takes next step in passing restrictive religion law Institute on Religion & Public Policy, October 6, 2008

The Institute on Religion and Public Policy condemns the passage of a draconian law regulating the practice of religion by Kazakhstan's lower house of parliament on Sept. 24. The bill is expected to pass the senate within days.

The draft law, meant to amend several provisions in Kazakhstan's current religion law, passed its first reading in the lower house, or Majlis, in June. An Institute analysis of the law showed it would be a severe setback for religious freedom in the country by making it more difficult for religious believers and organizations to register, function legally and worship.

For example, religious communities would only be allowed to register if they include 50 adult citizen members. In addition, the law would require the state to review the religious beliefs of communities, ban all unregistered activity and make it impossible for groups that work in several regions, such as Orthodox and Catholic Church dioceses, to register.

Even more alarming, children would need written permission to participate in any religious youth activity, and believers would only be able to share their beliefs in public places with the consent of all citizens present.

According to Forum 18 news, the Majlis has refused to make public the text of the law it passed last week. It is now unclear what version of the law will go to the senate for approval. Kazakhstan is due to assume the chairmanship of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) in 2010, a group that monitors how well its members uphold human rights.

"The draft law has rightly drawn strong rebukes from religious leaders and activists in Kazakhstan," said Institute President Joseph K. Grieboski. "We urge the Kazakh government to halt the progress of this draft law, which will seriously impair the nation's human rights record. The international community, especially the member states of the OSCE, must speak out against this legislation, for not doing so will undermine the authority of the OSCE as a legitimate monitor and upholder of human rights."

#18

News Media Feel Limits to Georgia's Democracy

By Dan Bilefsky and Michael Shwartz

New York Times, October 7, 2008

TBILISI, Georgia – The cameras at Georgia's main opposition broadcaster, Imedi, kept rolling Nov. 7, when masked riot police officers, armed with machine guns, burst into the studio. They smashed equipment, ordered employees and television guests to lie on the floor and confiscated their cellphones. A news anchor remained on screen throughout, describing the mayhem. Then all went black.

The pretext for the raid – which silenced the channel – was a government claim that Imedi was fomenting unrest after it broadcast a statement by one of its founders, Badri Patarkatsishvili, promising to topple the government of President Mikheil Saakashvili.

Earlier that day, riot police lashed out with clubs and fired rubber bullets at unarmed antigovernment protesters. A nine-day state of emergency followed.

Now, 11 months later, Georgia's democratic credentials are again being questioned, and tested, as the country finds itself on the frontline of a confrontation between Russia and the West.

Georgia and its American backers, including both the Republican and Democratic United States presidential contenders, have presented Georgia as a plucky little democracy in an unstable region, a country deserving of generous aid and NATO membership. But a growing number of critics inside and outside the country argue that Georgia falls well short of Western democratic standards and single out a lack of press freedom as a glaring example.

Mr. Saakashvili, a telegenic New York-trained lawyer, came to power in 2004 on a wave of protests known as the Rose Revolution, promising to shed the authoritarianism of the past. Lincoln Mitchell, a Georgia expert at Columbia University, contended that Mr. Saakashvili now presided over a "semi-authoritarian" state, while noting that it was also the most democratic of the former Soviet states in the region.

"The reality is that the Saakashvili government is the fourth one-party state that Georgia has had during the last 20 years going back to the Soviet period," he said. "And nowhere has this been more apparent than in the restrictions on media freedom."

In its most recent report, Freedom House, a human rights research group based in New York, ranked press freedom in Georgia on a level with Colombia and behind Nigeria, Malawi, Indonesia and Ukraine – the last a NATO aspirant, like Georgia.

A 2008 State Department report on Georgia's democratic progress noted that respect for freedom of speech, the press and assembly worsened during the 2007 crisis, and that there continued to be reports of "law enforcement officers acting with impunity" and "government pressure on the judiciary."

Sozar Subari, Georgia's ombudsman for human rights, an independent watchdog appointed by the Georgian Parliament, accused the government of stifling press freedom by ensuring that sympathetic managers were installed as directors at national broadcasters.

"That Georgia is on the road to democracy and has a free press is the main myth created by Georgia that the West has believed in," Mr. Subari said. "We have some of the best freedom-of-expression laws in the world, but in practice, the government is so afraid of criticism that it has felt compelled to raid media offices and to intimidate journalists and bash their equipment."

Nino Zuriashvili, a Georgian investigative journalist who said she broadcasted on the Internet to bypass censorship, said that under Mr. Saakashvili, nearly a dozen broadcasters had been winnowed down to a handful, and several political talk shows had been shut down. "The paradox is that there was more media freedom before the Rose Revolution," she said.

Mr. Saakashvili himself, asked about press freedom on a recent visit to New York, conceded at an Atlantic Council luncheon that "we need to have more debate and more transparency." But he insisted, "There are no taboos."

Prime Minister Lado Gurgenedze, a close ally of Mr. Saakashvili, retorted that market forces were driving the consolidation of media. Annual spending on television and newspaper advertising in Georgia was about \$50 million, he said, not enough to support a dozen broadcasters. The raid on Imedi was not Georgia's "finest hour," he said in an interview, but he insisted that opposition voices were represented across Georgian media.

"All this talk of media censorship is a tired cliché," he said, noting that opposition candidates in recent presidential and parliamentary elections had equal time on the main television stations, if not more.

Some critics said the culture of censorship was particularly pronounced during the brief war with Russia in August, accusing the government of obfuscating reality in an effort to portray Georgia as both victim and victor.

Nino Jangirashvili is the director of the Tbilisi broadcaster Kavkasia, which is independently owned and run. She said that on Aug. 10, when Mr. Saakashvili called for a cease-fire, government officials were briefing broadcasters that Georgian troops controlled Tskhinvali, the capital of breakaway South Ossetia, even as Georgian soldiers there were frantically calling Kavkasia to say they were overrun by the Russians and hiding in trees.

"We engaged in self-censorship because of the political environment of fear and intimidation," she said.

Giga Bokeria, the deputy foreign minister, who is a member of the ruling National Movement party and another close ally of Mr. Saakashvili, said that during the war, the government had in some cases asked broadcasters not to make reports that could incite panic or be used by Russia as propaganda. But he was emphatic that it had provided journalists with accurate information; the Georgian retreat from Tskhinvali on Aug. 10 was acknowledged publicly, he said. Indeed, by noon that day, Georgian media reported Russian control.

The government's hold over the media, critics say, is best seen at Rustavi-2, the most popular television channel. Once he came to power in 2003, Mr. Saakashvili moved to cement his hold over it, said Kibar Khalvashi, Rustavi-2's former owner, who has become a harsh critic of the government.

Mr. Khalvashi said in an interview that in 2004, a close friend who was then Georgia's minister of defense, Irakli Okruashvili, asked him to buy a majority stake in Rustavi-2, and he agreed. Two years later, when Mr. Okruashvili joined the opposition, Mr. Khalvashi said Mr. Saakashvili personally pressured him to sell his 78 per cent stake in the channel to an undisclosed person proposed by the government. "He told me to release these shares if I wanted to have a good life in Georgia," he said.

Once he had parted with his shares, Mr. Khalvashi said, the government began a campaign of intimidation and interference in his construction and consumer goods businesses; he said he was fined about \$37 million by

financial police and pushed into bankruptcy. He has since moved to Germany, where he is seeking political asylum.

Mr. Bokeria, the deputy foreign minister, denied Mr. Khalvashi's allegations as politically motivated; his businesses had been fined, Mr. Bokeria said, because he had broken the law.

According to Rustavi-2's licensing documents, dated December 2007 and on file at Georgia's national broadcast regulator, the channel's current majority owner is one Geomedia Group, registered in the Marshall Islands, whose controlling director is not publicly known. Its minority shareholder is the Georgian Industrial Group, which is controlled by two brothers, David Bezhuashvili, a member of the ruling party, and Gela Bezhuashvili, head of the Foreign Intelligence Service of Georgia.

Irakli Chikovani, Rustavi-2's general director for 10 months, said there had been no instances, as far as he knew, of officials trying to pressure the station's journalists.

"I think it inconceivable for someone to call a journalist, say not do something, and for the journalist to stay quiet," he said.

Eka Khoperia, a former news director at Rustavi-2, said her phone had rung constantly with government officials seeking to influence reporting. The pressure was so strong, she said, that she finally resigned on air in July 2005 to protest government attempts to influence her handling of a story on the murder of a bank official in which employees of the Interior Ministry were implicated.

In August of that year, other Rustavi-2 staff member staged a strike to protest the dismissal of the station's general director and his replacement with a government ally.

Ms. Khoperia said that Georgian journalists deserved some blame for not holding the government to account. "Lots of people in government after the Rose Revolution had been in NGOs and worked as journalists and they were our friends and we were together in one group," she said. "It took us journalists too long to adapt to the new reality. Often we behaved like politicians. We should have taken a step back."

As for Imedi, it reopened in early September and is now owned by Josef Kei, a pro-government businessman and a cousin of Mr. Patarkatsishvili, the Imedi founder. (Rupert Murdoch's News Corp, which held power of attorney over Imedi, no longer has a stake in the company.) Mr. Patarkatsishvili became a candidate for the Georgian presidency after the raid on Imedi and was accused of taking part in a coup against the government. He lost the election and died of a heart attack at his home near London earlier this year.

Nino Kandiashvili, a spokeswoman for the Patarkatsishvili family, said the family was contesting Mr. Kei's ownership. Imedi, meanwhile, has been nicknamed "Rustavi-3" by Georgian journalists because of its new pro-government line.

Olesya Vartanyan contributed reporting.

#19

UN chief wants new look at UN Georgia mission

By Edith M. Lederer

AP, October 6, 2008

UNITED NATIONS – The U.N. mission monitoring a cease-fire between Georgia and the separatist Abkhazia region should be extended for four months to explore whether to continue U.N. involvement following the Georgian-Russian war, the U.N. chief said Monday.

In a report to the U.N. Security Council, Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon said the conflict that led to Russia's recognition of the independence of both breakaway areas had changed the context in which the U.N. has operated for the last 14 years.

The Black Sea province of Abkhazia has been independently run since 1993, when two years of fighting with Georgian troops ended with a U.N.-monitored cease-fire. Two-thirds of Abkhazia residents hold Russian passports, and along with South Ossetia it had sought independence or union with Russia.

The recent war began Aug. 7 with a Georgian offensive to regain control of South Ossetia. Russia responded by sending in troops, which quickly routed the Georgian military. Ban said the Russian operation affected the situation in the area of the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict and beyond, with 9,000 troops and 350 armored vehicles reportedly taking part in the operation.

Under an European Union-sponsored cease-fire deal, EU monitors were deployed to Georgia and Russian forces must leave Georgian territory by Oct. 11. But Russia plans to keep 3,800 troops in South Ossetia and the same number in Abkhazia — a presence U.S., NATO and the European Union say violates its obligation under the cease-fire.

Ban said there is, as yet, "little clarity" about the future status of the areas where the U.N. observer mission, known as UNOMIG, operated — "the security zone where no military presence was permitted, the restricted weapons zone where no heavy weapons could be introduced, and the Kodori Valley."

"Under these circumstances, it is too early at this stage to define the role that UNOMIG may play in the future," Ban said.

The secretary-general said he has received formal word from both sides that they support the continuation of the mission, but he said differences between the two would have to be addressed.

Ban said he was therefore recommending a four-month technical extension of the 400-strong U.N. mission until Feb. 15, to explore "whether and how it is possible for the United Nations to follow up on the support of the two sides for the continuation of United Nations involvement."

#20

A Selective Definition of Democracy

By Alexei Pankin

Moscow Times October 7, 2008

Not long before we marked the 15th anniversary of the revolution of 1993, when President Boris Yeltsin ordered tanks to fire on the renegade White House, U.S. Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs and former ambassador to Russia William Burns made the following statement at a Senate Foreign Relations Committee hearing: "Since 1989, the United States, under the leadership of Presidents George H.W. Bush, Clinton and George W. Bush, has supported the right of every country emerging from communism to choose the path of its own development and to choose the institutions -- such as NATO and the European Union -- that it wants to join."

If we believe Burns about the consistency of U.S. policy regarding a nation's "freedom to choose" its alliances, then it was Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev who lied when he said that the administration of President George H.W. Bush assured him in 1989 that NATO would not expand eastward following German reunification. Then-U.S. ambassador to the Soviet Union Jack Matlock has substantiated Gorbachev's version.

So I tend to think Burns is the one who is not telling the truth. Burns' words reek of a double standard, particularly in the context of the anniversary of the 1993 constitutional crisis. The coup began on Sept. 21 when Yeltsin issued Decree 1,400, which dissolved the Congress of People's Deputies, the country's parliament and supreme governing body according to the Constitution at the time. After the Constitutional Court ruled the decree illegal, Yeltsin disbanded the court. Then, Yeltsin ordered federal troops to surround the White House, where the parliament was based, and he cut off the electricity and plumbing. When, on Oct. 3, the desperate hold-outs in the White House tried to break through the blockade, tanks opened fire on them.

In December 1993, there was a referendum on Yeltsin's new Constitution and elections for the new State Duma were held. Despite the pro-government media's pressure on voters, opposition parties gained a majority in the Duma.

There are strong reasons to believe that the referendum on the new Constitution, which greatly weakened the Duma and strengthened presidential powers, had been rigged in Yeltsin's favor. But it did show the people's deep dissatisfaction with Yeltsin's political and economic platform -- one that led to a breakdown of the country's industrial base, a lower life expectancy and a disastrous population decline. Nonetheless, international observers considered the elections exemplary. U.S. President Bill Clinton's administration could not find a single word of condemnation for Yeltsin's bloody, anti-constitutional coup d'etat. Moreover, the Western press praised Yeltsin for adhering to "democratic principles" -- much in the same way as it has extolled Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili in recent years.

Yet when Yeltsin, who was despised by his own people, was replaced by Vladimir Putin, who soon became widely popular at home, Washington constantly criticized Putin's policies that were aimed at undoing the damage done by Yeltsin.

Thus, we are seeing a disturbing pattern from the Western press. Similar to the nonsense that was written in the West of Yeltsin's "democratic revolution" of 1993, we hear and read the same distortions about Georgian "democracy" and Russia's "aggression" against Georgia in the August war.

By supporting aggressors and distorting the facts, the West believes it is supporting "young democracies" and "the choice of the people." Perhaps this is why the so-called young democrats, whether they be Yeltsin or Saakashvili, take such satisfaction in inflicting human losses.

Against this backdrop, it is scary to think what might happen in Ukraine, where its own "young democrats" -- President Viktor Yushchenko and Prime Minister Yulia Tymoshenko -- are battling each other to gain the West's admiration.

#21

Russian FM: Committed to preventing military nuclearization in Iran

By Roni Sofer

YNetNews, October 6, 2008

MOSCOW - Russian Foreign Affairs Minister Sergey Lavrov said in his meeting with Prime Minister Ehud Olmert on Monday evening that "Russia is committed to preventing the nuclearization of Iran for military purposes." Olmert, who landed in Moscow in the late afternoon, is scheduled to meet with Russian President Dmitry Medvedev on Tuesday.

Concerns regarding Iran's nuclear program topped the agenda at the meeting, with Olmert telling Lavrov it is "crucial that Russia take part in the international effort to prevent Iran from obtaining nuclear power and putting an end to Iran's enrichment operations."

The two discussed the cooperation between Jerusalem and Moscow and agreed it would continue. Israel maintains "both sides see eye-to-eye in regards to the importance of preventing the nuclearization of Iran."

Lavrov also said Moscow is working to secure the release of kidnapped soldier Gilad Shalit, assuring Olmert their efforts towards this end would continue. Sources within Olmert's entourage also reported the foreign affairs minister had said outright that Russia would not engage Hamas so long as the latter failed to meet the conditions set by the Quartet.

The two leaders also discussed the importance of strengthening the standing of Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas ahead of the upcoming elections in the Palestinian Authority (in January 2009). Likewise, they agreed that peace negotiations between Israel and the PA must continue to prevent extremists from gaining clout in the region.

Olmert expressed his concerns regarding the supply of Russian arms to hostile groups in the Middle East, including Iran, Syria and Hizbullah. "It's important that Russia do everything within its power to keep weapons from falling into the hands of terrorists in Lebanon," Olmert was quoted as telling his host.

The matter will also be breached during Olmert's meeting with President Medvedev.

Sergey's Courtyard makes waves

Many in the prime minister's entourage were surprised by the extensive media coverage dedicated to Israel's decision to restore the ownership of Sergey's Courtyard in Jerusalem to Russia. The property was owned by the USSR until it severed its diplomatic ties with Israel in 1967. The motion to return it to

Russian hands was passed as part of a goodwill gesture ahead of Olmert's visit to Moscow, likely his last as prime minister.

Reports on the courtyard's 'repatriation' garnered headlines in newspapers, internet websites, radio programs and television news broadcasts.

Despite the political turmoil the issue caused in Israel, it was met with warm appreciation in Russia. Chairman of the Russian Auditing Chamber, Sergei Stepashin, even joined part of Olmert's meeting with Lavrov to thank the prime minister in person.

#22

Nuclear Aid by Russian to Iranians Suspected

By Eliane Sciolino

New York Times, October 10, 2008

PARIS — International nuclear inspectors are investigating whether a Russian scientist helped Iran conduct complex experiments on how to detonate a nuclear weapon, according to European and American officials. As part of the investigation, inspectors at the International Atomic Energy Agency are seeking information from the scientist, who they believe acted on his own as an adviser on experiments described in a lengthy document obtained by the agency, the officials said.

The officials, who spoke on the condition of anonymity because the investigation is under way, said that the document appeared authentic, without explaining why, but they made it clear that they did not think the scientist was working on behalf of the Russian government.

Still, it is the first time that the nuclear agency has suggested that Iran may have received help from a foreign weapons scientist in developing nuclear arms.

The American and European officials said the new document, written in Farsi, was part of an accumulation of evidence that Iran had worked toward developing a nuclear weapon, despite Iran's claims that its atomic work over the past two decades has been aimed solely at producing electrical power.

In February, in a closed-door briefing at the agency's headquarters in Vienna, its chief nuclear inspector presented diplomats from dozens of countries with newly declassified evidence — documents, sketches and even a video — that he said raised questions about whether Iran had tried to design a weapon.

Among the data presented by Olli Heinonen, the chief inspector, were indications that the Iranians had worked on exploding detonators that are critical for the firing of most nuclear weapons.

When the Iranian envoy at the briefing called the charges "groundless" and protested that the tests were for conventional arms, Mr. Heinonen replied that the experiments were "not consistent with any application other

than the development of a nuclear weapon,” two participants said. He called the shape and timing involved in the firing systems and detonators “key components of nuclear weapons.”

At the same time, Mr. Heinonen acknowledged that the agency “did not have sufficient information at this stage to conclude whether the allegations are groundless or the data fabricated.”

The new document under investigation offers further evidence of such experiments, the Western officials said.

Iranian officials have said repeatedly that the documents the agency is using in its investigation of Iran’s past nuclear activities are fabrications or forgeries, and that any experiments were not related to nuclear weapons.

Iran has said the same about the new evidence, although the agency has not shown the full document to government officials in Tehran. Instead, Iran has been given only five pages of excerpts that have been translated from Farsi into English.

The Western officials said that the conditions under which the inspectors obtained the document prohibited them from revealing it in full to the Iranians, out of fear that doing so could expose the source of the document.

These restrictions present a problem for Mohamed ElBaradei, the agency’s director general, who is pressing Iran to reveal its past nuclear activity. “I cannot accuse a person without providing him or her with the evidence,” he said last year.

Although officials would not say how they had obtained the new document, it was first publicly mentioned in an agency report in May as one of 18 documents presented to Iran in connection with suspected nuclear weapons studies. At the time it was described as a “five-page document in English” about experiments with a complex initiation system to detonate a large amount of high explosives and to monitor the detonation with probes. There was no indication that the document was a translation of a much longer, more comprehensive document in Farsi.

The original, Farsi document is described by officials familiar with it as a detailed narrative of experiments aimed at creating a perfectly timed implosion of nuclear material.

According to experts, the most difficult challenges in developing nuclear weapons are creating the bomb fuel and figuring out how to compress and detonate it.

That was followed by an agency report last month that revealed that Iran might have received “foreign expertise” in its detonator experiments.

A senior official with links to the agency said then that a foreign government was not involved. He ruled out the involvement of Libya and the remnants of the network run by Abdul Qadeer Khan, the Pakistani metallurgist who built the world’s largest black-market sales operation for nuclear technology. But he would not comment further.

European and American officials now say that the “foreign expertise” was a reference to the Russian scientist, but they offered only scant details. They said that the scientist was believed to have helped guide Iranians in the experiments, but that he did not write the document.

Nor is he thought to have been affiliated with the civilian electric power plant that is being rebuilt by Russia at the Iranian port of Bushehr, and which Russia has agreed to fuel with nuclear material, the officials said.

Russia says it opposes any effort by Iran to obtain a weapon, but cooperation by Russian companies and individuals with some aspects of Iran’s nuclear program dates back years.

In the late 1990s, Russia’s scientific and technical elite, reeling from the collapse of the Soviet Union, forged ties to Iran, which paid hard currency for aid in weapons and technical programs. Western experts say the help

extended to Tehran's atomic efforts, but there was never any proof in those years of a Russian link to nuclear weapons development.

"The Iranians were very active in recruiting and paying Russian scientists to provide them with assistance in their nuclear program," said Gary S. Samore, a National Security Council official during the Clinton administration who now directs studies at the Council on Foreign Relations.

He said he had no recollection of Russian aid in the design of Iranian nuclear arms but added that it could have happened. "It's plausible to me that they at some point paid a Russian nuclear expert to provide assistance," he said in an interview.

Asked about the potential contribution of the Russian scientist in detonator experimentation, a senior Russian official who has long followed Iran's nuclear program said, "It is difficult for me to add anything."

#23

France says Russia partly meets Georgia ceasefire

By Margarita Antidze

Reuters, October 10, 2008

GORI, Georgia - Russia has not fully complied with the terms of a cease-fire in Georgia, France's foreign minister said on Friday, casting fresh doubt on whether frozen EU-Russia partnership talks will resume soon.

Russian soldiers and tanks pushed into Georgia's breakaway regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, and adjacent "buffer zones," as part of a massive counter-strike in August to crush an attempt by Georgian forces to retake South Ossetia.

Moscow pulled out of the buffer zones this week, before an October 10 deadline set out in the French-brokered cease-fire. But Georgia says the Kremlin has not fully complied because Russian soldiers remain inside the two separatist regions.

Asked in the Georgian town of Gori, near South Ossetia, if Russia had honoured the cease-fire deal, French Foreign Minister Bernard Kouchner told reporters: "I think so, but partly."

"This is not complete. This is not perfect. It's just the beginning. This is not the end," Kouchner, whose country holds the European Union's rotating presidency, said in a tent camp for Georgians displaced by the fighting.

After a tour of the buffer zone vacated this week by Russian forces -- where human rights groups say hundreds of ethnic Georgian homes were wrecked after the cease-fire came into force -- Kouchner took a swipe at the Russian military.

"It's always very sad to see houses destroyed and people coming back and discovering their belongings in desperate state," said Kouchner, speaking in English. "It was not a good march of the Russian army. Not at all.

EU DIFFERENCES

In a statement released in Brussels, EU foreign policy chief Javier Solana confirmed Russian forces had withdrawn from areas outside Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

"This withdrawal will, we hope, allow internally displaced people to return to their homes and contribute to the normalisation of living conditions," he said.

EU foreign ministers could decide next week whether to restart talks on a strategic partnership treaty with Russia that the 27-member bloc has put on hold until it is satisfied Russia has complied with the cease-fire deal.

Kouchner said he did not know if this would happen and pointed to differences among EU members. "Some are not in agreement. There are people supporting Russia, and there are people fighting against Russia," he said.

Kouchner and EU observers will present the findings of his trip at a meeting of foreign ministers on Monday which will prepare a possible decision two days later by European leaders to restart the talks.

Moscow says it is now in full compliance with the cease-fire and that it will keep a total of 7,600 troops in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, which it has recognised as independent states, to protect them from further Georgia aggression.

The Kremlin said it was morally obliged to enter Georgia to prevent what it called a genocide by Georgian forces.

Western states said its response was disproportionate, but analysts say the European Union's reaction has been tempered because Russia supplies a quarter of Europe's gas and is a major trade and investment partner.

"It seems that the Russians are keeping their word," an official with the EU's French presidency said early on Friday.

But diplomats in Brussels said others, including Britain, Poland and the Baltic nations, argue the EU should wait.

"Giving the green light is a very important moment in terms of the signal to Russia about how we feel about how things have ended up," said one EU diplomat.

#24

Transcript of second McCain, Obama debate [excerpt on Russia] CNN, October 7, 2008

Brokaw: Sen. McCain, this question is for you from the Internet. It's from Alden in Hewitt, Texas.

How can we apply pressure to Russia for humanitarian issues in an effective manner without starting another Cold War?

McCain: First of all, as I say, I don't think that -- we're not going to have another Cold War with Russia.

But have no doubt that Russia's behavior is certainly outside the norms of behavior that we would expect for nations which are very wealthy, as Russia has become, because of their petro dollars.

Now, long ago, I warned about Vladimir Putin. I said I looked into his eyes and saw three letters, a K, a G and a B. He has surrounded himself with former KGB apparatchiks. He has gradually repressed most of the liberties that we would expect for nations to observe, and he has exhibited most aggressive behavior, obviously, in Georgia.

I said before, watch Ukraine. Ukraine, right now, is in the sights of Vladimir Putin, those that want to reassemble the old Soviet Union.

We've got to show moral support for Georgia.

We've got to show moral support for Ukraine. We've got to advocate for their membership in NATO.

We have to make the Russians understand that there are penalties for these this kind of behavior, this kind of naked aggression into Georgia, a tiny country and a tiny democracy.

And so, of course we want to bring international pressures to bear on Russia in hopes that that will modify and eventually change their behavior. Now, the G-8 is one of those, but there are many others.

But the Russians must understand that these kinds of actions and activities are not acceptable and hopefully we will use the leverage, economic, diplomatic and others united with our allies, with our allies and friends in Europe who are equally disturbed as we are about their recent behaviors.

Brokaw: Sen. Obama.

McCain: It will not be a re-ignition of the Cold War, but Russia is a challenge.

Brokaw: Sen. Obama? We're winding down, so if we can keep track of the time.

Obama: Well, the resurgence of Russia is one of the central issues that we're going to have to deal with in the next presidency. And for the most part I agree with Sen. McCain on many of the steps that have to be taken.

But we can't just provide moral support. We've got to provide moral support to the Poles and Estonia and Latvia and all of the nations that were former Soviet satellites. But we've also got to provide them with financial and concrete assistance to help rebuild their economies. Georgia in particular is now on the brink of enormous economic challenges. And some say that that's what Putin intended in the first place.

The other thing we have to do, though, is we've got to see around the corners. We've got to anticipate some of these problems ahead of time. You know, back in April, I put out a statement saying that the situation in Georgia was unsustainable because you had Russian peacekeepers in these territories that were under dispute.

And you knew that if the Russians themselves were trying to obtain some of these territories or push back against Georgia, that that was not a stable situation. So part of the job of the next commander-in-chief, in keeping all of you safe, is making sure that we can see some of the 21st Century challenges and anticipate them before they happen.

We haven't been doing enough of that. We tend to be reactive. That's what we've been doing over the last eight years and that has actually made us more safe. That's part of what happened in Afghanistan, where we rushed into Iraq and Sen. McCain and President Bush suggested that it wasn't that important to catch bin Laden right now and that we could muddle through, and that has cost us dearly.

We've got to be much more strategic if we're going to be able to deal with all of the challenges that we face out there.

And one last point I want to make about Russia. Energy is going to be key in dealing with Russia. If we can reduce our energy consumption, that reduces the amount of petro dollars that they have to make mischief around the world. That will strengthen us and weaken them when it comes to issues like Georgia.

Brokaw: This requires only a yes or a no. Ronald Reagan famously said that the Soviet Union was the evil empire. Do you think that Russia under Vladimir Putin is an evil empire?

Obama: I think they've engaged in an evil behavior and I think that it is important that we understand they're not the old Soviet Union but they still have nationalist impulses that I think are very dangerous.

Brokaw: Sen. McCain?

McCain: Maybe.

Brokaw: Maybe.

McCain: Depends on how we respond to Russia and it depends on a lot of things. If I say yes, then that means that we're reigniting the old Cold War. If I say no, it ignores their behavior.

Obviously energy is going to be a big, big factor. And Georgia and Ukraine are both major gateways of energy into Europe. And that's one of the reasons why it's in our interest.

But the Russians, I think we can deal with them but they've got to understand that they're facing a very firm and determined United States of America that will defend our interests and that of other countries in the world.

#25

In Russia, a Struggle for Markets Just to Stay Open

By Andrew E. Kramer

New York Times, October 9, 2008

MOSCOW — At what point is a stock market no longer a functioning stock market?

Every day this week, regulators have had to halt trading on Russia's main bourses, the world's hardest-hit stock markets during the current crisis.

They closed the RTS and Micex exchanges three times on Monday — and the RTS still managed to lose 19.1 percent, its worst day. Trading reopened at 1 p.m. on Tuesday, and on Wednesday, it was suspended after shares collapsed 14 percent in the first hour.

Regulators said the Micex would reopen on Friday; the RTS was suspended indefinitely.

At issue are two problems. First, Russian companies used shares as collateral to borrow an untold amount of money. Second, the market decline is forcing a spiral of margin-call selling.

"It's a little embarrassing for Russia," Rory MacFarquhar, an economist at Goldman Sachs's office here, said of the daily market closures.

Though the closures sow growing doubt among investors, the larger problem is the leveraging, which has revealed a fundamental and central flaw in the Russian market.

If mortgage-backed securities are the toxic asset in the United States, loans backed by shares are the problem in Russia. A bailout package of more than \$200 billion by the Kremlin of loans and tax cuts has failed to stanch the sell-off.

"Russia does have its own problem now," Mr. MacFarquhar said.

Indonesia, Ukraine and Romania also closed their exchanges on Wednesday, and a rate cut by six big central banks failed to reverse a global rout in stocks.

The Standard & Poor's index for Russian stocks has fallen 53.2 percent this year as of Oct. 3 — the most of the 30 markets monitored by the S. & P.'s emerging-markets index. The second-biggest drop was in Indian stocks, which fell 51.8 percent.

Russia's market has fallen further than any other, in spite of trade and budget surpluses, partly because of the unusual ownership structure that took hold after the breakup of the Soviet Union.

A few wealthy individuals, known as oligarchs, obtained huge stakes in companies as Russia privatized. In "loans-for-shares" auctions in the mid-1990s, they became owners of the big mining and petroleum companies in exchange for small loans to the government.

In this sense, Russia is in contrast, for example, to the United States, where large companies have a diffuse stockholder base. Typically, oligarchs hold more than 50 percent in the companies they control, with the remaining shares split between domestic and foreign investors.

As the market here swooned and commodity prices fell, risk-averse foreign investors pulled out. Russia's war with Georgia and government attacks on private companies also scared away foreign investors. Meanwhile, the oligarchs had, to an unknown degree, pledged portions of their far larger stakes as collateral for loans.

As the smaller investors left and the market dropped, banks made margin calls. The fear is that now the shares that had been locked in the core holdings of the oligarchs will flood the market, at a time when there are no buyers. Just on Tuesday, regulators introduced more sweeping power to suspend trading on the stock exchanges to halt margin-call selling.

Unless trading is closed permanently, however, this measure will not solve the underlying problem.

"At some point, you must let market forces take their course," Michael Kavanagh, a metals sector analyst at UralSib bank, said.

Also on Tuesday, President Dmitri A. Medvedev said he would submit a bill to the Duma that he said would simplify the rules for the seizure of collateral by creditors, which might encourage new lending.

#26

Russia to Start Handing Out Emergency Cash in 'Days'

By Alex Nicholson and Maria Levitov

Bloomberg, October 9, 2008

Russia's government will start delivering cash to banks from \$186 billion of pledged emergency funds in "the next few days" as it seeks to stem the biggest financial crisis in more than a decade, a Kremlin aide said.

"Markets are waiting for money, for cash," President Dmitry Medvedev's senior economic aide, Arkady Dvorkovich, said in a Bloomberg Television interview in Moscow today. "We feel that this will calm the markets."

The Micex stock index was suspended for a 10th time yesterday and rallied as much as 17 percent today in response to coordinated central bank rate cuts and Medvedev's decision on Oct. 7 to channel a further 950 billion rubles (\$36 billion) into the country's biggest banks. Some of the money will come from currency reserves, the world's third largest, and add to \$150 billion in loans, cash auctions and tax cuts to counter the credit squeeze.

"We'll use some of the reserves to calm down the markets," Dvorkovich said. "No currency crisis, no banking crisis, no fiscal crisis is possible in this situation."

The reserves of the world's biggest energy producer fell \$16.7 billion last week to \$546.1 billion, this year's biggest decline, as the central bank sold currency to prop up the ruble and the euro declined against the dollar.

'Stable Position'

Investors withdrew about \$74 billion from the country amid the global financial turmoil, according to BNP Paribas SA estimates. Capital outflows were spurred by Russia's five-day war with Georgia in August, a drop in commodity prices and the seizing up of global capital markets, which spread after the bankruptcy of Lehman Brothers Holdings Inc.

"We are confident that we're in a stable position," Dvorkovich said. "The reserves are huge, the reserves are above \$500 billion and we believe that any figure above \$100 billion is good for Russia today."

For Russia, the "worst case scenario" would be a substantial slowdown in China that could push down oil prices, he said. The government's "budget is based on the price slightly above \$60 per barrel," Dvorkovich said, adding that experts estimate the average annual price of Urals blend of crude is unlikely to fall below that level "for a long time."

Russia's Urals blend of crude has fallen to \$82.15 a barrel, compared with this year's high of \$140.80 a barrel on July 3, according to Bloomberg data.

'Adequate' Reserves

Central bank reserves have climbed from \$12.3 billion in 1998. China has the world's largest foreign currency reserves, totaling \$1.7 trillion at the end of March, according to Bloomberg data, followed by Japan with \$970 billion at the end of May.

"In a calm situation reserves of \$100 billion are adequate for Russia, but if more than \$500 billion in reserves start to turn into \$100 billion too quickly it wouldn't be good," said Maxim Oreshkin, head of research at OAO Rosbank. "This would affect investor perception and markets depend on expectations."

Dvorkovich said Russian authorities were "worried about the slow reaction of other countries to the crisis."

The MSCI Emerging Markets Index rose 3.3 percent today to 624.07, after the coordinated cuts. The Index had lost 23 percent this month.

South Korea, Taiwan and Hong Kong today joined the U.S. Federal Reserve, European Central Bank and China in an emergency bid to stem the worst financial meltdown since the Great Depression through a sudden reduction in interest costs.

'Mirror Image'

Emerging markets have lost half their value this year, the biggest annual slump recorded by in more than two decades by the MSCI Emerging Markets index.

Russia has held "informal consultations" with Iceland on possibly extending a credit of as much as 4 billion euros (\$5.49 billion), Dvorkovich said. "It's a purely central bank discussion," he said.

"Global turmoil affects Russia a lot. We are part of Europe and we want Europe to be stable."

Laws that would enable the Russian government funds to be deployed to help local banks and companies could be in place by "mid next week," though this would be unlikely to ease the seizure on money markets, said Vladimir Tikhomirov, chief economist at UralSib Financial Corp.

"We have a mirror image of what's happening globally and what we see globally is that the banks with access to money from the government or the central bank tend to keep it on their balance sheet and don't pass it on into the economy," he said.

The MosPrime rate, the average interest rate Russian banks charge to lend money to each other overnight, rose today to 10.14 percent, its highest level since reaching a record of 11.08 on Sept. 17.

"The whole issue here is the issue of trust. And that seems to be becoming more serious by the day," Tikhomirov said.

#27

Building on Common Ground With Russia
By Henry A. Kissinger and George P. Shultz
Washington Post, October 8, 2008

In 1914, an essentially local issue was seen by so many nations in terms of established fears and frustrations that it became global in scope and led to the First World War. There is no danger of general war today. But there is the risk that a conflict arising out of ancestral passions in the Caucasus will be treated as a metaphor for a larger conflict, threatening the imperative of building a new international order in a world of globalization, nuclear proliferation and ethnic conflicts.

The presence of Russian troops on the territory of a state newly independent from the old Soviet empire was bound to send tremors through the other countries that established themselves after the collapse of the Soviet Union. This has evoked a rhetoric of confrontation, reciprocal threats and retaliatory countermeasures: American naval forces have been in the Black Sea; Russian military and economic capability has been displayed in the Caribbean, as if from a 19th-century balance-of-power playbook.

The Georgian crisis is cited as proof that Vladimir Putin's Russia is committed to a strategy of unraveling the post-Soviet international order in Europe. A strategy of isolating Russia has been advocated in response. Until a recent meeting between Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice and Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Sergei Lavrov, the United States and Russia had been without high-level contact since early August. Nongovernmental contacts have been curtailed.

This drift toward confrontation must be ended. However appropriate as a temporary device for showing our concern, isolating Russia is not a sustainable long-range policy. It is neither feasible nor desirable to isolate a country adjoining Europe, Asia and the Middle East and possessing a stockpile of nuclear weapons comparable to that of the United States. Given Russia's historically ambivalent and emotionally insecure relations with its environment, this approach is not likely to evoke considered or constructive responses. Even much of Western Europe is uneasy about such a course.

In 1983, when the Soviets shot down a Korean airliner that had wandered into their airspace, the United States vigorously invited all countries to join in sharp condemnation. Yet President Ronald Reagan ordered our arms-control negotiators back to Geneva. Strength and diplomacy remained in step.

Like most wars, the Georgian crisis originated in a series of miscalculations. Tbilisi misjudged its scope for military action and the magnitude of Russia's response. For its part, Moscow may have been surprised by the West's reaction to the scale of its intervention. It also may not have fully considered the impact that recognition of South Ossetia and Abkhazia as independent states would have on other countries with geographically distinct ethnic minorities, or the precedent this action might establish, even for some regions of Russia.

Yet these miscalculations should not be allowed to dominate future policy. America has an important stake in the territorial integrity of an independent Georgia but not in a confrontational diplomacy toward Russia by its neighbors. Russia needs to understand that the use or threat of military force evokes memories that reinforce the very obstacles to cooperative relations that are the basis of its grievances. America must decide whether to deal with Russia as a possible strategic partner or as a threat to be combated by principles drawn from the Cold War. Of course, should Russia pursue the policies its detractors assign to it, America must resist with all appropriate measures. Those of us who had responsibilities in conducting the Cold War would take the lead in supporting such a strategy.

We are not yet at this point. Russia's leaders undoubtedly deplore the dissolution of the Russian and Soviet empire. But if they have any realism -- and in our experience they do -- they know that it is impossible and dangerous to seek to reverse Russia's history by military means.

Russian history displays a tale of ambivalent oscillation between the restraints of the European order and the temptations for expansion into the strategic vacuums along its borders in Asia and the Middle East. These vacuums no longer exist. In the west, NATO is a formidable strategic presence. In the east, there is a resurgent Asia, to which the center of gravity of world affairs is shifting. In the south, Russia faces a partly radicalized Islam along a lengthy border. Internally, demographic prospects are for decline in the total population and a relative rise in the percentage of its Muslim portion, which is partly disaffected. Russia has not been able to address its infrastructure and health deficit adequately. With a gross domestic product less than

one-sixth that of the United States (in purchasing power parity terms) and a defense budget significantly smaller than those of the European Union and the United States, Russia is not well placed to conduct a superpower struggle. Whatever their rhetoric, Russian leaders know this.

What they have sought, sometimes clumsily, is acceptance as equals in a new international system rather than as losers of a Cold War to whom terms could be dictated. Their methods have occasionally been truculent. Understanding the psychology of its international environment has never been a Russian specialty -- partly because of the historic difference in domestic evolution between Russia and its neighbors, especially in the West.

But fairness requires some acknowledgment that the West has not always been sensitive to how the world looks from Moscow. Consider the evolution of NATO. For its first 50 years, NATO legitimized itself as a defensive alliance. In undertaking a war of choice against Yugoslavia in 1999, NATO proclaimed the right to achieve its moral aspirations by offensive military action. (We strongly supported NATO policy at the time.) The war to stop Serbian human rights violations in Kosovo, ended in part by Russian mediation, provided for an autonomous Kosovo under titular Serbian sovereignty but de facto European Union supervision. Earlier this year, that status was changed by, in effect, a unilateral decision of a group of European nations and the United States to declare independence for Kosovo without U.N. endorsement and over strenuous Russian objection.

The Kosovo decision occurred nearly simultaneously with publication of the plan to move anti-ballistic missiles into Poland and the Czech Republic as well as a proposal to invite Ukraine and Georgia to join NATO. Moving the East-West security line, in a historically short period, 1,000 miles to the east while changing the mission of NATO and deploying advanced weapons technology on the territory of former Soviet satellites was not likely to be met with Russian acquiescence.

This narrative explains some of Russia's motivations; it does not seek to justify every response or the confrontational rhetoric occasionally employed. But it suggests the importance of viewing the current conflict with some historical and psychological perspective.

Immediate crises should not deflect us from long-term responsibilities. The six points put forward by French President Nicolas Sarkozy provide a framework for a solution of the Georgian crisis formally accepted by all the parties: a genuinely independent Georgia, within its existing borders, while the status of South Ossetia and Abkhazia -- disputed since the founding of Georgia -- continues as the subject of negotiation within the security framework in Sarkozy's points.

In April, President Bush and then-President Putin met in Sochi and outlined a program of joint cooperation to deal with the long-term requirements of world order. It included such subjects as nonproliferation, Iran, energy, climate change, methods to defuse the impact of the anti-ballistic missile deployment in Eastern Europe, and a possible linking of some American and Russian anti-ballistic missile defense systems. The two countries possess more than 90 percent of the world's nuclear weapons; cooperation is imperative if proliferation is to be stopped.

The Sochi document provides a useful road map. Russia, of course, should not be allowed to use the invocation of the common interest as a way to achieve its special concerns by military pressure and intimidation. Those of us who question the urgency with which NATO membership was pursued for Georgia and Ukraine are not advocating a sphere of influence for Russia in Eastern Europe. We consider Ukraine an essential part of the European architecture, and we favor a rapid evolution toward E.U. membership. We do believe that the security of Ukraine and Georgia should be placed in a larger context than mechanically advancing an integrated NATO command to a few hundred miles from Moscow. NATO has already agreed to the principle of membership for Ukraine and Georgia. Delaying its implementation until a new U.S. administration is able to consider its options is not a concession but responsible management of the future.

Finally, our ability to conduct effective foreign policy toward Russia requires energetic efforts to restore our domestic strength. Our financial house must be put in order, regarding not just the immediate crisis but also the structure of entitlement programs. We are far too dependent on oil imports. We need legislation that gives a long-term horizon to comprehensive and determined efforts to end this state of affairs.

Diplomacy without strength is sterile. Strength without diplomacy tempts posturing. We believe that the fundamental interests of the United States, Europe and Russia are more aligned today -- or can be made so -- even in the wake of the Georgian crisis, than at any point in recent history. We must not waste that opportunity.

#28

Near the Arctic Circle, The Jews of Syktyvkar Dream of a Fancy JCC

By Rebecca Spence

Forward, October 8, 2008

In a heavily forested region of Russia, stretching at points above the Arctic Circle, is the vast and frigid Komi Republic. And if one of this remote republic's Jewish inhabitants has his way, its capital city will one day have a Jewish community center.

Leonid Zilberg, a longtime Jewish community leader in Syktyvkar, is hoping to build a \$2.5 million center for the capital city's estimated 1,500 Jews. The proposed center would include a synagogue, a café, a sports center and a movie theater, all to accommodate what Zilberg claims is a growing Jewish population in the city of more than 200,000.

Though he has yet to raise a penny, Zilberg, 45, is hoping that Jewish philanthropists will emerge from America and around the globe to help finance his lofty dream.

As global Jewry has poured vast sums into revitalizing the Jewish communities of the former Soviet Union in recent years, how those financial resources get distributed has emerged as a thorny question. There is also the question of what symbolizes a Jewish community. Is it the presence of a synagogue? How about a mikveh? These days, as Zilberg's efforts demonstrate, the marker of a Jewish community may just be a pricey, sprawling community center.

"Objectively, a 1,500-person Jewish community does not need a \$2.5 million community center with a sports center," said David Shneer, an expert in the Jewish communities of the former Soviet Union who directs the program in Jewish studies at the University of Colorado at Boulder. "But subjectively, the fact that the community thinks it needs one tells us a lot about what makes a Jewish community."

Zilberg, who works in real estate, organized Syktyvkar's official Jewish community in the early 1990s,

in the wake of the fall of the Soviet Union. He said that the idea for the center came directly from the city's Jewish community. "Many members of the community have lived in the U.S. or Israel, and they see that all the Jewish communities in the world have their own buildings."

The proposed center, a 4,265-square-foot complex, would be located in the heart of downtown Syktyvkar. Its modern brick-and-tile structure would replace the traditional wooden apartment buildings that now occupy the block. Its sports center would double as a concert hall, and could be rented out as a way to bring in income, Zilberg said.

Nikolay Zyuzev, a philosophy professor who is helping Zilberg with outreach to the global Jewish community, initially told the Forward that the proposed center would be the Northern-most synagogue in the world. In fact, however, a Finnish synagogue beats it by several latitudinal degrees, as does a congregation in Fairbanks, Alaska.

The majority of Jewish families in Komi — now an autonomous region of the Russian Federation — ended up there by force. Many are the descendants of Jews who were imprisoned in the Gulag labor camps, one of the most infamous of which was located in the Komi city of Vorkuta, north of the Arctic Circle. Still others were deported to the region from Poland and Lithuania in the 1940s.

Whether the Jewish population of the Republic of Komi is shrinking or growing is a matter of some contention. Zilberg said the Jewish population of Syktyvkar in particular is growing, as Jews from the region's even more remote cities migrate there. He estimates that the Jewish population of all of Komi is 2,500. The total population of the republic — comprising primarily Russians and native Komi people — is about 1 million.

But representatives of the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee — the American-based charity that provides funding to Jewish communities in the former Soviet Union — say that Komi's Jewish population is dwindling. Menachem Lepkivker, the St. Petersburg-based JDC representative for Northwest Russia, estimates the entire Jewish population of Komi at between 1,000 and 1,500. And according to the statistics, he said, between 25% and 30% of those Jews are elderly.

"When we are going to invest Jewish money, we should ask the question, 'Where will be the most significant result for the Jewish people?'" Lepkivker said. "It's not the highest priority, because we believe that in the long term, we cannot see a sustainable Jewish community in the republic of Komi."

Zilberg criticized the JDC, saying that it spends too much money on the big cities of Moscow and St. Petersburg and not enough on the local regions.

Steve Schwager, CEO of the JDC, said in an e-mail that as a result of an 18-month review process, the JDC had made a decision to begin shifting its resources, moving them from "smaller, peripheral communities" to areas with larger Jewish populations.

The Syktyvkar Jewish community also receives some funding from the Federation of Jewish Communities of the CIS, a Chabad organization that has emerged as a powerful force in Jewish life in the former Soviet Union. According to Zilberg, the federation gives the Syktyvkar community \$1,500 a month, which he uses to pay for such essentials as rent and heat. In the winter months, when average temperatures are below freezing, the cost of heat can run quite high.

Representatives of the federation did not return e-mails seeking comment.

In an indication of Komi's remoteness, Mark Levin, executive director of the National Conference on Soviet Jewry, said that his organization did not have regular contact with the region's Jews. Levin added, however, that Zilberg's efforts to build a Jewish center there could help his community enlist greater support across the board.

According to Zilberg, some of the key pieces needed to build the community center are already in place. He said that the president of the Komi Republic, Vladimir Torlopov, has designated a piece of land for the project; architectural plans have been drawn up.

Zilberg said that he hopes to raise \$1 million from global Jewish philanthropists, and the rest of the project can be financed through low-interest loans from local banks.

Last January, Zilberg wrote a letter to Roman Abramovich, a Russian-Jewish billionaire who lives in the United Kingdom and has roots in Syktyvkar, seeking financial help. He has gotten no response, he said, but he is still hopeful.

Asked how he planned on raising the money, Zyuzev, speaking on behalf of Zilberg, was forthright. "We don't know how to do this," he said. "By the method of trial and error."