

WASHINGTON, D.C. January 23, 2009

TO: NCSJ Leadership and Interested Parties

**FROM: Richard Stone, NCSJ Chairman;
Alexander Smukler, NCSJ President;
Mark B. Levin, NCSJ Executive Director**



In Brief: The New Administration and More

Dear Friend,

The celebrations are over in Washington, and the difficult work of governing begins for the new Administration and Congress. It is important to note that one of the first meetings President Obama held was with his foreign policy team. There are many immediate international challenges for President Obama, including in the former Soviet Union. I don't think it was coincidental that several stories were floated in the Russian media about an early meeting between the U.S. and Russian Presidents. Even if these stories do not prove entirely accurate, it strongly indicates the Russian government's desire to get off to a better beginning than President Medvedev's harsh rhetoric on missile defense in November 2008 may have indicated.

Once again, the human rights community in Moscow is in a state of shock after well-known attorney and activist Stanislav Markelov and a journalist were killed in broad daylight after a news conference. There are several stories in this week's update about this brazen assassination. It begs the question, what is the Russian government doing to stop these seemingly endless murders of journalists and human rights activists?

It appears that the Russian and Ukrainian governments finally have resolved their remaining differences on natural gas, and the pipelines should be operating again soon. The details of the agreement have not been made public, but both sides appear satisfied. As was mentioned in previous updates, this dispute was far more a political than economic disagreement.

The Ukrainian Jewish community held their fourth and largest demonstration in support of Israel earlier this week. As in other Diaspora communities, the rallies have also had a unifying impact inside the community, where organizational rivalries have been put aside for the larger good. Also this week, a Ukrainian court found the editor of an Odessa newspaper guilty of ethnic hatred and anti-Semitism. Both stories are in this week's update.

Finally, we have included a wonderful New York Times story about U.S. Ambassador to Russia John Beyrle and his late father. Joe Beyrle was an American soldier in World War II who was captured by the Nazis, escaped from a POW camp, and ended up fighting with the Red Army before his eventual return to the United States. I had the pleasure of meeting Mr. Beyrle on his last visit to Moscow, when his son was the Deputy Chief of Mission. He was a remarkable gentleman and is considered a true hero in 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. January 23, 2009

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#1a

Ukrainian editor sentenced for anti-Semitic article JTA, January 20, 2009

The editor of an Odessa newspaper was found guilty of inciting ethnic hatred in Ukraine for writing an anti-Semitic article.

Ihor Volin-Danilov, an editor of *Nashe Dyelo*, received a suspended 18-month sentence for a 2007 article titled "Kill the best of the goyim." Volin-Danilov concluded in the story that the Jewish religion is "criminal and immoral."

An expert commission of the Ukrainian State Committee for Nationalities and Religions found that the xenophobic article "harms the stability of multinational Ukrainian society and is dangerous for interethnic accord in the state, provoking extremism."

Volin-Danilov was convicted of "Infringement of equal rights on the basis of racial or ethnic identity or attitude to religion," an offense under the Ukrainian criminal code.

At an Odessa Prymorsky court hearing last week, a representative of the Jewish community said he had received reports of "xenophobes who attacked synagogues after reading the relevant books."

Volin-Danilov must register weekly with the local police station.

Berl Kapulkin, the head of the Odessa Jewish community press service, told JTA that Odessa Jews appreciated the court decision.

"The Ukrainian Jewish community considers that even the suspended sentence for the guilty journalist makes an important contribution to the struggle against anti-Semitism," said Eduard Dolinsky, a director-general of the Ukrainian Jewish Committee.

#1b
Ukrainians rally against international terrorism
JTA, January 21, 2009

Demonstrators rallied in Kiev to support the war against international terrorism.

Several thousand people from all over Ukraine gathered Tuesday near a Kiev monument dedicated to terror victims -- a bronze and concrete heart split in two parts, with the words "You shall not kill" written on the sculpture in different languages. The group was demonstrating in support of the struggle against terrorism and to support Israel's operation in Gaza.

Zina Kalay-Klaitman, Israel's ambassador to Ukraine, two chief rabbis of Ukraine, Ukrainian Jewish leaders and veterans of World War II, among others, took part in the event.

"Ukraine against Terror," organized by the United Jewish Community and All-Ukrainian Jewish Congress, was the fourth and most massive demonstration held this month in Ukraine's largest Jewish population centers, Kiev and Dnepropetrovsk.

The demonstrators carried placards that read "Israel -- Yes! Terrorism -- No!" and "No to Fascism!" They also waved Israeli and Ukrainian flags.

Anti-Semitic acts do not appear to have risen in Ukraine as a result of the Gaza operation and pro-Israel rallies.

#1c
Russian NGOs are under tight financial control – Alexeyeva
Interfax, January 19, 2009

The opinion voiced by the Russian Interior Ministry, that non-governmental and charity organizations in Russia are used to launder money, is wrong, head of the Moscow Helsinki Group Lyudmila Alexeyeva said.

"This is a sort of influence on public opinion directed against non-profit and charity organizations. There are good-doers all over the world, and they are bad here," Alexeyeva told Interfax.

Public organizations, which are used to launder money, are active almost in every social sphere, Deputy head of the Interior Ministry's economic security department Maj. Gen. Yury Popugayev told an interview with the Gazeta newspaper published on Monday.

Alexeyeva noted in this respect that the use of money by non-profit organizations is strictly controlled.

"I would like to calm down the Interior Ministry: both sponsors and the state exercise tough control over the use of money. The unparalleled law on public organizations was adopted in Russia in 2006, under which everything, virtually each kopeck, is checked every quarter. Even if money is received from independent sponsors, the state nevertheless checks. And we can spend money only at publicly declared programs," she said.

#1d
Ukrainian President Calls For Obama to Support NATO Bid
AFP, January 20, 2009

Ukrainian President Viktor Yushchenko Tuesday called for incoming U.S. president Barack Obama to continue support for his ex-Soviet nation's bid to join the North Atlantic Treaty organization.

"In Ukraine, we appreciate the support of the United States on Ukraine's strategic course to join NATO," Yushchenko said in a statement ahead of Obama's inauguration Tuesday. "We hope that fruitful cooperation will continue with your administration, in this area in particular."

Yushchenko also invited Obama to visit Ukraine "as soon as it is convenient" and offered the congratulations of the Ukrainian people on his inauguration.

"I have the great pleasure, on behalf of the Ukrainian people and myself, to congratulate you on taking up your post," he said.

Russia has been deeply angered by Ukraine's efforts to join NATO, its old Cold War foe. Tensions with the alliance are also high over another potential candidate, Georgia, with which Russia fought a short war in August. The U.S. strongly backed the efforts of both Ukraine and Georgia to join NATO under the administration of outgoing U.S. President George W. Bush.

#1e

Russians ordered to preserve Chabad documents JTA, January 22, 2009

A federal judge ordered Russia to preserve historic documents sought by members of the Chabad-Lubavitch movement.

U.S. District Judge Royce Lamberth said Thursday he will order Russia to preserve the documents and return any that already may have been removed from state archives, The Associated Press reported.

Chabad is suing Russia to recover thousands of books and documents that belonged to the late Rabbi Joseph Isaac Schneersohn, the father-in-law of the last Chabad leader, Menachem Mendel Schneerson, who died in 1994.

The judge also warned Russia that it could face a default ruling in the case if does not bring in new lawyers. Russia's current firm asked to withdraw from the case, saying that the government has failed to pay hundreds of thousands of dollars in legal bills.

#1f

Hanukah Miracles in Kyiv World Union for Progressive Judaism, January 22, 2009

Rabbi Alexander Dukhovny, the World Union's senior rabbi in Ukraine, lit the menorah candles this past Hanukah together with Chabad Rabbi Jonathan Markowitz during a holiday ceremony in Kyiv, which was sponsored by several Jewish organizations, including the Jewish Agency, the Joint Distribution Committee and the local Israeli cultural center.

"For the modern Jew," said Dukhovny, "it is difficult to believe in miracles. However...miracles do happen!" He was referring to the often acrimonious relations that Chabad and other Orthodox organizations have with non-Orthodox religious movements working in the former Soviet Union.

Hatikva, Dukhovny's congregation in Kyiv, held its own celebrations during the eight-day holiday, with over 100 members gathering in one of its preschool classrooms to light the first candle. The evening also included a performance by 25 preschoolers, aged three to six, and an auction to benefit the congregation.

The items for the auction were donated by London's Harrow and Wembley Progressive Synagogue and by Temple Shalom of Naples, Florida, Hatikva's two sister congregations. Dukhovny thanked Rita Asbury, Hanna Schlesinger and Judi and Howard Palay, members of the U.S. and British congregations, for sending the items to Kyiv "to make the Hanukah miracles real."

Hatikva opened its doors to the entire Jewish community of Kyiv on the Friday night of Hanukah, inviting everyone to light the sixth candle and participate in Kabbalat Shabbat services before sitting down to a meal of traditional holiday food. Dukhovny lit the final Hanukah candle at a ceremony sponsored by the Jewish Agency to close the festival of lights in Kyiv. "Miracles are about all of us who make them a reality every day!" he said.

Members of Chabad also say that they are asking the Obama administration to intervene to get the documents returned.

#1g
Ukrainian Jews honored
JTA, January 22, 2009

The Ukrainian government cited several Jews for their "extraordinary" contributions to society.

They were among a group of Ukrainians to receive national honors Wednesday from President Victor Yushchenko on National Reunion Day in the town of Baturyn.

Among the Jews recognized were Yevgeny Chervonenko, the first deputy mayor of Kiev and a prominent Jewish leader; Yliya Levitas, the president of the Jewish Council of Ukraine and the Council of National Associations of Ukraine; and Aleksandr Feldman, the director general of the Industrial and Scientific Center Trubostal and vice president of the Jewish Council of Ukraine.

Yushchenko's decree, dated Jan.16, said the honorees were honored for their "extraordinary contribution to consolidation of Ukrainian society, establishment and development of the democratic, social and law state on the occasion of National Reunion Day."

Chervonenko was presented with the Order of Yaroslav the Wise, fifth degree; Levitas received the Order for Merit, first degree; Feldman received the Order for Merit, the second degree; singer Tatyana Liberman, also known as Tina Karol, received Honored Artist of Ukraine; Semyon Tzydelkovsky, director of the Chernovtzy House of Aesthetics, received the Honored Worker of Art; and Yuriy Vaysberg, a head physician of the Zhytomyr Regional Medical Center, was given the Order for Merit, third degree.

Speaking at the celebration, Yushchenko noted the contributions of the recipients.

"Each of you made in your own sphere what we can call now a unique contribution into the establishment and development of the Ukrainian independence, the strengthening of democracy and law, the development of science, culture, spirituality, strengthening of economy," he said.

#2
Baltic Protests Erupt as EU's Worst Economies Shake
By Milda Seputyte and James M. Gomez
Bloomberg, January 16, 2009

The Baltic countries of Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia are facing unrest and street protests over government austerity measures that may make political leaders casualties of the worst economic collapse in the European Union.

Protesters hurled stones and broke windows at the Parliament building during an anti-government demonstration in the capital of Vilnius today, leading to at least 86 arrests. It followed a larger riot on Jan. 13 in Riga, Latvia's biggest city, in which 106 people were detained. Lithuanian Prime Minister Andrius Kubilius held an emergency Cabinet meeting as police pushed protesters back with rubber bullets and tear gas.

Disruptions in the former communist nations just west of Russia contrast with 2006, when the economies of the three grew faster than any others in the 27-member EU. Now, leaders are facing calls to step down over painful spending and wage cuts, enacted more than a year after the International Monetary Fund warned that an economic meltdown was looming.

"The frustration of people can have political ramifications for all the Baltic countries," said Lars Christensen, chief analyst at Danske Bank AS, in a phone interview from Copenhagen. "Politicians are very restricted in what they can do now and that is very hard to explain to people."

After 40 years as Soviet satellites, the three Baltic states founded free-market democracies that culminated in their entry into the EU in 2004. The resulting aid and foreign direct investment of more than \$21.5 billion helped housing prices and wages to more than double and economic growth to soar.

'Shame on You'

About 7,000 people took part in today's Vilnius demonstration, which was organized by the Lithuanian Trade Union Confederation to protest government tax reforms and public wage cuts. People marched along Vilnius's main shopping and business boulevard chanting "Shame on You" and carrying signs "Stop Impoverishment and Unemployment" to the government building

"We want firm, but well-considered, decisions that aren't done overnight," protester Aldona Balsiene said before rioting began. "We demand a stop to the nation's impoverishment policy, a reduction in the tax burden."

By afternoon, parts of downtown were filled with tear gas and paving stones, as riot police and dog chased crowds across the river.

The frustration of citizens was felt the most in Latvia, which has had the biggest economic reversal. In 2006, gross domestic product expanded 12.2 percent, the highest rate in the EU. In the third quarter, GDP contracted 4.6 percent, the EU's steepest dive.

Estonian, Lithuanian GDP

Estonia followed, with a 3.5 percent contraction, and Lithuania is expected to slip into recession this year, with the Finance Ministry predicting the economy to shrink 4.8 percent. Third-quarter growth for the 16-member euro region was 0.6 percent and the European Central Bank forecasts a 2009 contraction of 0.5 percent.

The troubles may infect the economies of other former eastern-bloc nations and the Nordic states, whose companies, including banks Swedbank AB and SEB AB and phone operator TeliaSonera AB, are the biggest in the three countries.

"There is a risk that a financial crisis in Latvia could spread and create unease on the financial markets in Sweden and our neighboring countries," Swedish central bank Governor Stefan Ingves said in a statement on Dec. 16.

Standard & Poor's, Moody's Investors Service and Fitch Ratings, like the IMF, have been issuing warnings about the Baltic economies since 2006.

In Latvia, resentment toward the government of Prime Minister Ivars Godmanis prompted a Riga street demonstration on Jan. 13 that drew as many as 10,000 protesters.

New Elections Sought

They called on President Valdis Zatlers to allow a referendum for new elections. The Riga demonstration became the first protest to turn violent since the country gained independence from the Soviet Union in 1991, after some in the crowd began throwing stones.

"If we want to get out this crisis, we need different people who didn't get us to this place," said Eriks Dreibans, a 36-year-old Riga chef. He said his New Year's business fell by half from the year before. "I'll participate in other protests in the future."

On Smilsu Street in Riga's old city, a protester wearing a hooded sweatshirt threw a brick through the window of a liquor store as looters stole alcohol. Windows in the nearby Finance Ministry were also broken before riot police responded with pepper spray and batons and officers dragged away offenders.

Lost Trust

Zatlers, 53, said the next day that trust in the government and lawmakers had "catastrophically fallen." He gave leaders until March 31 to shuffle the Cabinet and address criticisms, threatening to allow the referendum to dissolve Parliament, needed under Latvian law.

In Lithuania, Kubilius's Cabinet, which won in October elections, is under similar pressure. Even before taking office in December, he announced budget spending cuts and wage freezes designed to shore up public finances as the slowdown reduces revenue.

Vilnius police said on its Web site it's investigating online betting on whether today's protest will turn violent. The authorities said people placing bets may have "a financial interest in affecting the outcome of the protest."

Algis Krupavicius, a political science professor at the Kaunas University of Technology, said Kubilius, 52, wasn't open enough about his plans and failed to persuade citizens that sacrifices now will reap a stronger economy later.

Broken Promise

Teachers and university professors who were promised by the previous government wage increases of 20 percent this year received only 5.6 percent.

"Communication with the public hasn't occurred, and it is still nonexistent," said Krupavicius. "People are disappointed that decisions are made quickly."

Still, Lithuanian Finance Minister Algirdas Semeta said in an interview yesterday he saw no "possibilities to reverse the decisions made.

"I understand the hardships of people in the face of the economic downturn," Semeta said. "These measures were necessary but may be socially painful individually. The essence of the system that's been introduced as a medicine in this situation must remain."

In Estonia, support for the government of Prime Minister Andrus Ansip fell to 4.3 on a 1-to-10 scale in December. It was the lowest since March 2005, according to a Dec. 29 survey by EMOR polling company, commissioned by the public broadcaster. No margin of error was provided.

"The chances for the survival of the government are not great," said Juhan Kiviraehk, a sociologist with the International Center for Defense Studies in Tallinn, the Estonian capital.

#3

New U.S. Envoy to Russia Echoes Father Who Fought for Soviets

By Ellen Barry

New York Times, January 17, 2009

When John Beyrle, the new American ambassador to Russia, appeared on a Russian radio show shortly after Russia's five-day war with Georgia, the questions he got were predictably in-your-face. Is it true that the United States is sneaking weapons into Georgia disguised as humanitarian aid? Can you prove that planned American missile defense sites are not aimed at Russia?

And then: Is it true that your father was a Soviet soldier?

The answer — which Mr. Beyrle (pronounced BY-er-ly) delivered on the air in flawless Russian — has to be one of the more amazing stories to come out of World War II. Yes, during the last desperate months of the war, a starving 21-year-old from Muskegon, Mich., crossed the eastern front by foot and offered his services to a Soviet tank battalion, using the three words of Russian he had learned as a German prisoner of war — Ya Amerikansky tovarishch, or "I am an American comrade!"

And, yes, he fought the Nazis alongside them, wrapping his boots with burlap and downing shots of vodka to keep from freezing. During lulls in fighting, he answered batteries of questions about capitalism and taught the battalion to sing the Notre Dame fight song. And when the war was over, and Joe Beyrle was a supervisor in a bowling-ball factory, he told the stories to his son — the future ambassador to Moscow.

"He always looked at the Russians as people who saved his life when they could just as easily have put him up against a wall and shot him," said Mr. Beyrle, whose office looks out at the Russian White House, veiled in January by sheets of snow.

Mr. Beyrle, 54, arrived in Moscow at a difficult moment. A month after he moved into Spaso House, the ambassador's residence, Georgia launched its offensive against South Ossetia, which was widely viewed in

Moscow as an American initiative. In response, Russian troops poured over the border into Georgia, sending relations between Moscow and Washington to a post-cold-war nadir.

It is, in other words, no environment for sentimental journeys. Mr. Beyrle speaks of the August crisis with the emphatic cool of a three-decade Russia hand, as if friction between the governments is the rule, not the exception. His career in Russia has been punctuated by the invasion of Afghanistan, the downing of Korean Airlines Flight 007 and the destabilizing deaths of two Soviet leaders, Konstantin Chernenko and Yuri Andropov.

“I have,” he said evenly, “a sense of perspective on crisis.”

Still, there is something personal about Mr. Beyrle’s connection with Russia. His father’s memories lent the Soviet Union a human heft: In the spring of 1945, as Joe Beyrle made his way home to Michigan, he took a train east across Belarus, staring out the window at the bodies of Soviet soldiers, stacked like cordwood, his son said. Twenty-seven million Soviet citizens died during the war — including, his family believes, the entire battalion that rescued Joe Beyrle.

“He saw what the war had left behind, which was not much but ash and smoking rubble,” Mr. Beyrle said. “For most Americans, World War II is Italy and Normandy. Nobody knows what happened in Stalingrad. I had another dimension of understanding of the Soviet Union. This is a country whose self awareness has been formed by war.”

Crazy things happen in war. Joe Beyrle’s story marks the collision of a singularly mulish American P.O.W. — he risked death to escape a German camp when it was obvious he would soon be freed anyway — and the brutal chaos of the eastern front, which Joe’s biographer, Thomas H. Taylor, describes as “two tyrannosauruses going at it.”

Joe Beyrle, who parachuted into Normandy on D-Day, had been terribly battered during seven months in German captivity. He managed to escape, on his third try, and fled through Polish farmland until he could hear the artillery fire of the eastern front, which sounded “like a welcome from God,” he told Mr. Taylor for his book, “The Simple Sounds of Freedom.”

He hid in a hayloft, sucking on straw until it was soft enough to swallow, as the Red Army seized the farm, machine-gunned the German couple who lived there and fed the bodies to their pigs. He came out with his hands up, offering the Soviets a damp pack of Lucky Strikes.

When they offered him safe passage home, he said he would rather stay with the battalion. Why, they asked, dumbfounded. His answer was, “To fight the Nazis, fight them with you,” Mr. Taylor writes.

The war ended for him a few weeks later, when a German bomb blew him off a tank, and his commander — a woman he knew only as “the Major” — leaned over him and told him, Proshchai, tovarishch — Goodbye, comrade. Joe Beyrle returned to Muskegon, where everyone’s war stories were gradually papered over by ordinary life.

The feelings of fellowship between Moscow and Washington would not last long. By the 1950s, anti-Communist sentiment was so pervasive that, as John Beyrle put it, “If you were a prudent person, maybe you didn’t talk so much about the fact that you fought for the Red Army, even for a week.”

The American authorities discouraged Joe from contacting his Soviet war buddies and saw him as a “unique asset,” Mr. Taylor said. In the 1950s, the F.B.I. asked him to infiltrate a Communist cell in a labor union, and during the Vietnam War, when peace talks had stalled, the C.I.A. flew him into Laos to hand deliver a letter to a major in the Vietnamese Army.

It was his son, finally, who allowed Joe Beyrle to delve into his past. Steered toward Russian by one of his professors at Grand Valley State University in Grand Rapids, Mich., John Beyrle found work in Moscow as a guide for a United States government exhibit on farming techniques. He and his father began combing through archives, looking for a single survivor who might remember Joe Beyrle. The son joined the Foreign Service in 1983 and chipped away at the research during two tours in Moscow. The story began to draw attention.

In 1994, President Boris N. Yeltsin presented Joe Beyrle with four medals for service in the Red Army. It was, John Beyrle said later, “the proudest moment of his life.”

Today John Beyrle is married to another Foreign Service officer, Jocelyn Greene, and they have two daughters. When he was nominated as ambassador to Russia, his father had been dead for four years. But the story has been told again and again since his arrival; diplomats hope it will resonate at a moment of deep distrust of America.

On Veterans’ Day, Mr. Beyrle revived an embassy tradition of celebrating with Russian veterans. Among them was Maj. Gen. Vasily Zibarev, who, like his father, fought in a tank battalion on the eastern front.

“Maybe my father and General Zibarev never met, but they were fighting for the same thing and they celebrated a common victory,” Mr. Beyrle said. The quote was taken down by Oleg Gorupai of the Defense Ministry’s in-house newspaper, *Krasnaya Zvezda*, or Red Star. The newspaper routinely excoriates the American role in the region. Asked about his subject matter while working in the Caucasus, Mr. Gorupai, an editor, smiled and said, “Scolding America.”

But his column about Joe Beyrle reflected a different frame of mind. “The path of confrontation — it is a step into the desert, into the unknown,” he wrote. The gathering of old soldiers at Spaso House, he said, “once more testifies to the fact that all is not lost.”

#4

Russia and Ukraine Reach Deal on Gas

By Andrew E. Kramer

New York Times, January 19, 2009

The prime ministers of Russia and Ukraine agreed Sunday to resolve their gas dispute, with an understanding that prices would be pegged to the price of oil, but with a discount for 2009 that means Ukraine could pay little more than it did last year.

The deal, expected to be signed Monday, came after a din of criticism from officials in Europe, where more than 20 countries have been affected since a Jan. 6 cutoff of natural gas and at least 12 people have frozen to death in a dispute that is ostensibly over prices and transit fees, but that is also deeply entwined in post-Soviet politics.

If the agreement holds — and previous deals have not — the gas dispute would essentially end where it started in terms of prices, in what would be a baffling result considering the hardship caused by the embargo. It was unclear after the announcement when gas would start flowing back to Europe.

Politically, Russia appeared to have made gains in influencing internal Ukrainian affairs ahead of an election scheduled there next year, but at the cost of alienating officials in European countries in a standoff that was as much geopolitical as commercial.

Russia has sought to divide the pro-Western coalition in Ukraine that came to power after the Orange Revolution in 2004. It had striven to negotiate with and strengthen Ukraine’s prime minister, Yulia V. Tymoshenko, who is seen as more conciliatory toward Russia than Ukraine’s president, Viktor A. Yushchenko.

In this sense, the deal served at least one of the political goals analysts of post-Soviet politics had ascribed to Russia’s actions in the gas dispute. Russia had also, some analysts said, sought to intimidate new members of NATO, like Bulgaria, which are heavily dependent on Russia for energy. Within Ukraine, critics of Mr. Yushchenko said his pre-election posturing of taking a hard line against Russia exacerbated the dispute.

Before the agreement was reached, European Union officials had characterized the talks between Prime Minister Vladimir V. Putin of Russia and Ms. Tymoshenko as a last chance for Ukraine and Russia to resolve their dispute or risk suffering irreparable damage to their reputations as reliable partners in the energy business.

Some analysts noted that Russia might lose market share for its energy in Europe, where countries may turn to alternative forms of energy, like liquefied natural gas.

The European Commission issued a cautious statement on Sunday. "We have seen many false dawns," it said. "The test in this case is whether or not gas flows to European customers."

Some experts said that Russia had not achieved one of its objectives — to cause a split between Ukraine and Europe.

"I would still say, the big losers, in the long run, are the Russians," Zbigniew Brzezinski, co-chairman of the Center for Strategic and International Studies and the national security adviser under Jimmy Carter, said in an interview from Washington.

"The key point is that what Russia did was not aimed at Europe as such, but aimed at Ukraine, in the hope that the Europeans would gang up on Ukraine," he said. "I think the key issue is strategic, not the money involved. They were hoping the Europeans would put a lot of pressure on Ukraine, and convey to the Ukrainians that they are dispensable in this relationship.

"I think that this did not work out as well as hoped" for authorities in Moscow, he said.

In a meeting that extended into the early hours of Sunday in Moscow, Mr. Putin and Ms. Tymoshenko agreed that Ukraine would buy gas from Russia at a 20 percent discount to prices paid in Europe, which are expected to fall sharply this year.

Gazprom, the Russian gas monopoly, has projected the average price in Europe next year to be between \$260 and \$300 for 1,000 cubic meters of natural gas. The prices are pegged to oil prices with a delay of six months. Thus Ukraine would pay between \$208 and \$240.

Talks had broken off late last month with Ukraine offering a fixed price of \$201, and later raising its offer to \$235, after Russia embargoed supplies. The country had paid \$179.50 in 2008. Russia had asked for a fixed price of \$250, then halted deliveries to Ukraine and asked for a flexible price pegged to oil and starting at \$450, but with the understanding it would decline through the year.

Still, the agreement pegged Ukrainian prices to those in Europe, a formula Russia had sought throughout the dispute.

Russia cut supplies to Ukraine's domestic market on Jan. 1, saying Ukraine had no contract for 2009. A week later, Russia halted shipments to Europe after accusing Ukraine of withdrawing gas from the export pipelines. Ukraine said it took gas only to run pumping stations used to pressurize the pipelines.

While previous agreements have collapsed, Sunday's deal addressed the pivotal issue of the prices Gazprom was willing to pay to use Ukraine's natural gas pipeline network, which the company relies on to carry about 80 percent of its exports to higher-paying customers in Europe.

#5

Russia Restores Gas to Ukraine

By Andrew E. Kramer

New York Times, January 21, 2009

Russia on Tuesday resumed pumping gas through Ukraine to Europe, after nearly two weeks of disruption in a dispute over prices. The shipments were expected to reach energy-starved homes to the west within three days.

Gazprom said in a statement that the flow of gas was restarted around 10:30 a.m. Moscow time, and that it planned to pump nearly 350 million cubic meters of gas via Ukraine to Europe on Tuesday.

In Kiev, a spokesman for Naftogaz, the Ukrainian energy company, told Bloomberg News that the gas was flowing along all the major pipelines into Ukraine and that it would reach Ukraine's borders with the European Union within 36 hours.

Impatient European officials have said they wanted to see results after a number of false starts. Officials in Brussels could not immediately be reached for comment.

The E.U. energy commissioner, Andris Piebalgs, was to hold a joint press conference in Kiev later Tuesday with the Ukrainian prime minister, Yulia V. Tymoshenko.

The resumption of gas flows came after Russia and Ukraine signed an agreement Monday to resolve their dispute over the price of natural gas and the terms of its transit. After previous agreements collapsed, officials in Europe had been cautious about the deal negotiated over the weekend between Prime Minister Vladimir V. Putin of Russia and Ms. Tymoshenko, which was made formal in a ceremony here on Monday.

In a hopeful sign, however, Mr. Putin said that Gazprom, the Russian gas monopoly, had been ordered to turn the gas back on, for Ukraine's internal market and for re-export. "I hope transit supplies in the European direction will be fully resumed in the nearest future," he said.

Ukrainian officials have said that once shipments to the border resumed, restoring pressure in the pipelines for export elsewhere in Europe would require about 36 hours. As it played out over three cold weeks, the gas shutoff left hundreds of thousands of homes in southeastern Europe without heat and shuttered hundreds of factories. Slovakia, alarming its neighbors, had proposed restarting an obsolete nuclear reactor to make up for the gas shortfalls.

Yet tensions remain between Russia and Ukraine. On Monday, Russia's president, Dmitri A. Medvedev, signed an order imposing sanctions on countries that sold weaponry to Georgia, the former Soviet republic that Russia fought in August. The sanctions would halt military and technical cooperation with such countries. Ukraine has sold weaponry to Georgia and could be harmed by the measure, since its military industry is closely entwined with Russia's as a legacy of the Soviet Union.

But in a sign of some softening of disagreement, at least over the gas business, the two prime ministers complimented each other graciously after the signing — a rarity in their relations. "I would like to thank the Ukrainian prime minister, Yulia Vladimirovna Tymoshenko," Mr. Putin said. "Faced with one of the hardest situations, she took responsibility for making these important decisions."

Ms. Tymoshenko said, "I am very much obliged to Vladimir Vladimirovich and his team for finding the opportunity to grant special terms for Ukraine."

The contracts will be valid for 10 years but adjusted to current market prices. The contract provides that the price of Russian natural gas in Ukraine will be pegged to prices in Europe, which are linked to international oil prices, but with a 20 percent discount in 2009. The discount will be eliminated next year.

Under that formula, Ukraine could be expected to pay \$208 to \$240 for 1,000 cubic meters of natural gas. It paid \$179.50 last year. Russia had initially asked for \$250 but raised that to \$450 in the midst of the shutoff.

Ukraine, meanwhile, accepted a transit fee that is about half the average rate in Europe, but with the understanding that it will be raised next year.

Russia halted shipments of gas to Ukraine on Jan. 1 and then, accusing Ukraine of siphoning gas intended for export, suspended shipments intended for export on Jan. 6.

#6

Some 'kvelling' from Axelrod at Jewish bash

By Eric Fingerhut

JTA, January 19, 2009

David Axelrod said he came to the Jewish Community Inaugural Reception "to do a little kvelling."

The senior adviser to Barack Obama told the 800 people in the crowd on Monday evening that he felt an "enormous sense of pride and satisfaction and gratitude" when he pored through the exit polls on Election Night and saw 78 percent of American Jews voted for Obama. Axelrod also reached back into his own family story to illustrate the "promise" of Obama's election.

Recalling how his father and grandparents fled Bessarabia after their home was blown up in the pogroms, he said they "weren't just looking for a place of safety, they were looking for a place of promise and opportunity."

"They were drawn to America -- America was that beacon," he said. And Tuesday "would have been a great affirmation of that" idea, Axelrod added. "Not just that we elected Barack Obama, but that their son will be 20 feet from the Oval Office, and have a chief of staff named Rahm Emaunel," he said to cheers.

Axelrod spoke at the official Jewish community inaugural event, an hors d'oeuvres and drinks reception at the Capital Hilton in downtown D.C.

Sponsored by nine organizations -- the National Jewish Democratic Council, the United Jewish Communities, the American Jewish Committee, the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations, AIPAC, NCSJ and the Jewish federations of New York, Chicago and Washington -- the reception was not an official inaugural event, but organizers said that prominent Obama supporters encouraged Jewish communal leaders to -- like other ethnic groups -- privately sponsor such a gathering.

"You were all shareholders," said Axelrod, and "you're going to be our partners as we move forward and try to fulfill the commitments we have made."

Elie Wiesel also spoke, praising Obama's "absolute passion for human decency," while calling the new president "a friend to the Jewish people."

Wiesel has high expectations for the new commander-in-chief. He said he was "convinced" that Obama "will bring an end to the tragedy in Darfur" as well as convinced he will utilize "his energy and passion" to bring about "peace in the Middle East." The Nobel Laureate added that Obama's election makes him think that his son and daughter will one day be "celebrating the first Jewish president of the United States."

Actress Debra Winger also was on hand --she campaigned for Obama in Virginia this fall -- but kept her remarks very brief, saying that she hoped "all our prayers are answered."

A short speech was a wise decision, because the excitement in the room meant many partygoers wanted to chat more than listen to speeches. Earlier in the evening, U.S. Sen. Frank Lautenberg (D-N.J.) twice had to ask the crowd to quiet down during his remarks, and it took a very loud demand by someone in the crowd to finally achieve silence for Wiesel -- as well as Axelrod.

The hall was filled with rabbis, Jewish leaders and virtually all of what one might call "official Jewish Washington." Anti-Defamation League Washington counsel Michael Lieberman counted seven of his former summer interns in the crowd (including your correspondent). But a portion of the tickets were also made available to the general public, so there were some who had come long distances simply to celebrate the new president. Joanna Charnes had left the Sundance Film Festival in her hometown of Park City, Utah for the nation's capital on Saturday night.

As a resident of a "very red state," she had spent lots of time campaigning in neighboring Colorado and raising money -- as well as hours a day refuting the Internet rumors that circulated about Obama in the Jewish community throughout the campaign.

"I can't stop getting tears in my eyes," she said.

#7

Leading Russian Rights Lawyer Is Shot to Death in Moscow, Along With Journalist
By Michael Schwartz
New York Times, January 20, 2009

A prominent Russian lawyer who spent the better part of a decade pursuing contentious human rights and social justice cases was killed on Monday in a brazen daylight assassination in central Moscow, officials said.

The lawyer, Stanislav Markelov, had just left a news conference where he announced that he would continue to fight against the early release from jail of Yuri D. Budanov, a former Russian tank commander imprisoned for murdering a young Chechen woman.

Anastasia Baburova, a 25-year-old journalist who was with Mr. Markelov, was also killed, according to a spokeswoman for a newspaper where she worked as a freelancer, Novaya Gazeta, which is highly critical of the government. The two were shot.

Officials said they believed that Mr. Markelov, 34, was the primary target, having brought cases against the Russian military, Chechen warlords and murderous neo-fascists. With a laundry list of his potential enemies, authorities refrained from naming any suspects.

"Investigators are looking into various theories, including that the murder was linked to the victim's professional activities," Vladimir I. Markin, a spokesman for the investigative wing of the Prosecutor General's Office, said of Mr. Markelov.

The murder bore the characteristics of a contract killing, a not-uncommon phenomenon in Russia. Even so, the audacity of Mr. Markelov's murder surprised some commentators.

"Even when organized crime in the 1990s was rampant, such a killing would have been considered bold and horrific," said a correspondent from Vesti television.

Mr. Markelov, who was the director of the Rule of Law Institute, a civil liberties group, gained prominence recently representing the family of Elza Kungayeva. She was an 18-year-old Chechen whom Mr. Budanov, the former tank commander, admitted strangling in his quarters in March 2000, just as the second post-Soviet war in Chechnya was beginning to rage.

Mr. Budanov was sentenced to 10 years in prison but was given early parole for good behavior.

Mr. Markelov, at the news conference just before his death, told reporters that he might file an appeal to the European Court of Human Rights against the early release of Mr. Budanov, who was a decorated colonel of the Russian Army before he was stripped of his rank. In an interview last week with The New York Times, Mr. Markelov said he might also file a lawsuit against the administration of the prison that released Mr. Budanov last Thursday.

The decision to free Mr. Budanov set off street protests and outraged some human rights groups and Chechen officials. It reignited long-simmering tensions years after a decade of intermittent war in Chechnya, a southern Russian republic, was replaced by tenuous stability.

But Mr. Budanov was also revered by nationalists as a valiant fighter who helped wage a bloody but necessary war against separatist rebels in Chechnya. Some now see Mr. Markelov's murder as revenge for his efforts against a Russian hero.

"The murder of Markelov, I consider a bold open warning by the 'party of war' to democratic Russia," Nudri S. Nukhazhiev, Chechnya's human rights ombudsman, said in a statement. "Today, there are no facts or evidence of the direct participation of Budanov in this crime, but I am more than certain that it was committed by his supporters with his consent."

Mr. Markelov phoned the father of Ms. Kungayeva, the slain teenager, a few days ago to complain that he had received death threats, the father told the Interfax news agency.

Lela Khamzayeva, another lawyer for Ms. Kungayeva's family, was adamant, however, that the killing of Mr. Markelov could not be linked to his connection with Mr. Budanov, because his role during the actual proceedings against the former colonel was, as she put it, "insignificant."

"If someone is trying to link this murder with Markelov's participation in the Budanov case, well, that's just ridiculous," she said.

Given Mr. Markelov's propensity for challenging the Russian authorities and others known to settle scores violently, the list of potential suspects is lengthy.

He worked closely with Anna Politkovskaya, an investigative journalist with Novaya Gazeta and strong critic of Russia's Chechnya policies, who was murdered in Moscow in 2006.

He often defended the interests of those, like Ms. Kungayeva, who became ensnared in the violent and often arbitrary military justice of the Chechen conflict or the tyrannical rule of Chechnya's violence-prone leader, Ramzan A. Kadyrov, in the war's aftermath.

"He handled almost every case opened as a result of the work of Anna Politkovskaya," said Nadezhda Prusenkova, a spokeswoman for Novaya Gazeta.

While he was not involved in the current trial of three men accused in the murder of Ms. Politkovskaya, Mr. Markelov did work on the case of another murdered Novaya Gazeta journalist, Igor Domnikov, who died in 2000 from wounds caused by a hammer blow to the head.

Mr. Markelov has also represented victims of neo-fascist and xenophobic violence, a phenomenon that has been expanding annually both in frequency and intensity, according to experts.

At least 10 people were killed and 9 others injured in racist attacks in Russia in the first two weeks of 2009, said Aleksandr Brod, the head of the Moscow Human Rights Bureau, Interfax reported.

Ms. Baburova, the freelancer who was killed Monday, began working for Novaya Gazeta last October. She cited Mr. Markelov in her most recent article about fascist groups, published on Saturday.

In it, the lawyer criticized the authorities for their handling of a case against the leader of a violent nationalist group, who was sentenced to three years in prison for arranging the murder of a man from Tajikistan and putting video of the killing on the Internet.

With Ms. Baburova's death, Novaya Gazeta has lost four reporters to murder or other mysterious circumstances since 2000.

#8

Russians condemn slaying of rights lawyer

By David Nowak

AP, January 21, 2009

Attorneys, activists and lawmakers Wednesday condemned the brazen shooting of a human-rights lawyer on a busy Moscow street and called for a thorough and honest investigation into a killing that spotlighted the risks faced by Russians who fight for justice.

Rights activists have compared Monday's murder of Stanislav Markelov to the 2006 slaying of investigative journalist Anna Politkovskaya. They fear the investigation into his killing, like many others involving victims who have pressed to hold authorities accountable for their actions, will hit a dead end.

"The most worrying thing is that (such attacks) give certain signals to society," Karinna Moskalenko, another leading human-rights lawyer, said Wednesday. She expressed outrage – but little surprise – over the latest killing of a member of Russia's beleaguered, close-knit community of justice seekers.

Lawmakers in the State Duma, aware of the criticism Russia has faced over a dismal record on prosecuting the killers of government critics, voted unanimously to demand prosecutors share details of the investigation into the slaying of Markelov and a journalist who was with him, Anastasia Baburova.

Communist lawmaker Oleg Smolin called the attack "political terrorism."

Sergei Markov, a Duma member from Prime Minister Vladimir Putin's dominant United Russia party, urged a "stop to the wave of attacks on rights defenders."

But there has been no public comment on the killings from Putin or his protege, President Dmitry Medvedev – a former lawyer who has called for urgent reform of Russia's corruption-tainted justice system but has made little progress.

Prosecutors, yet to make any arrests or offer a concrete motive in the double killing, on Wednesday questioned colleagues and searched offices that Markelov, 34, had used. Moscow police chief Vladimir Pronin told a news conference Wednesday that authorities had little evidence.

"All the investigation has to go on is the data from video cameras," Pronin said, Interfax reported.

The daily Izvestia said the attack was meticulously planned: The assailant approached Markelov, avoiding a clear view from several security cameras nearby, and shot the lawyer at point-blank range with a silenced Makarov pistol, it said.

Baburova was accompanying Markelov from a news conference toward a subway station and was fatally shot after she challenged the attacker. The 25-year-old woman was a student and freelance journalist who contributed to Politkovskaya's newspaper, Novaya Gazeta.

Markelov's array of contentious cases provided ample room for speculation on a motive.

The most obvious possible link was to Markelov's representation of the family of a Chechen teenager killed in 2000 by a Russian officer. Col. Yuri Budanov was released from prison last week with more than a year left in his 10-year sentence for the murder of Heda Kungayeva.

His early release caused anger among Chechens and rights activists who pointed out that people imprisoned on what they see as politically motivated charges are routinely denied parole.

Markelov was working with the victim's family to put Budanov back behind bars, and he reportedly received death threats days before the attack.

According to Izvestia, he received a cell phone text message five days earlier that read, in Russian, "You brainless animal, you are again involved in the Budanov case? Idiot, couldn't you find a calmer way of killing yourself?"

Markelov had discussed the case at a news conference minutes before the attack.

But many believe the Budanov angle to be a smoke screen.

Markelov also defended Mikhail Beketov, the editor of a suburban Moscow newspaper who had been charged with slandering local authorities amid crusades against environmentally threatening development projects. Beketov was brutally beaten by unidentified assailants in November and remains in a coma.

Markelov had said he knew who attacked Beketov, and claimed local officials were behind it.

Russian media have also speculated that neo-Nazi groups could have been behind Markelov's shooting.

He was beaten in Moscow in 2004, around the time he was representing victims of beatings by ultra-nationalists, and had since received further threats from skinheads.

#9

Slain Russian rights lawyer buried in Moscow

By David Nowak

AP, January 23, 2009

A Russian human-rights lawyer whose killing on a central Moscow street has spotlighted the risks faced by Russians who fight for justice was buried Friday, and the U.S. Embassy said it was outraged by the crime.

Rights activists have compared Monday's murder of Stanislav Markelov to the 2006 slaying of investigative journalist Anna Politkovskaya. Anastasia Baburova, a reporter from Politkovskaya's Novaya Gazeta newspaper who accompanied Markelov, was also fatally shot by a masked assassin on a street near the Kremlin.

The U.S. Embassy said in a statement Friday that it was "saddened and outraged" by the murders. "We hope that those responsible will be caught, tried and punished, and that the long series of unsolved murders of journalists will come to an end," it said.

Markelov was buried Friday at the Ostankino cemetery in northern Moscow under icy rain.

Rights activist Lev Ponomaryov said the killing of Markelov was a political murder and yet another signal of Russia sliding back toward repressive Soviet ways.

"The murder shows we are in a post-totalitarian state that is returning to its old ways," Ponomaryov told The Associated Press. "There have been political murders, and they will continue."

Markelov was killed minutes after a news conference at which he talked about his efforts to fight the early release of a Russian army colonel convicted of killing a Chechen woman in 2000. Col. Yuri Budanov was released from prison last week with more than a year left in his 10-year sentence.

Markelov was working with the victim's family to put Budanov back behind bars, and he reportedly received death threats from Budanov's supporters days before the attack.

Some Russian commentators said, however, that the Budanov angle could be a smoke screen.

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#10

Political killings have become systematic in Russia. Their punishment has not. The Economist, January 24-30, 2009

On March 26, 2000 Vladimir Putin was elected president of Russia. By coincidence his election, partly promoted by the war in Chechnya, was soiled by a horrific crime that same night. A Russian colonel, Yuri Budanov, entered a house in the Chechen village of Tangi, home to an 18-year-old girl, Elza Kungaeva. Mr Budanov ordered his soldiers to wrap her in a blanket, put her in his armoured personal carrier and take her to his quarters.

Two hours later she was dead, her strangled naked body displaying marks of severe beating. She was buried in secret but an autopsy later showed that she had been raped and sodomised. After a three-year legal odyssey, Colonel Budanov was sentenced to ten years in prison for the murder. A rare case of a Russian officer being brought to justice for a wartime crime in Chechnya, it became a symbol of the army's atrocities there.

On January 15th Mr Budanov was freed on parole for good behaviour, 18 months early. Stanislav Markelov, a lawyer for the Kungaev family, protested vainly against his early release. On January 19th Mr Markelov held a press conference, claiming that Mr Budanov was freed only after a false statement by the prosecution service.

After the news conference, Mr Markelov walked towards a Moscow metro station along a busy street, accompanied by Anastasia Baburova, a 25-year-old journalist for Novaya Gazeta, one of Russia's most daring remaining independent newspapers. A masked man following behind shot Mr Markelov dead. Ms Baburova chased the killer; he turned and shot her in the head, and she later died. It was about 3pm, barely a mile from the Kremlin. Even by Russian standards this was brazen.

Mr Budanov denied any involvement. Mr Markelov had defended many victims of human-right abuses, in Chechnya and elsewhere. He was particularly hated by Russia's nationalists and neo-fascists, for whom Mr Budanov is an idol and a cause célèbre. (Ms Baburova had written about just these groups in her newspaper.)

As Mr Markelov argued in his final news conference, Mr Budanov's release reflected neither his own interest, nor the state's. "It was in the interest of those who seek to undermine legal institutions in the Caucasus," he said. Jailing Mr Budanov was a way to show Chechens that they could seek justice peacefully rather than turning to separatists for revenge. His release argued the opposite.

In Chechnya, it was seen as yet another sign of Moscow's contempt. Even Ramzan Kadyrov, the republic's pro-Kremlin president, was outraged. The killing of Mr Markelov eliminated a man whose name in Chechnya, according to Tatyana Lokshina of Human Rights Watch, a campaigning group, "was synonymous with hope for justice." It also epitomised the atmosphere of lawlessness and impunity that has flourished in Russia in recent years.

The list of dead journalists, campaigners for civil liberties and those who seriously harm the interests of over-mighty state officials is getting longer by the day. On January 13th a former Chechen rebel, Umar Israilov, who had turned against Mr Kadyrov and formally complained to the European Court of Human Rights of his involvement in kidnappings and torture, was gunned down in Vienna.

Last August Magomed Yevloyev, a journalist and owner of an opposition internet site in another north Caucasus republic, Ingushetia, was detained and "accidentally" shot by an interior ministry guard. His supporters blamed Ingushetia's then president and interior minister. To the joy of the whole republic the Kremlin fired both men in October. But on December 30th Russia's president, Dmitry Medvedev, appointed the former interior minister to a new job of "federal inspector" in Moscow. Impunity, it seems, still prevails.

Mr Putin prides himself on having pacified Chechnya. The war is indeed over, but its legacy continues to poison and haunt Russia. Its methods have spread far beyond Chechnya to reach Moscow. In a recent road-rage incident in the Russian capital, two Chechen policemen bearing special security passes beat up and fired at a bus driver who cut in front of their Mercedes.

Mr Medvedev once pledged to fight "legal nihilism" in Russian society. But neither he nor Mr Putin has uttered a word about the killing of Mr Markelov and his brave companion, both of whom tried to defend the law from the abuses of the state.

#11

Kyrgyzstan: Human Rights Activists Condemn New Religion Law EurasiaNet.org, January 16, 2009

Kyrgyz President Kurmanbek Bakiyev signed a controversial new religious law on January 12 that bans proselytism, private religious education, and the import or dissemination of religious literature. The law, which has encountered strong opposition from human rights activists, comes into effect the same week civil rights watchdog Freedom House criticized Kyrgyzstan for increasingly authoritarian tendencies.

The bill, "On Freedom of Conscience and Religious Organizations," also proscribes children from membership in a religious community and mandates that religious groups must have a membership of at least 200 adult citizens who permanently reside in Kyrgyzstan before the groups can be registered. The previous law required only 10 members for registration.

In an interview with Forum 18, an Oslo-based religious freedom watchdog, Human Rights Ombudsman Tursunbek Akun condemned the law for failing to meet international rights standards and for imposing "a range of restrictions that will prevent small religious communities from developing."

Three-quarters of Kyrgyzstan's five million people consider themselves Muslim. Another 20 percent are Russian Orthodox Christians, while the remaining five percent are Protestants and members of other religious minority groups.

Proponents -- including the heads of both the Russian Orthodox and official Islamic communities -- say the new law is designed to prevent the spread of radical groups, such as the banned pan-Islamic party Hizb-ut-Tahrir. Other supporters admit fears that Protestant Christian groups are converting Muslims away from their "true" faith.

The deputy director of Kyrgyzstan's State Agency on Religious Affairs hailed the new rules. "This is a demand and requirement of today's reality. It is necessary to bring order to the chaotic processes we see in the religious sphere and society," said Kanatbek Murzahalilov.

In an October interview with EurasiaNet, Kanatbek praised the then-draft law, saying that proselytism "damaged society" and violated others' human rights.

But critics worry the law is an affront to those very human rights, including international charters the Kyrgyz government has signed. Kyrgyzstan's constitution guarantees religious freedom.

Felix Corley, editor of Forum 18, says the directive is a step backwards.

"This law clearly violates Kyrgyzstan's commitments to religious freedom," Corley commented to EurasiaNet. "It remains to be seen how draconian the implementation will be, but many religious communities have expressed their fears to Forum 18."

Citing examples in neighboring Kazakhstan and Tajikistan, Corley sees this as part of a wider trend: "Laws on religion across Central Asia have repeatedly been amended over the past decade, each time becoming harsher and more restrictive. . . . Let us not forget that repression of religious communities is already the norm in Central Asia, especially in Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan, and increasingly in Kazakhstan, Tajikistan and now Kyrgyzstan."

Sergei Lysov, a pastor and head of Kyrgyzstan's chapter of Bible League, a non-profit Christian group, sees the bill as yet another challenge to religious freedom in Kyrgyzstan and worries it will curtail his organization's activities. "We prayed this law would not be passed," Lysov said. But "I think it will only strengthen religious communities. For a true believer, it is important to have tests, because it only makes him stronger."

Other minority groups told EurasiaNet they will go underground and complained their voices were not heard during the drafting process.

A week before the president signed the new law a group of American representatives wrote an open letter to Bakiyev, urging him to work with lawmakers to remove articles that threaten freedom of religion.

The leaders of the US Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe, also known as the Helsinki Commission, praised Kyrgyzstan's previous development of democratic institutions, but warned Bakiyev that the law would "damage your country's reputation."

"We strongly urge you not to sign this law, which would mark a serious regression in your country's observance of OSCE [Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe] norms," the group wrote.

OSCE representatives in Bishkek did not outright condemn the bill, but expressed cautious optimism it could still be modified. Noting "discrepancies with international standards," Lilian Darii, deputy head of the OSCE Center in Bishkek, said the OSCE had made recommendations on the draft law last fall, at the government's request, but noted that much of the advice was ignored. "We hope there is still room for review," he added.

Kyrgyzstan's Muftiate officially supports the legislation.

Despite repeated attempts, EurasiaNet was unable to reach the administration of the Russian Orthodox community in Bishkek for comment. Last fall, church representatives told EurasiaNet that they broadly supported the law.

Since the hopeful Tulip Revolution in 2005, Kyrgyzstan has slid steadily backwards in human rights and corruption assessments. This week, the Washington, DC-based civil rights monitoring group Freedom House said that individual liberties in Kyrgyzstan had decreased in 2008 because of "new legislative constraints on the media and freedom of assembly, as well as moves by the authorities to enfeeble the political opposition and silence civil society." The government has not yet responded publicly to the criticism.

#12

Evangelical Christians rescue Jewish education program in FSU

By Haviv Rettig Gur

Jerusalem Post, January 20, 2009

Evangelical Christian contributions are coming to the rescue of the flagship Jewish education programs in the former Soviet Union.

With an infusion of some NIS 40 million, the International Fellowship of Christians and Jews (IFCJ) will allow welfare and education programs in Jewish schools throughout the FSU to survive a year that has seen drastic cutbacks.

"We understand the situation the Jewish Agency and other Jewish philanthropic organizations have found themselves in following the global economic crisis," said IFCJ president Rabbi Yechiel Eckstein.

"The IFCJ is happy to be able to offer its aid in these difficult times in order to strengthen the Jewish community in the former Soviet Union. The IFCJ has always espoused the cause of strengthening the social fabric of the Jewish people in Israel and the Diaspora." Some NIS 3.5m. will go to saving Heftsiba, the flagship Israeli government-funded program for Jewish and Zionist education in the FSU, which funds additional teaching hours, Hebrew classes and identity studies in existing Jewish schools.

Some 10,000 schoolchildren in 45 schools participate in the program. The schools belong to the three major Jewish education networks in the FSU: Or Avner, ORT and Shema Israel.

Until today, it was a shared project of the Jewish Agency and the Education Ministry, but its existence was called into question last month after the Jewish Agency was forced to withdraw its support for the program due to a 10 percent cut in the agency's 2009 budget, a cut amounting to some \$45m.

The agency's pullout followed a multiyear decline in Heftsiba's funding that stripped away some 66% of the funds the program received from the Israeli government, according to Yohanan Ben-Ya'acov, director of Heftsiba in the Education Ministry.

In December, Ben-Ya'acov warned that if Heftsiba were to close its doors in 2009, it might not be possible to revive it in the future.

"Heftsiba was put together at a moment of opportunity that won't repeat itself, in the aftermath of the Soviet collapse before [the FSU countries] reestablished their institutions. To rebuild it now, in today's institutional framework in these countries, would be impossible," he said.

As the Israeli funding dried up, many schools scaled back meals and bus transportation, necessary services for schools serving communities scattered across immense urban sprawls and teaching a curriculum that demands long school days.

According to the Prime Minister's Office, the IFCJ stepped in to replace the Jewish Agency as co-funder of the program after an appeal from Cabinet Secretary Oved Yehezkel.

Internal IFCJ discussions were held to decide if the request met the intent of the Christian donors, who contribute out of a religious conviction calling on them to help Israel and the Jews. But given the welfare component, it was decided that the emergency aid to the programs fit the organization's mission.

"When the Jewish Agency announced it was stopping its funding of the project, there was genuine concern for the continued operation of the school networks and a subsequent hindering of the need to preserve Jewish identity in the former Soviet Union," said Yehezkel.

"I am glad that Rabbi Eckstein sees eye to eye with the state of Israel concerning the support of this important project. The IFCJ's support at a time like this is a real saving grace."

The rest of the funds to given by the fellowship will go to welfare assistance to Jewish families and schoolchildren in the FSU. NIS 24m. will be given through the Federation of Jewish Communities to the Or Avner network to fund the basic needs of many pupils in the Jewish schools, including special bus routes, basic medicines, shoes, lunches and backpacks.

Another NIS 12m. will go to JDC programs to help makeup budgetary shortfalls in welfare services for children and orphans.

#13

Bill Gives People The Right To Know

By Anna Malpas

Moscow Times, January 21, 2009

The State Duma on Wednesday is to consider in a third and final reading a bill spelling out citizens' right to gain access to government documents and outlining punishments for officials who do not comply.

The bill, comparable to freedom of information laws in other countries, would require officials to disclose, upon request, any information controlled by the government -- such as court rulings, budget expenditures and government permits -- that has not been deemed a state secret.

The authors of the bill and transparency campaigners said the law could be a powerful tool for citizens in dealing with the country's notoriously reticent bureaucracy and its firm grip on information that, by law, should be in the public domain.

"We consider this to be a very positive law that will reduce corruption at all levels and will increase people's trust in the authorities," Valery Komissarov, head of the Duma's Information Policy Committee and one of the bill's authors, told The Moscow Times in an interview Tuesday.

The law, which would require federal, regional and municipal officials to respond to citizens' requests for information within 30 days, would reduce corruption by empowering people to ask questions about how budgetary funds are spent, said Komissarov, a deputy with United Russia. Bureaucrats will have more difficulties trying to "pull the wool over people's eyes," he said.

While various existing laws oblige officials to disclose information about the government's activities to their employers -- taxpayers -- the bill attempts to spell out in a single law citizens' right to know, as well as punishments for bureaucrats who refuse to cooperate.

Under the proposed legislation, a citizen can request information from authorities via the Internet and should receive a reply within 30 days.

Officials are obliged to provide information that has not been classified as a state secret, although if the information has been published earlier they can merely provide the applicant with a date and place of publication.

Officials who do not comply can be fined or even handed prison sentences of up to five years if the withholding of information causes serious bodily harm, Komissarov said. He cited the example of the Chernobyl disaster in

1986, when Soviet authorities waited several days to release the news of the explosion at the nuclear power plant, exposing people to radiation.

Ivan Pavlov, a St. Petersburg lawyer and freedom of information campaigner, called the bill "very promising."

"It has a few shortcomings, but these are nothing compared with the positive social effect it will have," Pavlov, who heads a nongovernmental organization called The Institute for Information Freedom Development, said in a telephone interview.

The law could help fight "legal nihilism" in the country, Pavlov said, employing a phrase used by President Dmitry Medvedev to describe rampant corruption in Russia.

Information on budget spending, construction projects and the results of government inspections remain largely inaccessible to the public, Pavlov said.

The problem with current legislation is the implementation, Pavlov said. Judges, for example, will often reject citizens' inquiries if they are seeking information that does not directly concern them.

"If I ask for financial information about budget spending, the court will say, 'It doesn't affect you directly, you don't have the right to this information,'" he said.

Pavlov cited the construction of the Gazprom Tower in St. Petersburg as an example of improper state secrecy.

The giant business center, incorporating a skyscraper almost 400 meters high, has sparked controversy in the city, whose center is a UNESCO World Heritage site.

In 2007, St. Petersburg resident Yelena Doilnitsina wrote a letter to St. Petersburg Governor Valentina Matviyenko and another senior city official asking to see all the permits and documents that allowed the construction to go ahead.

Doilnitsina's request was rejected on the grounds that the project did not directly concern her. A court subsequently upheld the officials' refusal to disclose the documents.

The proposed legislation would make judges more likely to grant access to information by lumping all the regulations together in one document, Pavlov said. "When there is just one combined law, it will be much better, much more understandable," he said.

The bill was first mentioned in a 2005 address by then-President Vladimir Putin to lawmakers and senior government officials. But it has taken a long time to hammer out because it went through a "great number of consultations" and had to receive approval from federal ministries, Komissarov said.

The Economic Development Ministry has been working on the law since 2002, but the bill faced "huge opposition" in the Duma, Pavlov said.

Nonetheless, the bill was passed in a first reading in January 2007 and in a crucial second reading last month. Should it be passed at Wednesday's Duma session, it will be sent to the Federation Council for consideration. If approved there, it will go to President Dmitry Medvedev to be signed into law. The law would come into force in January 2010.

Several Duma deputies criticized the bill in its earlier readings because it specifies that citizens should file information requests via the Internet, Pavlov said.

The law would require places such as libraries and schools to provide Internet access for citizens, Komissarov said.

Pavlov called this requirement a minor hurdle, since almost all Russian schools now have Internet access. The Internet is "a very effective way to see what governments are doing 24 hours a day," he said.

The law falls short of requiring state institutions to publish information on their web sites. Instead, a clause says they "can" publish information. "I think this is the main mistake in this draft of the law," Pavlov said. "But it's not critical."

#14

Scandals, weak rouble dry up Russia regions' funding [analysis]

By Gleb Bryanski

Reuters, January 21, 2009

Russian regions will be forced to rely on the central government to plug growing fiscal holes after the rouble's decline and fraud scandals crushed their hopes of raising cash independently.

The \$16 billion regional debt market ground to a standstill last August, when Russia spooked investors and triggered capital flight by sending troops into neighboring Georgia. Now, daily recorded trades are numbered in dozens.

The market received another blow when a string of firms affiliated with the Moscow region, the most heavily indebted Russian province, defaulted, prompting Standard & Poor's to cut the region's rating to "selective default."

"In the near future the regions will increasingly depend on the federal budget because they will not be able to independently raise cash in the market," said Vladimir Bragin, analyst from Trust Bank.

Gaping holes in regional budgets will put additional strain on Russia's treasury, whose own revenues are dwindling due to falling commodity prices and economic growth rates. Analysts estimate the regions' revenues may fall by up to 25 percent, making spending cuts necessary.

"The regions will suffer most from the crisis," said Troika analyst Anton Tabakh, pointing out that regional revenues come mostly from profit and income tax, which are expected to fall sharply due to the crisis.

"They are now crowding the corridors of the Finance Ministry," he said.

BAILING OUT THE REGIONS

Russia plans to review the 2009 budget to take into account lower oil revenues and a \$200 billion-plus plan to support the economy and stave off social unrest, as well as regional financing needs. Analysts say the state will bail out the regions as needed but it is too early to estimate the cost.

The likelihood of any defaults on regional debt will probably be judged on the performance of the Moscow region, whose next coupon payment is due on January 20.

Overall though, the state is expected to ensure that the regions themselves do not default, although linked entities may do, such as the various areas within the Moscow region.

The City of Moscow, the market's benchmark issuer, placed less than a 10th of its 15 billion rouble bond last week, offering a yield which, analysts said, can be easily beaten by "buying up a foreign currency and holding it in a safe box."

That has further reduced the attractiveness of rouble bonds. Yields on many reliable borrowers with stable tax revenue bases, such as the Samara region, have soared to 25-30 percent.

Reining in the regions, which enjoyed much political freedom in the 1990s with many of them de-facto becoming independent fiefdoms, was one of the key goals of ex-President Vladimir Putin's eight years in power.

Putin scrapped elections of regional governors, who had grown too powerful for the central government to tolerate, banned regions from issuing eurobonds and redirected the lion's share of tax revenues to the federal budget.

However, the investigation into fraud against the head of a company that organized bond issues worth over \$1 billion for firms affiliated with Moscow region's government indicates that Putin's measures have failed to stamp out corruption.

#15

Many Russians Believe Obama Will Warm Moscow-Washington Relations

By Alexsei Kuznetzov

CBS News, January 20, 2009

"America is a beautiful country – very picturesque – but it has been unlucky with its leaders lately," said a man dressed as Ded Moroz (a Russian Santa Claus) interviewed by CBS News in downtown Moscow. "It has been run by the wrong people."

Today may really be the day of the big change – with Barack Obama taking office in the White House. Lots of Russians believe that under President Obama, U.S.-Russia relations which have reached their post-Cold War low should pick up.

"After Barack Obama becomes president, he should establish better contacts and improve ties with Russia," says Maxim, a young boy from the Russian city of Yaroslavl, carrying a McDonald's paper bag shortly before visiting Red Square. "Maybe he should come to Russia and do some sightseeing – so that he would fall in love with my country."

"I would advise President Obama to telephone our President Medvedev and arrange a meeting between them," adds Vitaly, also from Yaroslavl. "Once that meeting is held, the two could do something together to change the world for the better."

Indeed, it seems that truth does come out of the mouths of babes – Russian officials have recently been talking most favorably of the future of the bilateral relations, significantly toning down their anti-American rhetoric which has for years been Moscow's trademark in foreign relations.

Last November, President Medvedev made no mention at all of Mr. Obama's victory when giving his State of the Nation address the day after the U.S. elections, claiming he "forgot." The Russian President seems to be showing considerably more interest in the inauguration.

"Naturally, we have been following this event very carefully," President Medvedev said, adding that he wanted "U.S.-Russia relations to develop intensely and constructively in all areas."

This view was echoed by Russia's Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov who confirmed Moscow's readiness for a thaw in the bilateral relations.

"Like many other countries, we want to actively work together with the new U.S. administration," Mr. Lavrov said. "We are open to equal dialogue. And we are hopeful that the advantages of this cooperation will outweigh any desire to play a political game to again deter Russia."

In a rare demonstration of amiability towards Washington, the Kremlin ordered activists of a pro-government youth movement Mestniye (Locals) to welcome Obama's inauguration.

On Tuesday, January 20, about 50 members of the youth group rallied in front of the U.S. Embassy to congratulate President Obama and to caution the new U.S. president against repeating his predecessor's mistakes.

"We hope this man, unique in many ways, will take a more sober look at Russia – a country that has regained the status of a great power," Mestniye leader Sergei Fadeyev is quoted by Interfax news agency as saying. "We also hope that that he would give up the policy of double standards and treat Russia as an equal partner."

Treating Russia as an equal partner appears to be the key factor in improving U.S.-Russian relations. After the defeat in the Cold War and the collapse of the Soviet Union there is a deep-running feeling shared by many Russians that their country has not been treated fairly by the West and particularly by the United States.

Among the main irritants is the continuing NATO eastward enlargement which Moscow sees as a direct threat to its national security. U.S. resolve to offer a fast-track NATO membership to Ukraine and Georgia and to install missile defense components in Poland and the Czech Republic has dramatically raised tensions between Washington and Moscow.

"It is easy to understand why so many Russians feel gravely embittered and insulted," Anatoly Utkin, a leading analyst at the Moscow-based U.S.A. and Canada Institute explained to CBS News in an interview. "Over the past 20 years, this country has made so many unjustified geopolitical concessions to the US, getting nothing in return from the West besides humiliation. Russia simply has nothing else left to cede."

And this is the reason why Russia, unlike some other countries, has not seen a tide of Obamamania. In the eyes of ordinary Russians, the White House is still associated with the previous U.S. administration and its policies. People here are waiting for a signal from Mr. Obama that a new chapter in U.S.-Russia relations has begun.

"Obama has not done or even said anything good about Russia. Russia is a country where words are important," explains Anatoly Utkin. "It would have made a difference, if Obama had, for instance, mentioned Dostoyevsky or said anything about the mysterious Russian soul."

Instead, "Obama has been repeating the word 'change' as his main mantra – but it remains to be seen in which direction that change is going to be," Utkin said.

Almost a decade ago, Russia's most powerful man - Vladimir Putin - managed to charm George W. Bush who looked Putin in the eye and "got a sense of his soul."

Today, Putin sounds charmed with the new U.S. President: "Mr. Obama appears to be a sincere and open person. Surely, this is appealing."

But as an experienced former KGB officer, Putin tempered his optimism about Barack Obama.

"Exclusive expectations usually produce the worst disappointment," Putin said. "Let's wait and see what happens in practice."

#16

Starting Fresh With Obama

By Mikhail Margelov

Moscow Times, January 20, 2009

President-elect Barack Obama has formed his team of advisers, but it would be difficult to call them "friends of Russia." This reflects in part the cool relations Washington and Moscow have had for nearly eight years. No wonder the Kremlin is taking a close look at statements made by members of the new administration to discern whether Washington will support many of the same positions adopted by former U.S. President George W. Bush or if he will finally make changes to U.S. foreign policy that the whole world has long awaited.

Nobody in Russia is expecting that our relationship with Washington will improve overnight. Obama's team has more pressing issues to deal with in other parts of the world such as Afghanistan, Iraq and Iran. After an unsuccessful attempt to keep the United States as the unchallenged leader of a unipolar world, Washington will need the support of allies and partners more than ever. U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton expressed this idea during her Senate confirmation hearing on Jan. 13: "America cannot solve the most pressing problems [in international affairs] on our own, and the world cannot solve them without America."

Russia's direct participation is required to solve many of these global problems, particularly in Eurasia, where the interests of both countries coincide. Clinton's words suggest that the United States will rely on its partners and accept the fact that the world is now multipolar. If Washington can accept these fundamental positions, it will open up many new opportunities to improve U.S.-Russia relations. Under Putin, Russia has returned as a major global power, but it understands that it needs allies and partners as much as the United States does to maintain that leadership status.

As a key element of Russia's foreign policy, Moscow must play a leading role in such strategic issues as the nonproliferation of weapons of mass destruction, the regulation of missile defense, reforms to the global financial system and the fight against terrorism. The new U.S. administration is ready to cooperate with Russia in these areas first. Clinton's statement inspires hope that Moscow and Washington will find common ground regarding Iran; there is talk of U.S. readiness to hold direct talks with that country.

Certainly, the United States will not renounce its role as a global leader, and it will continue to "stand up strongly for American values," as Clinton stated in the Senate hearing. It is generally thought that a Democratic administration puts more stress on these "American values," such as human rights, when it formulates its foreign policy, whereas Republican administrations tend to be guided more by realpolitik principles.

Over the past eight years, there was no shortage of areas over which Russia and the Bush administration sharply disagreed. The most divisive issues were U.S. plans to deploy elements of a missile-defense system in Poland and the Czech Republic, the expansion of NATO membership for Ukraine and Georgia and Iran's nuclear program. Moscow hopes that the new president will reconsider his position on missile defense in Central Europe. If he does, Russia will most likely not deploy Iskander missiles in Kaliningrad.

Moscow is concerned that the Obama administration will continue to support requests from Georgia and Ukraine to join NATO. In a broader sense, there are disagreements between Russia and the United States on policies in the former Soviet republics and in Europe. Russia is far from alone in opposing Washington's foreign policy. Last week, German Foreign Minister – and possibly future chancellor – Frank-Walter Steinmeier wrote a letter to Obama suggesting that the United States consider President Dmitry Medvedev's proposal for a European security pact covering the territory stretching from Vancouver to Vladivostok. Moscow is ready to cooperate with Washington on all issues of mutual concern, including the prevention of nuclear terrorism and the fight against narcotics trafficking.

Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov has said many times that Russia and the United States should develop a unified agenda. That was also reflected in the strategic framework declaration signed in Sochi by then-Presidents Bush and Vladimir Putin, in which the two countries agreed that such cooperation should be built upon the principles of equality, honest dialogue and friendly relations.

Now more than ever, Washington and Moscow need more dialogue on a whole range of issues. I believe that these negotiations should take place on all levels, both governmental and nongovernmental. As the head of the Russian side of the Federation Council-U.S. Senate working group, I am ready to discuss how to increase cooperation between our two countries. I have great hopes for this group, since talks are conducted in a more candid manner than between official diplomats. That is why I am certain that U.S.-Russia relations will improve, starting with the very first meeting between U.S. senators and members of the Federation Council under the new Obama presidency.

Mikhail Margelov is chairman of the International Affairs Committee in the Federation Council.

#17

A little Hebrew at the inaugural prayer service

By Eric Fingerhut

JTA, January 21, 2009

Rabbis from the Orthodox, Conservative and Reform movements (although not the Reconstructionists; we're told that Reconstructionist Rabbinical College Dan Ehrenkrantz was in attendance representing the Reconstructionists, but he was not a participant in the service) joined Christian, Muslim and Hindu leaders as part of Wednesday morning's Presidential Inaugural Prayer Service.

Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism director Rabbi David Saperstein read Psalm 121, beginning the recitation with a line in Hebrew.

Then United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism Executive Vice President Rabbi Jerome Epstein and Rabbi Haskel Lookstein, the spiritual leader of Orthodox Congregation Kehilath Jeshurun in New York, were two of

eight faith leaders who recited an original prayer with a refrain asking God to "keep this nation under your care, and guide us in the way of justice and truth."

"May the President, Vice President, Members of the Cabinet, Governors of States and Territories, Mayors of Cities, and all in administrative authority who are empowered by our sacred trust lead this nation with wisdom and grace as they seek to serve the common good," said Lookstein, whose participation in the event led to a rebuke from the Rabbinical Council of America.

"May those who are hungry or homeless, sick or suffering, and all those beset by economic insecurity receive the solace of your comfort," read Epstein. "Stir us to order our social and economic lives that all who live in need may find refuge and relief."

The service at the Washington National Cathedral was mostly interfaith, although a Georgia pastor delivered a prayer, drawn in part from George Washington's inaugural prayer service, which included the words "Jesus Christ our Lord," the Lord's Prayer was recited and the processional hymn at the start of the event made reference to the "blessed Trinity." The cathedral is an Episcopal church, but cathedral dean Very Rev. Samuel Lloyd III noted that it was "built to be a spiritual home for the nation." The history of the cathedral posted on its Website points out that the designer of Washington, D.C., Pierre L'Enfant imagined "a great church for national purposes," and the facility has been used for past inaugural prayer services, state funerals for presidents and the memorial service for the victims of the September 11 attacks.

Many kippot could be seen in the crowd of 3,200 invited guests, but since we were way up in the balcony of the majestic cathedral, we couldn't make out who was wearing many of them. The Jewish guests we did see, or who other sources informed us were there, included United Jewish Communities Washington office director William Daroff, NCSJ executive director Mark Levin, American Jewish Committee legislative director and counsel Richard Foltin, AJC Washington chapter executive director Melanie Maron, Jewish Council for Public Affairs Washington director Hadar Susskind, B'nai B'rith Center for Human Rights and Public Policy deputy director Eric Fusfield, Rabbis Bruce Lustig of Washington Hebrew Congregation in D.C. and Stuart Weinblatt from Congregation B'nai Tzedek in Potomac, Md., and Jewish PR man Matt Dorf, who served as a consultant for the Democratic National Committee on faith issues during the campaign.

#18

Making Traveling Arrangements for Obama... for a visit to Moscow soon

By Mikhail Zygar

Kommersant, January 22, 2009

What information is available to Kommersant indicates that the new US President Barack Obama may visit Moscow in April. His State Secretary Hillary Clinton may turn up in Russia in March with a piece of news calculated to make the Kremlin happy. Obama's Administration has already decided to reduce ABM development expenses.

A source close to the US Department of State said Obama's first visit to Russia might take place in April. It will become a part of the US president's first European tour. Obama will come to London on April 2 to attend the G20 summit. He will meet Russian President Dmitry Medvedev there. NATO summit dedicated to the 60th anniversary of the Alliance will become Obama's next stop. This event will take place in Strasbourg and Kiel on the French-German border on April 3-4. Insiders say that it is from there that Air Force One may fly to Moscow (just like George W. Bush did last year when he visited Sochi right after the NATO summit in Bucharest).

Medvedev's presidential administration said no official request for a meeting between the presidents had come from Washington yet. If Obama did turn up in Moscow on the other hand, it would show that the new US Administration regarded Russia as a prime partner which would certainly facilitate improvement of the Russian-American relations. In any event, the Russian presidential administration planned for a meeting between Medvedev and Obama at the G20 summit in London. Obama's coming to Moscow afterwards will remove the necessity to arrange a bilateral meeting in the British capital.

Clinton may visit Russia even before her patron. Sources assume that she may turn up in Moscow in March. Her visit will probably precede Obama's first tour of European capitals. Moreover, Clinton is scheduled to attend her first conference of NATO foreign ministers also in March.

Sources in the US Department of State meanwhile expect Clinton to concentrate on formation of her team throughout February. Its key members are already known. William Burns, Undersecretary of State for Political Affairs (he was Ambassador to Russia not long ago) will retain his position. The Russian division will be run by Philip Gordon, the head of the European department of the National Security Council in Bill Clinton's Administration, and Dennis Ross, a career diplomat who was with the US Department of State during George Bush's presidency and represented Clinton in the Middle East afterwards. Russian policy of the new US Administration will be coordinated by Michael McFall, formerly Director of Programs of the Moscow Carnegie Center. McFall advised Obama on Russia during his campaign. He will handle Russian affairs in the National Security Council now. Speaking before the US Congress that confirmed her nomination a short while ago, Clinton said work on a new document to replace the START-1 treaty would become one of the high priorities of the US Administration. START-1 expires on December 5, 2009. Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Ryabkov and Undersecretary of State for Arms Control and International Security John Rood began consultations over a new document last December. The Russian Foreign Ministry said then that the talks over a new treaty might stimulate the rapprochement between Moscow and Washington and that its signing would become the first joint project for Medvedev and Obama. Observers unanimously agree that START-1 will be one of the major items on the agendas of Clinton and Obama in Moscow.

Ryabkov said last December that the START-1 talks would almost inevitably be tied in with installation of the ballistic missile defense system in Europe. "Reaching an agreement over the ballistic missile defense system is particularly difficult. The Americans' plans on that score convince us that these matters should be considered together." Stand of the new US Administration's on the matter may actually make Moscow happy.

Senatorial Armed Forces Committee confirmed the new Pentagon top brass last week. Judging by what was said there, new upper echelons of the US Defense Department are considerably more skeptical with regard to ballistic missile defense system than their predecessors were. William J. Lynn, the future Senior Undersecretary of Defense, called the Pentagon's current budget (\$180 billion) "inexcusably swollen". He said that budget of the ballistic missile defense system was a prime candidate for a sequester and added that the US Missile Defense Agency must learn to play by the financial rules applied to everyone else within the US Defense Department. Michelle Flournoy, would-be US Undersecretary of Defense for Political Affairs, was of a similar frame of mind. She told Senators that the Pentagon would proceed with the ballistic missile defense program only if it were absolutely convinced of its effectiveness. As a matter of fact, this is what Democrats in the US Senate have been saying for years. Criticizing Bush's Administration for its obsession with development of the ballistic missile defense system in Europe, they kept pointing out that its effectiveness had to be proved yet.

Along with START-1 and ballistic missile defense, the new US Administration will have one other high priority in connection with Russia. Addressing Clinton at the hearing that was to confirm her as the US State Secretary, Senator Richard Lugar told her to pay close attention to the matter of energy security. "Prime Minister Putin ordered suspension of gas deliveries this month, and that became a hard blow at our allies. This conflict is a fresh example of how energy dependence may restrict our foreign policy," Lugar said. It should be added that Lugar wields a lot of clout with Obama. It was Lugar who took Obama on his first trip to Moscow four years ago when the Senatorial International Affairs Committee Lugar chaired then sent a delegation to Russia.