

WASHINGTON, D.C. February 27, 2009

TO: NCSJ Leadership and Interested Parties

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



In Brief: Human Rights in the FSU; Durban II; U.S.-Russia and Iran

Dear Friend,

Earlier this week, the U.S. Department of State issued its annual [Human Rights Report for 2008](#). We are reviewing the sections focusing on the countries of the former Soviet Union, and will distribute a summary report in the coming weeks. Meanwhile, in this week's update, there are a few stories about the report. Almost all of the countries in the region have been singled out for criticism: the Russia section describes how government consolidation of power has eroded its accountability to the Russian population; Belarus is cited for its continuing overall poor human rights practices; corruption and abusive law enforcement practices are a source of concern in Ukraine; and serious human rights violations occurred throughout Central Asia and the Caucasus. Examples of anti-Semitic incidents are also detailed in the report.

The Obama Administration announced today that it will not send a delegation to the upcoming UN Conference on Racism (Durban II) in April. A U.S. delegation recently returned from the latest preparatory meetings in Geneva, where they determined there was no hope in improving the language in the draft document. Earlier today, NCSJ and other Jewish organizations participated in a White House Office of Public Liaison conference call on Durban II, in which Administration representatives explained their decision.

International issues of all kinds are beginning to compete with the economic crisis for President Obama's attention. No issue is more pressing than Iran's drive to obtain nuclear weapons, and its goal to be the regional power in the Middle East. A major player involved in this issue is Russia. The debate in Washington continues: what does Russia want in return for helping prevent a nuclear Iran, and what overall relationship needs to be developed with Russia? There are several interesting stories dealing with both issues in the update. NCSJ has submitted suggestions to the Administration about improving the overall relationship with Russia. We continue to maintain that any such improvement must not come at the expense of other countries in the region.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads 'Mark B. Levin'.

Mark B. Levin
Executive Director



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

NCSJ WEEKLY NEWS BRIEF
Washington, D.C. February 27, 2009

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#1a**Report: Russia freezing anti-missile sales to Iran
JTA, February 23, 2009**

Russia reportedly froze its pending sale to Iran of anti-missile defense systems.

Kommersant, a Russian newspaper, reported Feb. 18 that Anatoly Sedyukov, the Russian defense minister, informed his Iranian counterpart, Mostafa Mohammed Najjar, that the sale of the S-300 anti-aircraft missile systems would not go through at least until Russian President Dmitry Medvedev and U.S. President Barack Obama meet April 2 at a summit in London.

Israel has been pressing Russia not to make the sale, saying such a system could remove any inhibitions Iran might have about the possibilities of an Israeli strike aimed at disabling the Islamic Republic's suspected nuclear weapons program.

Russia reportedly has signed but not ratified an \$800 million deal for five of the systems.

Russia is known to be seeking guarantees from the new Obama administration that it will roll back the Bush administration's efforts to raise NATO's profile in Eastern Europe.

According to the Jerusalem Post, the S-300 missiles have a range of about 200 kilometers, about 125 miles, and can hit targets at altitudes of 27,000 meters, about 89,000 feet.

#1b
Odessa ORT School recognized
JTA, February 23, 2009

A panel of education experts recognized the Odessa ORT School for its excellence.

The school was cited as a Flagship of Contemporary Science and Education in Ukraine for its innovative contribution to the teaching of technology and its recognition by authorities at a prestigious national education exhibition despite budget cuts.

In spite of a funding crisis and Ukraine's struggling economy, Odessa ORT School No. 94, which specializes in Hebrew and Informatics, managed to adhere to a high standard of educational excellence, the committee said. The school was nominated for the award by the Odessa City Administration Department of Education.

"The ORT school contributed to finding new ways of modernizing education and science," said Professor Vasyl Kremen, president of the Academy of Pedagogical Science of Ukraine.

Principal Svetlana Manchenko said the ORT school, which has 400 students and works in close cooperation with World ORT, has modern computer classes, a media library and maintains up-to-date educational equipment.

#1c
Prosecutors vow to catch Politkovskaya killers
Reuters, February 24, 2009

Russian state prosecutors vowed on Tuesday to catch the killers of journalist Anna Politkovskaya despite a court's acquittal last week of the only three men so far charged in the 2006 murder.

The acquittal of the men suspected of helping Politkovskaya's killer sparked fresh accusations that the Russian justice system was failing to catch and prosecute killers in politically charged murder cases.

Russian prosecutors, accused by Politkovskaya's former colleagues of botching the investigation, have said they will appeal the acquittal.

"This criminal case will be investigated until the truth is fully established and all the accomplices in the crime, including those who carried it out and those who commissioned it, are identified," Vladimir Markin, spokesman for the investigative unit of the Prosecutor-General's office, said in a statement.

A gunman shot Politkovskaya -- a vocal Kremlin critic who wrote extensively about rights abuses in Chechnya where rebels have been fighting federal forces -- in the entrance of her central Moscow apartment block on October 7, 2006.

After last week's acquittal, the United States urged Russia to find those responsible as quickly as possible and a European rights watchdog called the failure to solve the crime a "human rights crisis."

#1d
Jewish leaders urge prosecution of Ukraine pol
JTA, February 24, 2009

Jewish leaders called on Ukrainian authorities to press charges against a politician for inciting ethnic hatred.

In letters addressed to national and local authorities, leaders of Jewish organizations in the southern Ukrainian city of Kherson accused Sergey Kirichenko, a member of the Union of Left Powers and member of Kherson City Council, of systematic anti-Semitic propaganda.

Rabbi Josef Wolf, chief rabbi of Kherson and the surrounding region, told JTA that Kirichenko continues to accuse Jews of robbing the Ukrainians, and of plotting to enslave them and exterminate Slavs in general, on the local radio show Vik and in local Vik publications. Kirichenko also claims that Jews "occupied the region."

Kirichenko also accuses Jews of taking over the country and striving to wipe out the Slavic race.

"The Jews are occupiers, they have occupied us, they stole all our wealth and control us," Kirichenko claimed in a recent interview, adding also that Jews "create terms that will enable genocide of the Slavic people."

Kirichenko also has defined "The Protocols of the Elders of Zion" as a "historic document."

Jewish leaders have theorized that Kirichenko's anti-Jewish campaign is part of his bid to replace Kherson's mayor, who is Jewish.

Kirichenko's recent statements outraged the Rabbinical Center of Europe, which urged Ukrainian authorities to put Kirichenko on trial and promote legislation banning similar expressions.

"It would be imprudent to disregard these comments," the center wrote in a statement. "The Ukrainian government must pass a law barring such narrow-mindedness, like most other European states have."

Hate speech is illegal in Ukraine. Last September, Kherson Jewish leaders appealed to Ukrainian authorities to take action and put Kirichenko on trial. Meanwhile, Kherson Jewish leaders told JTA that a Kiev expert commission did not find Kirichenko guilty of inciting ethnic hatred in Ukraine for anti-Semitic claims and publications, while Kherson law enforcement agencies and experts did.

It is still unclear whether local authorities will bring charges over Kirichenko's statements for "infringement of equal rights on the basis of racial or ethnic identity or attitude to religion," an offense under the Ukrainian criminal code.

#1e

Russia will oppose attempts to justify Nazism, review history - Medvedev Interfax, February 24, 2009

Any attempts to justify Nazism are unacceptable and will be opposed by Russia, Russian President Dmitry Medvedev said.

"I am convinced that any attempts to justify Nazism and to defame the heroic victors will lead to an unacceptable hypocritical review of history. To the complete loss of its lessons. This will be resolutely and coherently opposed by Russia," Medvedev said in his letter to Vera Ganina, the mother of Russian man Dmitry Ganin who died during tragic events in Tallinn in April 2007.

Excerpts from the president's letter to Ganina were issued by the president's press office on Tuesday.

Medvedev expressed his support and deep sympathy to Ganina. "Millions of Russians" share these feelings, he said. "The death of your son during the dramatic events in April 2007 shocked us all," the president wrote.

"Dmitry (Ganin) had a high sense of justice and openly protested the blasphemous plan to relocate the war memorial commemorating the soldiers who freed Europe from fascism. He rightly thought it was an insult to their memory. Your son was defending not only the heroic past. He stood up for the civil dignity of the people, who remember those who gave their lives for peace on the planet," Medvedev said.

"We will firmly insist that all those responsible for the death of Dmitry Ganin are found and brought to justice," the president said.

In her letter to Medvedev Ganina thanked him for the attention, sympathy and concern for her family.

In April 2007 the Estonian authorities dismantled the Bronze Soldier monument on the Tonismagi hill and moved it to the Tallinn military cemetery. The move prompted mass disturbances, followed by clashes with police, riots and the arson of shops and kiosks. Some 1,200 people were detained and dozens were injured during clashes with police. Russian national Dmitry Ganin was killed.

#1f
Russia's Medvedev Slams Prosecutors After Politkovskaya Trial
Agence France Presse, February 25, 2009

Russian President Dmitry Medvedev Wednesday slammed prosecutors for poor work with juries, after they failed to convict four men accused of organizing the murder of journalist Anna Politkovskaya.

"Prosecutors and law-enforcement officers who conduct preliminary investigations should learn to work with the existence of the institution of the jury," Medvedev said at a meeting with senior prosecutors.

"It is time to learn to do this, and not discuss how good it was back when this institution did not exist," he said in televised remarks.

The comments came a week after a jury acquitted four men who were suspected of involvement in the 2006 murder of Politkovskaya after a high-profile trial that shed little light on the crime.

Juries were introduced in Russia in the post-Soviet era and tend to acquit suspects at a much higher rate than judges.

Meanwhile Russia's top prosecutor defended his staff despite international criticism of their failure to convict the four defendants or identify the mastermind of the apparent contract killing.

"There is no reason to replace them, they acted in a principled and highly professional way," Prosecutor General Yury Chaika was quoted as saying by the Interfax news agency, responding to a question about the Politkovskaya case.

Politkovskaya, a fierce critic of the Kremlin who exposed human rights abuses in the war-torn region of Chechnya, was gunned down near her Moscow apartment in October 2006.

#1g
U.S. rabbi leaves Russia after losing appeal
JTA, February 26, 2009

An American rabbi left Russia after a Russian district court upheld a ruling ordering his expulsion.

Rabbi Yisroel Silberstein was serving the country's Primorye region, according to lubavitch.com.

The district court in Vladivostok ruled Feb. 12 that Silberstein violated the terms of his visa by serving as a religious leader. His visa had been issued for promoting cultural ties, according to Russia's Interfax agency.

On Wednesday, the court rejected Silberstein's appeal. Silberstein, who had been in Russia for 2 1/2 years, left for New York that night, according to lubavitch.com.

One of Russia's two chief rabbis, Berel Lazar, said the Jewish community will protest the ruling, Interfax reported.

The Jewish community is outraged at these policies which target Jewish spiritual workers who are foreign citizens," said Alexander "Sasha" Boroda, director of the Federation of Jewish Communities of Russia, said in a statement. "This trend could significantly redraw the map of faith-based work in Russia, making it extremely difficult to perform spiritual work on behalf of the Jewish community."

Boroda added that the work of a rabbi falls within the definition of "cultural activities."

Two rabbis in Rostov-on-Don were expelled recently on similar charges.

#1h
Billionaire wants Russian citizenship back
JTA, February 26, 2009

Russian-Israeli businessman Arcadi Gaydamak has asked Russia to reinstate his citizenship.

Gaydamak made the request Wednesday, senior Kremlin officials told the Israeli daily Ha'aretz.

His Russian citizenship was revoked in the 1970s when he immigrated to Israel. Gaydamak will likely have to renounce his Israeli citizenship if his request is granted, since Russian law does not permit dual nationality, Globes reported. Gaydamak, who lived in France for 17 years, also is a French citizen.

The billionaire reportedly is hoping that having Russian citizenship will make it difficult to extradite him to France, depending on a March 4 verdict in a French court over an arms-dealing affair.

Gaydamak is accused of illegally organizing the sale of Russian arms to Angola from 1993 to 2000 for \$791 million.

#1i
Memorial to Lubavitcher rebbe damaged
JTA, February 26, 2009

Unidentified vandals damaged a monument erected in southern Ukraine in honor of the late Lubavitcher rebbe.

The attack occurred overnight Wednesday in Nikolayev, the birthplace of Menachem Mendel Schneerson, the seventh Lubavitcher rebbe, who died in 1994.

Jewish officials said the vandals damaged the monument -- a black granite open book -- likely using a hammer, and pasted two provocative xenophobic leaflets on the memorial.

Law enforcement agencies are investigating but no arrests have been reported.

"We are not sure who did it," Rabbi Shlomo Gottlib, chief rabbi of Nikolayev and the surrounding region, told JTA. "Probably this crisis is a result of the anti-Semitic atmosphere in the city. We are working closely with local authorities who are loyal to us. Meanwhile, probably some forces directed those vandals against ethnic minorities. We believe that local law enforcement agencies will investigate the case and punish the guilty parties."

The monument was erected last August on the corner of Moskovskaya and Dunayeva streets, not far from where Schneerson was born. It was built on the initiative of the Nikolayev Jewish community with a donation from the Shaul family of Los Angeles and support of the local mayor.

Nikolayev, with a population of 500,000, is home to an estimated 7,000 Jews.

#1j

U.S. pulling out of 'Durban II' conference

By Ron Kampeas

JTA, February 27, 2009

The Obama administration has decided to boycott the so-called Durban II conference out of concerns for anti-Semitism.

Multiple sources on a conference call with the White House on Friday told JTA that the Obama administration had opted not to attend any further preparatory meetings ahead of the planned U.N. conference against racism in Geneva in April.

The conference reprises the 2001 conference in Durban, South Africa that devolved into an anti-Jewish free-for-all. Canada and Israel have opted not to attend the conference, and some U.S. Jewish groups had been pressing the United States to do the same.

Preparations for a draft document so far have seen Iran leading a coterie of nations blocking inclusion of anything that might guarantee Jewish protections – including mention of the Holocaust – while inserting draconian language guarding Islam against "insult."

The State Department sent a delegation, including a senior staffer from the American Jewish Committee, to this month's preparatory talks. The delegation's conclusions were that the anti-Israel and anti-Western tendencies were too deeply entrenched to excise.

Now that the United States is withdrawing from the conference, European nations are expected to follow.

Speaking for the White House on Friday's call were Samantha Power and James Warlick, who handle international organizations for, respectively, the national security council and the State Department; and Jennifer Simon, an adviser to Susan Rice, the U.S. envoy to the United Nations.

#2

Obama vs. the Clenched Fists

By Jim Hoagland

Washington Post, February 22, 2009

An American hand reaching out to an unclenching authoritarian fist: This is the dominant foreign policy metaphor of President Obama's first month in office. It is a simile of hope, as the president intends -- but also one of vulnerability, as Obama may discover sooner than he expects.

The most repeated image of Obama's inaugural address has helped his administration get out of the gate fast, with special envoys trotting the globe and secret correspondence flying between the White House and the Kremlin about an introductory mini-summit in April. The president's metaphor-makers have earned their keep.

But Obama is launching his ambitious effort to lead the world with sweet reason as the foundations of the American economy seem to crumble. This increases the danger that the president's offer to cooperate with former adversaries will be seen or portrayed as a sign of weakness. (If mere Republican members of Congress slap Obama's extended hand, imagine what Kim Jong Il or Vladimir Putin might do.) Obama must carefully manage the paradox of power and penury he has inherited.

The fact that the twin economic and financial crises are global in nature could work in his favor. Almost every other major power is in worse shape than the United States. That is certainly the case for Russia, Iran and Egypt -- the countries at the top of the president's clenched-fist list.

It could even help with still-growing China, which so far does not seek to exploit U.S. market woes. Instead, China holds its breath and continues to underwrite economic cooperation with purchases of U.S. Treasury bills and private investments.

Obama in his first month has made clear his style in foreign policy: He plays the hand he wishes he had rather than the one he was dealt. He relies on skill -- and a determined optimism that he believes will help shape the outcome -- to make up for low cards.

Russia provides the clearest example. Obama has chosen to put high priority and a positive cast on U.S.-Russian relations in intensifying private contacts with President Dmitry Medvedev, who telephoned Obama less than a week after the inauguration to say that two "young, new presidents" should be able to work together. Medvedev followed up with an effusive eight-page letter and a second substantive telephone call, according to several senior officials here and abroad.

Obama responded with a less chatty missive that listed opportunities -- i.e., hot spots and conflict zones -- for U.S.-Russian cooperation, including the Middle East, Iran and nuclear weapons reductions. These previously undisclosed communications were the foundation for Vice President Biden's Feb. 7 offer in Munich to "press the reset button" with Russia.

The White House and the Kremlin are working to arrange a bilateral presidential meeting on the sidelines at the Group of 20 economic summit on April 2 in London. Another possibility is to get the two leaders together later that week in the context of the NATO summit in Strasbourg, France.

Obama's chances for detente with Moscow may well have been improved by the 20 percent plunge in Russian industrial output in January and the 30 percent fall in the value of the ruble over the past six months. This is not -- as Voltaire said on his deathbed when a priest urged him to renounce Satan -- the time to be making enemies.

But Medvedev still takes orders from Putin, who fiercely nurtures grudges and may carry on trying to convince the world that "Russia is back," economic and demographic facts to the contrary notwithstanding.

There is a vaguely schizophrenic quality to Russian diplomacy now. Moscow cynically bribes Kyrgyzstan to push the United States out of Manas Air Base while eagerly offering overland transit through Russia for U.S. and NATO forces in Afghanistan. This suggests that even if Medvedev goes for detente, he may not be able to deliver it.

Putin is better at obstruction than cooperation. Even if the Russians develop a strategy to reciprocate Obama's extended-hand diplomacy, they may not be able to implement it. The same is true in spades for Iran's competing power centers and North Korea's hermit leadership.

Obama is right to reach out in a new spirit of openness. But he must prepare to cope with the dangers of success, as well as of failure. He will spark misgivings and apprehensions among European and Arab allies if he gets too close to nations that still threaten them. And he will, of course, reap their scorn if the fist remains clenched.

#3

Anti-Semitic Incitement Against Jewish Mayor Revs Up in Ukraine

By Hana Levi Julian

IsraelNN.com, February 22, 2009

A Ukrainian city council member has kicked off an intense anti-Semitic campaign against Vladimir Vasilevitch Saldah, the Jewish mayor of Kherson, according to two local Jewish community leaders.

Sergei Kirichenko, a former parliament member, used Israel's recent counterterrorist Operation Cast Lead as a springboard for his latest vicious anti-Semitic diatribe, one calculated to ignite the worst fears of Ukrainian gentiles.

Aleksandr Vayner, director of the Kherson Jewish Charitable-Community Center, and Vitaly Bronshtein, chairman of the Kherson branch of the Council of Regions of the Jewish Conference of Ukraine, both reported that Kirichenko spewed his anti-Semitic hate during several appearances on the local "Vik" radio show.

"Like in Gaza, where they kill women and children, they are destroying the Slavic people from within," the Kherson city council member proclaimed.

"The Jews are occupiers, they have occupied us, they stole all our wealth and control us... they create terms that will enable genocide of the Slavic people."

The anti-Semitic lawmaker has long been invested in trying to convince the local population that Jews are the enemy.

According to the FSU Monitor, Kirichenko has also allegedly posted on his website a "Catechism of a Jew in the USSR," they said, a slightly updated version of the Protocols of the Elders of Zion, the fictional anti-Semitic work produced by the Russian secret police during the time of the Czar. In the past, he has defined the work as a legitimate "historical document" that should be taken seriously.

Mayor Saldah officiated at the ceremony when the public menorah erected by Chabad in the city's Lenin Square was lit for the first time during the Festival of Lights in December 2002.

The Rabbinical Center of Europe (RCE) speculated that Kirichenko's latest rant was part of an effort to unseat Saldah and take his place.

Other comments he has made in the past include:

* "The Jews are the only ones getting rich while everybody else is suffering... this is the reason why we live so poorly in Kherson, why we are being ripped off every day, why we have no peace."

* "The Jews think that the Ukrainians are an inferior race that is meant to serve them, which is why they perpetrate crimes no other nation would dare to do."

The RCE has called on the Ukrainian government to press charges against Kirichenko for incitement to racial hatred, and further, to denounce his activities. The organization has also demanded that the Ukrainian government pass laws banning similar talk.

In a statement to the media, the RCE warned, "It would be irresponsible to disregard those comments, especially as there are many who hear them, and among those, some who actually believe them. The Ukrainian government ought to pass a law against such bigotry, like most other European states. There is no place for such a warped mindset in the 21st Century."

The rabbinical council also called on the French government last year to suspend cooperation with Ukraine until the government curbs the growing anti-Semitism in its society.

#4 Chattier Medvedev Could Be Testing Path To 'Real Power' By Chloe Arnold RFE/RL, February 23, 2009

Sitting back in a comfortable leather armchair, a cup of tea perched on the table in front of him, Dmitry Medvedev reassures the nation that it has little to fear from the current economic crisis.

The television show, filmed in a room lined with expensive-looking artwork and leatherbound books, gives the impression that Medvedev is speaking from his own sitting room. It has echoes of the "fireside chats" used so effectively by U.S. President Franklin D. Roosevelt at the height of the Great Depression.

"We have accumulated substantial reserves over the past five to seven years exactly in order to be able to use them in case the financial and economic situation got worse," Medvedev intones. "We are making changes to our budget. Yes, it is a difficult budget, it [has a] deficit. However, with the help of the Reserve Fund, we will be able to cover all our expenses, including social expenses, for this year and for the next year, and overcome the most difficult part of the financial crisis."

That February 15 television appearance was just the latest attempt to boost Medvedev's public profile, giving rise to speculation that he is emerging from the shadow of his patron, Prime Minister Vladimir Putin, and coming into his own as president. In addition to the "fireside chat," handlers have posted videos to Medvedev's official blog of the president discussing anything from student loans to affordable sports facilities. There is room for readers to post their comments, and he has promised to reply to any issues raised on the website.

Analysts say Medvedev's variation on the Roosevelt theme is potentially a good development for his country.

"I think his idea to be visible and try to explain the situation to people -- that's basically a good move," says Fyodor Lukyanov, editor of the journal "Russia in Global Affairs." "It's much better than before, when the administration actually tried to limit itself to propaganda, without any attempts to explain. So in the long run, I think it might be positive."

Time Of Disenchantment

Medvedev's paternal, almost professorial, approach is in sharp contrast to that of Putin, who has long relied on a brusque, aggressive tone in his dealings with the public. While Putin's approach might have worked well when Russia was riding high, some observers suggest a softer touch is needed as the country heads into a period of economic uncertainty.

It also comes at a time of growing disillusionment with the government.

"Medvedev is very concerned about the situation in Russia, and I believe the main goal of the government is to avoid any kind of panic among the population, to maintain a certain kind of political stability," says Yevgeny Volk, director of the Moscow office of the Washington-based Heritage Foundation.

"They are trying to be more appealing to the people, to make more public-relations campaigns in order to calm people and to improve the image of the authorities."

It is almost a year since Medvedev sailed to victory in a tightly managed presidential election in March 2008, an election that was criticized in the West as undemocratic. Medvedev, a former protege of Putin, came in with the full support of the outgoing president.

Medvedev has often been described as a caretaker president, holding the reins until 2012, when the constitution allows Putin to run for the top job once again. In the meantime, it is thought that Putin continues to run the country in his role as prime minister, leading some commentators to dub the current regime a "tandemocracy" or a "two-headed eagle."

But there are signs that Medvedev is attempting to emerge from Putin's shadow. Following nationwide protests against the deepening economic crisis, Medvedev expressed dissatisfaction at how slowly the government was responding. He told a group of business leaders that anticrisis measures had been implemented "unjustifiably slowly."

Last month, he demanded that a draft law on treason submitted by Putin's cabinet be withdrawn and reworked. The bill was criticized by human rights groups, who said it would have allowed law-enforcement agencies to charge government critics as traitors, and anyone working for a foreign organization as a spy.

Strains At The Top?

But do the rumblings of dissent signal a genuine split within the "tandemocracy"?

"It's known that Vladimir Putin and Dmitry Medvedev don't always see eye to eye. But for the time being they have managed to find a way to agree on their differences," says Aleksei Mukhin, the director of the independent Center for Political Information. "Putin was very clever in choosing Medvedev as his successor. He studied all his psychological traits. And so Medvedev in all certainty will not come into open conflict with Putin during his tenure as president, as long as there is no force majeure."

At the same time, however, the deepening of the financial crisis could make it harder to maintain a balance between the two leaders' styles.

With tens of thousands of jobs on the line and a mounting risk of unrest, analysts say there is a chance that power will shift away from the former patron.

"It's my personal feeling that Putin is very tired, and he's really not in a very good mood because of everything that's happening," Lukyanov says. "He wasn't prepared for such a sharp shift in trends. I wouldn't rule out that the power balance in Russia may shift this year. Maybe Medvedev will gradually grab more real power."

Ordinary Russians appear divided on Medvedev's more prominent role. After the weekend television address, some of those interviewed by RFE/RL said they still felt no reason to believe what he says, while others said his relatively relaxed approach made him seem more accessible.

Raisa Melekhova, an engineer at the Institute for Nuclear Physics in Novosibirsk, was one of a handful of people picked to speak to Putin during his annual question-and-answer session on national television in 2007. Reached after Medvedev's Sunday premiere on February 15, she said she thought the new television address was a step in the right direction:

"He seems very open to discussion, and wherever he is, he goes out of his way to speak to people," Melekhova says. "For now, it's a little early to say, but I think [politicians] should play a greater role in people's lives."

Medvedev is expected to hold his television shows every three or four weeks, according to a spokeswoman.

#5

A 'Reset' That Doesn't Compute

By Jackson Diehl

Washington Post, February 23, 2009

Normally sour Russian officials are almost jaunty in describing their first engagements with the Obama administration. "We are excited," says one at the Foreign Ministry.

It's not just Vice President Biden's recent promise of a "reset" in U.S.-Russian relations that prompts this outward cheer from the government of Vladimir Putin. A first visit by a senior U.S. delegation here 10 days ago quickly produced agreement on an agenda that begins with a new nuclear arms control treaty to replace the START agreement, which expires at the end of the year. There is discussion of re-creating bilateral cooperation committees, and of U.S. support for Russian membership in the World Trade Organization. And the Russians are thrilled by what they perceive to be Obama's incipient retreat from Bush administration agreements with Poland and the Czech Republic to begin building a European missile defense.

So is this the beginning of a new era of cooperation between Washington and Moscow -- a detente that could deliver another big cut in nuclear arsenals, more effective pressure on Iran's nuclear program, and a diminishment of the growing tensions between the United States and Europe over how to handle Russia? A few days spent here with a group of Americans and Germans organized by the German Marshall Fund left me with some considerable doubts.

The first concerns the Russian economy -- the basis of Russians' acceptance of Putin's autocracy -- which has plummeted far faster and further than any in the developed West. This year will see, at best, a massive reversal in Russian output, from the 8 percent growth rate of 2008 to a 2 percent contraction. Industrial production in January dropped 16 percent, and unemployment rose to more than 8 percent. Independent economists predict that the jobless rate will rise as high as 15 percent and that the government's once-vast reserve of dollars will be exhausted sometime next year.

This city remains a showcase of bright lights and choking traffic, but outside the capital popular demonstrations and strikes have begun. With Kremlin funding drying up, regional governments are showing signs of rebelliousness. And in Moscow itself there are hints of an ugly debate among the competing political clans around Putin over how to divide what money is left.

These are all familiar symptoms of the political and economic "chaos" of the Russian 1990s, the rescue from which has been the foundation of Putin's domestic popularity. Little surprise then, to hear a seasoned foreign businessman here agree with the almost universal assessment by Moscow's small democratic opposition movement: "Putinism as it has existed until now is dead." Former chess champion-turned-dissident Garry Kasparov said, "The situation will inevitably lead to political change. What kind of change? I don't know."

To that uncertainty must be added Putin's unaltered domestic political formula: harsh repression of critics such as Kasparov, the unsolved murders of leading journalists and human rights activists, and relentless television propaganda that describes Russia as a great power encircled by enemies -- foremost among them the United States. "Of course the authorities understand that they need good relations with America now," said Arsenii Roginski of the human rights group Memorial, whose main office, in St. Petersburg, was recently ransacked by security forces. "But also the authorities understand that the population should be told who is the enemy, and why you don't live well -- and that is America. And this is the contradiction."

Former secretary of state Condoleezza Rice, a longtime student of Russia, liked to point out that, historically, deepening Russian domestic repression has correlated with greater external belligerence. Will this era be an exception? The Obama administration and European governments seem to hope so; the latest Moscow political murders have not slowed their rush to "reset." Yet the cheery Russian response has covered a series of policy moves that are, at best, ambiguous.

Despite its dire budget problems, Putin's government offered \$2.1 billion in aid this month to the government of Kyrgyzstan, which promptly announced the closure of a U.S. air base vital to operations in Afghanistan. Russian officials then smilingly offered a supply corridor to Afghanistan through Russia, providing Putin with a potential chokehold over NATO operations. Officials here were blunt in describing their objective: to be treated as an equal partner by Washington in deciding Afghanistan's future.

Then there are the disturbing signs that Putin's ambition to subjugate Georgia -- manifest in the hysterical rhetoric with which officials here continue to describe its democratic and pro-Western government -- remains very much alive. Pavel Felgenhauer, a respected military reporter for the independent newspaper Novaya Gazeta, offers a detailed case for his conclusion that the possibility of a Russian military operation this summer to "finish the job" of toppling Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili is "frighteningly high."

Naturally, those betting on a new spring in U.S.-Russian relations scoff at such speculation. But Felgenhauer is used to that. He was also dismissed last year -- when he correctly predicted that a Russian invasion of Georgia would come by August.

#6

**Georgia: Russia Is Stoking Tensions
Border Incidents Spark Accusations From Both Sides
By Philip P. Pan
Washington Post, February 22, 2009**

The tank rumbled across the border from South Ossetia in the middle of the afternoon, followed by about 40 Russian soldiers on foot, witnesses said. The troops took up a position at the edge of this small Georgian village, on an empty piece of land where residents once tended an apple and walnut orchard.

Villagers who watched nervously from a distance said that a few soldiers appeared to take measurements while the others milled around. Then, after less than two hours, the soldiers followed the tank back across the border.

Not a shot or even a word was exchanged between the soldiers and the villagers or the Georgian police officers posted here. But the Feb. 11 intrusion sent a ripple of fear through this tiny hamlet of 500 and was a reminder of the fragile security situation on Georgia's borders six months after its defeat in the August war with Russia.

"They're trying to make the situation more tense," said Nodari Longurashvili, 47, a farmer in Kvemo-Nikozi, which Russian troops occupied for nearly two months after the war. "They don't want our village to feel normal. They want to make us remember them."

That assessment is shared by Georgia's leaders, who say Russia has been orchestrating a series of escalating border incidents in an attempt to provoke a new conflict and create an atmosphere of instability in the country that would undermine its pro-Western government and frighten off investors.

"This is the biggest challenge," President Mikheil Saakashvili said in an interview. "Of course, investment flows will stop, and that's what keeps this country going."

He said Georgia is determined not to be baited into a new confrontation but that it has limited options for countering the Russian moves. "That's why we really need strong international involvement," he said.

Russian and Georgian negotiators agreed at international talks in Geneva on Wednesday to establish a hotline and regular contacts between local police officials in an attempt to prevent incidents from escalating. But both sides expressed caution about how effective the accord would be.

In the past five months, sniper fire has killed 11 Georgian police officers and wounded 22 in the border areas next to the two breakaway regions protected by Russian forces, South Ossetia and Abkhazia, according to Interior Minister Vano Merabishvili. One officer was shot to death minutes after leaving a meeting with European monitors, he said.

In another incident, a group of armed men wearing military fatigues crossed into Georgia this month and stopped a car on a stretch of highway near the South Ossetian border, seizing the vehicle and one of its passengers, a prominent soccer referee.

The Feb. 7 abduction, which followed at least 10 kidnappings in Georgian border areas in recent months, caused particular alarm because the highway is Georgia's main east-west artery. If security on the road becomes a problem, it could choke trade and investment across the country, officials said.

"For Russia, it was never just about these two territories," said Giga Bokeria, Georgia's deputy foreign minister. "The prize for them is to get Georgia back into their back yard, to have a weak government here. . . . That goal hasn't been achieved, and that's why they're doing this."

Malkhaz Beuklishvili, 36, the referee who was abducted, said the men who seized him spoke Ossetian and took him to South Ossetia without being stopped on either side of the border. They held him in a farmhouse,

demanding money and occasionally beating him, but surrendered him to Russian and Ossetian soldiers after being stopped at a checkpoint the next day.

As he was being driven away, the referee said, he looked back and saw his former captors chatting with the other soldiers. "They didn't handcuff them. They just stood and talked. I don't know what happened to them, whether they were detained or not," he said.

South Ossetian authorities released Beuklishvili after the intervention of the International Committee of the Red Cross and European observers, and said the abduction was being investigated.

But Merabishvili, the interior minister, said that none of the kidnappings or sniper shootings has resulted in arrests and that 12 Georgian citizens in the border areas are still missing. "It's clear for us that the Russians are doing it or encouraging it," he said. "They're trying to destroy the Georgian state."

Russia denied that its soldiers entered Kvemo-Nikozi and said it is Georgia that is taking provocative actions, by kidnapping South Ossetians and building up its military forces in the border regions.

The European Union's monitoring mission in Georgia, however, said it has inspected all key Georgian military posts in the border areas and found no buildup of forces.

Georgia signed an agreement with the E.U. mission in late January to withdraw heavy weapons from a buffer zone near the borders, and the Europeans have called on Russia to reciprocate.

Russian officials have dismissed the measure as ineffective and argued that only Georgian forces need to be restricted because they attacked South Ossetia in August, while Russian troops in the region are protecting newly independent states.

E.U. observers have not been granted access to South Ossetia or Abkhazia, and a smaller European monitoring team that has also been blocked from entering the territories is scheduled to withdraw within months at Russia's insistence.

After the August war, Russia recognized South Ossetia and Abkhazia as sovereign nations over the objections of Georgia, the United States and much of Europe. It withdrew its troops from adjacent Georgian territory in early October, after the European Union agreed to send the monitoring mission.

But according to Georgian, European and American officials, Russia remains in violation of the cease-fire deal brokered by French President Nicolas Sarkozy, which called on both sides to pull troops back to pre-war positions and levels. About 8,000 Russian soldiers are stationed in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, almost three times the previous number, and they hold positions closer to the border than before the war, Georgian officials say.

Russian forces also continue to occupy the large Akhagori district in South Ossetia, which was under Georgian control before the war, and have announced plans to build military bases in the disputed territories.

Georgian officials acknowledged that the country is more vulnerable than it was before the war, and said the government is working with the Pentagon to improve the nation's military and upgrade its air defenses. But they said there is little the army can do to stop a Russian attack or the erosion of security along the border.

"We're working hard to stay on the radar of the international community and make sure the price for these actions is as high as possible," Bokeria said. "That's the only way to deter Russia."

Special correspondent Temo Bardzimashvili in Tbilisi, Georgia, contributed to this report.

#7

As Crisis Deepens, Russian Finance Ministry Battles 'Siloviki'

By Brian Whitmore

RFE/RL, February 23, 2009

For nearly a decade, hard-nosed security-service veterans and bean-counting economists have comprised the two key pillars of Vladimir Putin's authoritarian regime in Russia. Today they are locked in a high-stakes and potentially destabilizing bureaucratic war.

The resuscitation earlier this month of a dormant corruption probe alleging fraud in the Finance Ministry marked the latest move in an ongoing struggle between these two Kremlin factions that is only intensifying as Russia's economy craters.

The criminal investigation is viewed by many analysts as a politically motivated attack. It came just a week after Finance Minister Aleksei Kudrin made an abrupt U-turn in the Kremlin's anti-crisis program, shutting down direct assistance to companies struggling to refinance their foreign debts. That move reportedly angered many politically connected corporations -- and their allies in the security services -- who were counting on the state assistance.

The assault on the Finance Ministry is yet another example of how the sagging economy is exposing deep cracks in the Russian elite as officials scramble for control over shrinking resources. And in a top-heavy political system marked by weak institutions and highly personalized rule, such rifts tend to be resolved with heavy-handed tactics.

"Under the conditions that have been created by Putin, there is neither transparency, nor justice, nor a tradition of civil behavior," says David Satter, a senior fellow at the Hudson Institute and author of the book "Darkness At Dawn: The Rise of the Russian Criminal State." "And the easiest way oftentimes to make ones point is to fabricate a case against the person who is causing you problems."

There has long been tension between the green-eyeshade set at the Finance Ministry and the security service veterans, or "siloviki," who dominate Putin's inner circle.

But with the economic crisis damaging Kudrin's reputation for sound economic management, analysts say the most influential of the siloviki, First Deputy Prime Minister Igor Sechin, now sees an opening for a full-on assault.

"People in the Finance Ministry are concerned with...macro-economic stability and the future of the country's economic system," Satter says. "People like Sechin and those around him, many of whom control large state-run corporations and have skimmed money [from] those corporations, are experiencing problems because of the fall in raw materials prices. Their first concern is not the economic stability of the country, but their own economic stability and that creates an inevitable conflict in the leadership."

Political Scapegoat?

Earlier this month, Investigative Committee chief Aleksandr Bastrykin accused two top Finance Ministry officials of embezzling \$18 million in connection with an agreement to settle Russia's debts to Algeria. Bastrykin said an investigation into Deputy Finance Minister Sergei Storchak and former Deputy Finance Minister Vadim Volkov is "nearing completion and the case will soon be sent to court."

Storchak was released in October pending trial after spending nearly a year in prison. Volkov is still in custody.

Some Kremlin-watchers claim the case, which has sputtered along since late 2007, has little to do with Storchak, Volkov, or Algeria. Instead, most call it a proxy attack against Kudrin.

"A confrontation between Sechin and Kudrin has been going on for some time," says political analyst Dmitry Travin, academic director of the Center for Modernization Studies at the European University of St. Petersburg.

"Sechin wants to force Kudrin's resignation and install his own person as Finance Minister. He is using the Investigative Committee and his ally Bastrikin to discredit Kudrin."

Kudrin has long been an irritant for the siloviki and their corporate allies.

When Russia's economy was booming, he successfully argued in favor of placing oil revenues in a "stabilization fund," a move that infuriated Sechin and the siloviki who coveted access to the billions in petrodollars.

Kudrin and his allies now argue that the approach turned out to be prescient. Without this nest egg, they say, Russia would not have had the cash on hand to defend the ruble from freefall and prop up the country's floundering banks, which are reeling from a credit crunch.

Earlier this month, Kudrin abandoned direct government assistance to struggling companies, arguing instead that firms should instead seek financing from commercial banks, which became the main recipients of the government's cash injections.

Kudrin is now arguing for steep budget cuts as Russia readjusts its spending plans amid falling oil revenues, a position at odds with the security services' desire for increased funding for defense-related industries.

Analysts say that despite whatever merit Kudrin's policy arguments may have, the economic crisis makes him vulnerable as inflation and unemployment rises, the stock market tanks and the ruble sinks.

"The Finance Ministry is no longer the rock of the Putin era's stability, but instead has returned to the role it played in the 1990s as the party that gets blamed for all the country's economic problems," Stanislav Belkovsky, director of the Moscow-based National Strategy Institute, tells RFE/RL's Russian Service.

He says the situation "makes it more possible for Aleksei Kudrin to be made into a political scapegoat," setting the stage for "a systematic attack" on the Finance Ministry.

Master Of Intrigue

A master of intrigue and bureaucratic manipulation, Sechin is widely seen as the bete noire of Russian politics. He is believed to have been the key behind-the-scenes player in the prosecution of oil tycoon Mikhail Khodorkovsky and the subsequent break-up of his Yukos oil company.

Most of Yukos's assets were eventually gobbled up by the state-run oil giant Rosneft, where Sechin is chairman.

Travin says Sechin is "a person who aspires to expand his power until it is unlimited" by using "his ties with Putin to the maximum effect." Control of the Finance Ministry would significantly buttress Sechin's already considerable clout.

"If Sechin gets his own person appointed as Finance Minister, it would give him colossal power," Travin says. "He would have control over where and to whom government money flows throughout the whole country. This would allow him to expand his influence. It is something he has long aspired to."

But Travin and other analysts say removing Kudrin will not be easy. Kudrin and Putin are believed to be close friends, having worked together since the early 1990s when both served in the St. Petersburg local government.

"I think it is only because [Putin and Kudrin] have good personal relations that Kudrin has not yet been removed," Travin says. "Otherwise, Sechin would have been able to replace him. It is difficult to remove Kudrin. But if Putin thinks this is politically advantageous then he can fire Kudrin [as Finance Minister] and appoint him to another position."

Analysts also note that the embezzlement case against Storchak and Volkov that is being used to discredit Kudrin is transparently weak and riddled with inconsistencies.

"This is an extremely flimsy case. Bastrykhin is always talking about what the investigation and its experts have concluded," political commentator Yulia Latynina tells RFE/RL's Russian Service. "But they are always citing different figures. Now he is saying \$18 million [was embezzled]. In an earlier interview he said it was \$80 million, also citing some experts. The investigation is very unprofessional."

RFE/RL's Russian Service contributed to this report

#8

Kremlin plans to hand over property to religious groups

RIA Novosti, February 24, 2009

Russia plans to change the ownership structure of property used by religious groups, a move that could make the Orthodox Church a major real estate owner and cut budget spending, a business daily said on Tuesday.

The bill drafted by the economics ministry proposes handing over buildings, land plots and other property to religious organizations that currently use them free of charge. The document also proposes returning all church property seized by the Bolsheviks after the 1917 revolution, Kommersant reported.

Experts said the Russian Orthodox Church, the country's dominant religion, could emerge as a major real estate owner, the paper said.

"Only [gas and railroad monopolies] Gazprom and Russian Railways could then be compared with the Church [in terms of property ownership]," Roman Cheptsov from Prime City Properties consultancy told the daily. "In Moscow, for example, 1 hectare of land is worth about \$6-\$7 million."

The economics ministry declined to comment on the bill, the paper said. While drafting the document in 2007, however, the ministry said it was aimed at removing the expense of maintaining religious buildings from the federal budget.

An opposition Communist Party leader said the move was designed to improve public trust in the Kremlin amid the ongoing financial crisis and warned that ensuing commercial activity involving the property could harm the mission of religious organizations, the paper said.

"Some clergy will want to engage in commerce, rent out premises and land," Vladimir Kashin, also a lawmaker, told the daily. "We must prevent extremes, or otherwise we will have gilded churches and growing poverty and immorality."

Father Vladimir Vigilyansky, spokesman for the Moscow Patriarchy, said the Church would have to review its economic policies if the bill was approved to support churches outside large cities, which may not have sufficient funds to maintain or rebuild the buildings, the paper reported.

In a separate interview on Tuesday, Vigilyansky said the Church has often been returned virtually derelict monasteries and cathedrals, and the state could help churches, especially those in remote regions, rebuild them.

Vigilyansky said the late Patriarch Alexy II had only allowed the lease of auxiliary church premises on rare occasions to raise money for reconstruction projects, Kommersant reported.

Since the collapse of the officially atheist Soviet Union, the Church has regained the ownership of over 100 of 16,000 churches and cathedrals, the paper said.

"If religious organizations become legitimate owners of their property, they will be independent of the state, which will lose its levers to influence on them," a senior Muslim cleric, Mufti Nafigulla Ashirov, told the paper admitting that mosques would rent out extra premises to support the Muslim community.

Rabbi Zinovy Kogan told the daily: "We will rent extra premises, but will spend earnings on welfare projects, for example soup houses."

Kommersant said the bill would be discussed by a government commission on religious organizations in March.

#9

Orthodox Church May Become One Of Largest Proprietors In Russia Itar-Tass, February 24, 2009

MOSCOW -- The Economic Development Ministry has drafted a bill which gives every religion registered in Russia the right to own buildings, land and property, including that impounded by the Bolsheviks. If the bill is approved, the Russian Orthodox Church will be one of the largest proprietors in the country, and the authorities will never have to support religious buildings, which is important amid the financial turmoil.

All the religions welcome the initiative, while the public fears that the Church may go in for business on one hand and appear to be unable to support historical and architectural monuments on the other.

Representatives of the Economic Development Ministry did not deny in 2007 when the work on the prospective bill's concept started that the document would stop budgetary allocations for Church buildings.

The draft law "On the Transfer of Religious Property to Religious Organizations" cited by the newspaper Kommersant stipulates Church ownership of religious buildings, land and movable property, which is now being used gratis for an indefinite period. A supplementary note to the bill says that the Church should regain all property impounded after the Bolshevik Revolution.

Modern Russia has 234 monasteries, 244 nunneries, 16,000 parishes and 4,696 Sunday schools of the Orthodox Church. The Roman Catholic Church has 220 parishes in Russia, and a third of them have no temples. There are over 4,000 mosques and about 70 synagogues in Russia, as well. The size of religious buildings varies from 5,000 to 50,000 square meters, while Church land is from 0.3 to ten hectares in size.

The Church has become the owner of more than 100 temples in the past 15 years by order of executive authorities. The new bill is bound to legalize this process.

If the bill is approved, the Church may become a leading private owner in Russia, real estate agents say. "The only possible rivals of the Church in that case would be Gazprom and Russian Railroads," Development Director of the Prime City Properties consulting company Roman Cheptsov said. "In Moscow alone an average cost of one hectare of land stands at approximately \$6-7 million."

"A religious organization shall maintain religious property in an appropriate condition, i.e. conduct current and major repairs and bear all the maintenance expenses," the bill runs. The new owner will have no right to change the focus of the acquired property or to transfer it to third persons in the period of ten years.

The Church will also be unable to own particularly valuable monuments and architectural sites on the UNESCO World Heritage list (for instance, the St. Basil Cathedral on Red Square or the Moscow Kremlin cathedrals). In all, there are about 20 sites of the kind on the list.

However, the bill will enable religions to lease out their buildings or land.

One should not fear Church commerce or a sharp growth of Church revenues, Deputy Chairman of the Moscow Patriarchate's Church External Relations Department Bishop Mark of Yegoryevsk said as quoted by the NEWSru.com website.

"Most of our parishes are located in the countryside. As for temples in cities, where land is expensive, they are usually pretty tight and have no vacant space for elementary needs, such as toilets, let alone a parish building or a Sunday school," he said.

Meanwhile, Co-Chairman of the Russian Council of Muftis Mufti Nafigulla Ashirov does not conceal that "the community will have a so-called Waqf domain, which will be leased out for community benefit."

"We will lease out vacant space," Chairman of the Congress of Jewish Religious Communities and Organizations of Russia Rabbi Zinovy Kogan said. "The earned money will be spent on social projects, such as canteens for the poor."

Religious organizations' ownership of their property "is a worldwide norm," Deputy Chairman of the Russian Council of Muftis Damir Gizatullin said.

"There won't be an eruption of commerce" because traditional religions use their churches, mosques and synagogues "only for religious purposes," he said.

The massive return of property nationalized in the Soviet period to religious organizations began in April 1993 with then President Boris Yeltsin's ordinance "On the Transfer of Religious Buildings and Other Property to Religious Organizations."

Believers will own not only real estate but also cultural values. In 2006-2007 then President Vladimir Putin personally handed over to the Russian Orthodox Church the Icon of Our Lady of Smolensk and a fragment of the Lord's Robe stored at the Moscow Kremlin. In December 2007 the Russian Orthodox Church regained all the relics stored in the Kremlin.

A number of museums are trying to impede the process. For instance, the Tretyakov Gallery did not permit the Church to minister services with the Holy Trinity Icon by Andrei Rublev in November 2008. The museum administration said that the masterpiece created in the 15th century might be damaged.

"Such masterpieces as icons, paintings and sculptures are stored at museums all over the world. The Church is able to preserve them duly," Pushkin Fine Arts Museum Director Irina Antonova said.

#10

Appeal Denied, Rabbi of Russia's Primorye Region To Be Deported

By Zalman Nelson

Lubavitch.com, February 25, 2009

A Russian district court on Wednesday, February 25, overturned an appeal and upheld its ruling to expel Rabbi Yisroel Silberstein, a U.S. citizen from Russia where he was serving the Primorye region's Jewish community.

The Vladivostok district court's original decision on February 12th stated that Silberstein applied and received his most recent visa 10 weeks ago for cultural activities, inconsistent with the religious work he was actually performing in Russia.

According to a Federal Migration Service spokesman, Silberstein should have written "religious activities" as his intended purpose on the visa, the third of his 2? year tenure.

A native of Brooklyn, Rabbi Silberstein told Lubavitch.com he flew from Vladivostok to Moscow after the decision and would be flying to New York on Wednesday night.

In a statement issued by Federation of Jewish Communities of Russia director Alexander (Sasha) Boroda, the decision was deplored as being part of a “dangerous trend in the region” which included the deportation of Chief Rabbi of Rostov-on-Don Eliyashiv Kaplun in 2003 and the blatant use of the migration service “to deny work visas for spiritual leaders.”

“The Jewish community is outraged at these policies which target Jewish spiritual workers who are foreign citizens. This trend could significantly redraw the map of faith-based work in Russia, making it extremely difficult to perform spiritual work on behalf of the Jewish community,” said Boroda.

He said that historical Soviet efforts to suppress Judaism and deny them opportunities for religious instruction and to develop their own community rabbis, makes it necessary to import foreign clergy today.

“Our extensive efforts since the fall of the Soviet Union have not been sufficient to overcome the devastation and train a new generation of rabbis. The Jewish community in Russia had to resort to inviting rabbis from abroad because only they have sufficient training for the position.”

The statement challenged the judgment as being illogical “since the execution of rabbinical duties includes cultural, educational and outreach activities.” Claiming that the work of a rabbi falls within the definition of “cultural activities”, Boroda called upon federal authorities to review their policies and decisions with respect to the Jewish community.

A spokesman for the Federation, Boruch Gorin, told Lubavitch.com that the decision would be appealed with “higher judicial authorities” and “will not go away quietly.”

In bringing attention to an apparent anti-Semitic pattern of government behavior, the statement suggested reviewing the November 10th incident in which an attacker robbed Rabbi Silberstein in central Vladivostok, hitting him in the head and fleeing with his bag and laptop computer. The rabbi was hospitalized with a concussion. A local police investigation rejected anti-Semitism as motivation.

The Federation statement praised the dedicated and hard work of foreign rabbis in Russia on behalf of the Jewish community “engaging in the spiritual upbringing and education of Jews in Russia who had been distanced from their religious traditions and spiritual roots.”

“Now the Jews of Primorye are without their rabbi.”

#11

Formula for Rebooting Commercial Relations By Anders Aslund and Andrew Kuchins Moscow Times, February 25, 2009

As the horrendous effects of the global economic crisis sink in, it should be a signal to both Washington and Moscow to move toward more productive relations without any illusions of shared values. There is no reason why U.S.-Russia relations shouldn't improve under Presidents Barack Obama and Dmitry Medvedev.

There are many areas of mutual interest. In a much-noticed speech in Munich on Feb. 7, Vice President Joseph Biden set the line of the Obama administration: "It is time to press the reset button and to revisit the many areas where we can and should work together." He also stated that "the United States and Russia can disagree and still work together where our interests coincide." One of the most obvious areas of common interest has been ordinary commerce between the United States and Russia. This sphere has been largely neglected in recent years.

U.S. engagement with Russia on economic integration presents an opportunity to broaden and deepen the bilateral relationship. Economic cooperation will build goodwill and confidence, which can facilitate discussion of other areas such as cooperation on nonproliferation and dealing with Iran's nuclear program. Yet the two countries' very limited mutual trade and investment -- the United States accounts for only 4 percent of Russian

trade and foreign direct investment -- indicate a very significant potential to expand bilateral economic relations to the benefit of both sides.

One reason direct U.S. investment in the Russian economy is so small is that the United States does not have a ratified bilateral investment treaty, or BIT, with Russia. Moscow has BIT agreements in place with 38 other nations representing most of the major global economies and most members of the European Union. As a consequence, U.S. corporations usually invest in Russia through European subsidiaries that enjoy better legal protection. Russia has clearly indicated that it welcomes such an agreement, and it was included in the U.S.-Russia Strategic Framework Declaration, which then-Presidents George W. Bush and Vladimir Putin signed in Sochi in April.

A BIT would also encourage Russian investment in the United States. Foreign investment not only provides jobs for Americans but it also "foster[s] economic interdependence," as Yale professor of economics Aleh Tsyvinski wrote in *The Moscow Times* on Oct. 23. "By investing in U.S. and European assets," Tsyvinski said, "Russia's government and business elites are buying a stake in the global economy. This should bring better mutual understanding and a more rational and accountable foreign policy." The United States must work with Russia to ensure that openness to foreign investment is reciprocal and that legal protections for investors are guaranteed.

A crucial issue in Russia's standing in world commerce is its accession to the World Trade Organization. It is the largest economy that remains outside the WTO. The United States has consistently favored Russia's membership in the WTO as well as in other international economic institutions because this type of integration would not only boost commerce but also promote rule-based international norms of economic behavior in Russia and thus help influence Kremlin policy in a constructive direction. The United States should continue to support Russia's WTO accession and work toward resolving the objections coming from both Moscow and the trade organization.

Russia is already an active and responsible board member of the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank. In 2007, Russia showed positive engagement by proposing its own highly respected candidate for managing director of the IMF. Economic integration will provide additional opportunities for the Russian leadership to further develop its global engagement.

In addition, Russia has been a full member of the Group of Eight since 1997, although the financial G7 group still formally excludes Russia. The Obama administration should follow the recent lead of the Bush administration and devote more attention and resources to developing the G20, which was created by the administration of Bill Clinton in 1998, rather than the G8, which seems increasingly economically irrelevant and a vestige of Cold War international institutional arrangements. Russia shares this view.

In his October speech in Evian, France, Medvedev expressed a strong interest in reforming the anachronistic system of global financial governance. Although Russian proposals have not been very concrete, such efforts should be welcomed, even if its views may sometimes conflict with those of the United States.

Russian accession to the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development is also important. Like the WTO, the OECD is a highly legalistic organization that requires new members to adopt many rules before they are granted entry. Membership requires obligations such as observance of international standards relating to rule of law, transparency and property rights, all of which must be adopted in coordination with other members -- in particular, our close European allies.

Another roadblock is the Jackson-Vanik amendment, which requires the executive branch to certify to Congress annually that there are no restrictions on the emigration of Jews from Russia. This Cold War holdover no longer serves any useful purpose, and the Obama administration and Congress should finally bury this relic, which would facilitate Russia's entry into the WTO.

The United States and Russia signed in April the "123 Agreement" on civilian nuclear cooperation, which could be of great commercial significance. The Senate was ready to ratify the agreement in the fall, but the Bush administration withdrew it after the Russia-Georgia war. When appropriate, this treaty should be ratified.

The United States should increase export support and trade facilitation for U.S. companies interested in the Russian market. The Exim Bank and Overseas Private Investment Corporation exist for these purposes, but they should receive more support, especially during the current crisis. The United States should also deepen bilateral economic dialogue involving government and business at all levels, building on the U.S.-Russia Economic Dialogue, which was initiated in April.

The U.S.-Russia commercial relationship can and should be much more productive.

Anders Aslund is a senior fellow at the Peterson Institute for International Economics, and Andrew Kuchins is a senior fellow and director of the Russia and Eurasia Program at the Center for Strategic and International Studies. They are co-authors of "The Russia Balance Sheet," which will be published in April.

#12
Russia's Medvedev Orders Crackdown On Extremists
By Oleg Shchedrov
Reuters, February 25, 2009

President Dmitry Medvedev ordered a crackdown Wednesday on what he called extremist groups trying to exploit Russia's economic crisis by sowing unrest.

Russian officials traditionally mean racist groups and radical religious and political organizations when speaking about "extremism." But human rights activists and some opposition groups accuse the Kremlin of using new legislation on extremism as a pretext to clamp down on legitimate dissent.

"Extremist actions are especially dangerous in the current conditions," Russian news agencies quoted Medvedev as telling a meeting with top prosecutors. "In many instances they are directly linked to attempts to destabilise ... our society."

"You have the right to ask courts to liquidate relevant public and religious organizations and suspend their activities pending a court decision," Interfax news agency quoted him as saying.

Medvedev said this month racist attacks were on the rise and were a threat to national security in Russia, whose economy has been hit hard by the global economic slowdown and the fall in the price of oil and other commodities.

Medvedev said that in some cases jury trials could be moved to another region to avoid pressure on jurors.

"We...should do our best to exclude rough pressure on courts and jurors," he said. "We know that they are being intimidated and offered money. Therefore, such changes (to move the territorial jurisdiction of extremism and terrorism trials) would be of use."

"The Supreme Court could step into action here to work out special rules to apply changes to the territorial jurisdiction of courts."

The Moscow-based rights group SOVA said at least 96 people were killed and more than 400 were wounded in racist attacks last year.

Millions of foreign workers, many from former Soviet republics in Central Asia, have poured into Russia in the past few years to take up construction and retail jobs.

But some 2 million people have lost their jobs in Russia in the last six months and at least 1 million more lay-offs are expected in 2009.

#13

Russian Passport Handout Stirs Fears

By Gary Peach and Maria Danilova

Associated Press, February 25, 2009

Retired postal worker Maria Kozyrenko is a new citizen of Russia -- along with 135,000 others in Transdnestr alone.

Kozyrenko hasn't lived in Russia since the Soviet era. But she got her passport two years ago as part of the Kremlin's push to grant citizenship to hundreds of thousands of ethnic Russians living in former Soviet countries, including Georgia, Moldova, Estonia and Ukraine.

"All our hopes are with Russia," said Kozyrenko, as she hawked an old black coat at a flea market in Tiraspol, the capital of Transdnestr. "We hope that Russia will protect us."

Russia has given passports to nearly 2.9 million former Soviet citizens since 2000, according to the Federal Migration Service. It does not break down the numbers between those who returned to Russia and those who still live abroad.

Some fear that Moscow will use its growing expatriate communities to meddle in the domestic politics of countries near its borders, or -- as in the case of Georgia -- as an excuse for military intervention. But the Kremlin says it is granting passports to Russians abroad for humanitarian rather than political reasons, to help Russians trapped in other countries after the breakup of the Soviet Union.

Kremlin spokesman Alexei Sazonov pointed out that Western countries, such as Belgium, have conducted similar campaigns in the past.

"We have a nonconfrontational foreign policy -- we don't need any conflicts," Sazonov said. "At the same time to defend the rights of compatriots is a right countries have."

The creation of communities of Russian citizens is already undermining Ukraine's entry into NATO and weakening Moldova as it looks to Europe. It also lets the West know that Russia wants to be reckoned with in what it considers its sphere of influence.

"This is a warning, a serious reminder that there are grounds for concern for those who don't recognize Russia's interests," said Masha Lipman, an analyst with the Carnegie Moscow Center.

For example, in recent years the Kremlin has handed out tens of thousands of passports in the breakaway Georgian regions of South Ossetia and Abkhazia. It then in part justified its military incursion into Georgia last year by saying it was protecting Russians living abroad. Now, both South Ossetia and Abkhazia have strengthened political, economic and military ties with Moscow.

Similarly, the Kremlin subsidizes Moldova's separatist province of Transdnestr with cheap gas, funds pro-Russian youth movements and pays poor pensioners a monthly \$10 addition to their pensions of \$60 to \$70.

"For Transdnestr, Russia is like the closest and dearest person -- it's like our motherland," said Alyona Arshinova, 23, a new Russian citizen and activist with a youth group sponsored by pro-Kremlin lawmakers in Russia. Posters of President Dmitry Medvedev and Prime Minister Vladimir Putin adorn her college dormitory room.

About one-fourth of Transdnestr's 550,000 people have already received Russian citizenship. And Transdnestr leader Igor Smirnov, who has ruled this sliver of land since 1991, makes no secret that he wants the region to become part of Russia, even though the two don't share a border.

Estonia's Noncitizens

Another flash point is Estonia. The Russian Embassy in the capital, Tallinn, said about 3,700 passports were issued in the 12 months before Oct. 30, 2008 -- more than three times the number during the same period a year earlier.

This is partly because Estonia, a member of the European Union and NATO, has made clear that it is nervous about its large ethnic Russian population. Denied automatic citizenship after Estonia's independence in 1991, many of these Russians are so-called "noncitizens" who must pass a language exam before receiving an Estonian passport.

A lot don't bother because of the time and expense of studying the grammatically complex Estonian language. For them, a Russian passport is just as enticing, if not more so. Immigration numbers show more than 96,200 Russian citizens and 111,700 noncitizens living in Estonia.

Residents of Narva, a predominantly ethnic Russian city in northeastern Estonia, said that if they hold a Russian passport and an Estonian noncitizen's passport they can travel from Lisbon, Portugal, to Vladivostok without a visa.

"I finally made up my mind -- I'm going to get Russian citizenship," said Vitaly Shkola, 47, an Estonian noncitizen.

Russians with Estonian passports are considered "second-class citizens," he said.

For some the choice of citizenship boils down to economics. Vasily Kaidalov, 21, applied for a Russian passport because he can earn more working in Russia than in his destitute hometown.

10% of Ukrainians

In Ukraine, officials claim that Russia is rapidly distributing passports in the Crimea Peninsula, the location of a major Russian naval base. The Crimea was long a jewel in the Russian imperial crown but was given to Ukraine by Nikita Khrushchev in the 1950s.

Many influential Russian politicians, such as Mayor Yury Luzhkov, believe that Khrushchev's decision was illegal and Russia is duty-bound to repossess Crimea.

Mustafa Dzhemilev, a member of Ukraine's parliament from the Crimean Peninsula, estimated that about 200,000 people -- or nearly every 10th resident -- has dual Russian-Ukrainian citizenship, although it is prohibited by law.

In Ukraine, Russia is "trying to do the same thing they did with Abkhazia and South Ossetia -- establish legal grounds, at least in the Russian legal system, for intervention, whether that be economic, political or military," said Peter Zeihan, vice president of analysis at Stratfor, an international intelligence and analysis company.

Many remain convinced that Russia's true motive in handing out passports outside its borders has to do with politics and power.

"If there are some 200,000 Russian citizens living in Estonia, Russia will have the basis to intervene," said Sergei Stepanov, an ethnic Russian resident of Narva and noncitizen. "Who will stop them?"

#14

**Khodorkovsky Moved to Moscow Jail
Moscow Times, February 25, 2009**

Former Yukos CEO Mikhail Khodorkovsky has arrived in Moscow for a trial on new charges, and he met with his lawyers Tuesday.

Khodorkovsky arrived early Saturday by plane from the east Siberian city of Chita, where he has been imprisoned since being sentenced to eight years on fraud and tax-evasion charges in 2005, defense lawyers said Tuesday.

Khodorkovsky is being held at the Matrosskaya Tishina pretrial detention facility, the same place where he was kept during his first trial.

"I saw Khodorkovsky on the fifth floor of the detention center," Khodorkovsky's lawyer, Denis Dyatlev, said Tuesday, Interfax reported.

He did not say what they had discussed.

Khodorkovsky's business partner, Platon Lebedev, who is also serving a sentence on fraud and tax charges, arrived with Khodorkovsky on Saturday and was transferred to the same detention facility.

"He is in a vigorous mood, preparing for the trial and studying the charges," Lebedev's lawyer Yelena Liptser said after meeting with him Tuesday, Interfax reported.

Asked whether Khodorkovsky and Lebedev would be allowed to meet with relatives, Liptser said, "The judge said he would not impede meetings."

Prosecutors last week announced new embezzlement and money-laundering charges against Khodorkovsky and Lebedev in connection with the now-defunct Yukos. Preliminary hearings are scheduled to begin March 3 at Moscow's Khamovnichesky District Court.

Media interest in the trial is high, and more than 50 journalists have asked to be accredited to the proceedings, far more than there is space for in the courtroom, Moscow City Court spokeswoman Anna Usachyova said Tuesday.

"More than 50 applications from various mass media organizations have arrived. Therefore, a room will be provided for the press at the Khamovnichesky court," Usachyova told Interfax.

A plasma television screen will be placed in the room, and the hearings will be broadcast live, she said.

The court was only notified Tuesday that Khodorkovsky and Lebedev had been transferred to Moscow, she added.

Khodorkovsky, once Russia's richest man, built Yukos into the country's largest oil company. After his 2003 arrest, Yukos was broken up and its main assets were sold to state-controlled Rosneft.

Khodorkovsky and his supporters call the case against him politically motivated, meted out as punishment by a Kremlin angered by his political and business ambitions.

#15

The Russian Holocaust

By Walter Ruby

NY Jewish Week, February 25, 2009

If it had not been for the regime of Josef Stalin, which exiled Ludmila Prakhina's father and pregnant mother from their home in Moldova to the interior of the Soviet Union nine days before the Nazi invasion of the Soviet Union on June 22, 1941, Prakhina's parents would almost certainly have been killed in the Holocaust. And she would never have been born months later near a railroad siding in Uzbekistan.

Yet Prakhina, 68, a Soviet Jewish immigrant and resident of Elmwood Park, N.J., who heads a literary foundation dedicated to perpetuating the memory of both the Holocaust and Stalinist mass deportations, is emphatically ungrateful to the notorious Soviet tyrant.

"I see no difference between Hitler and Stalin," said Prakhina in an interview soon after the Prakhin International Literary Foundation held its second annual award ceremony at the Museum of Jewish Heritage in Manhattan on Jan. 25. There the foundation presented its Truth About the Holocaust and Stalinist Repression Award to Yefim Milshteyn, another Soviet Jewish refugee whose just completed memoir, "A Journey Through Hell," tells the story of his survival of both Nazi death camps and the Soviet gulag. "For the millions of victims massacred during that period, it mattered not at all if they were killed by Hitler or Stalin," Prakhina said. "In fact, Stalin actually killed far more people than Hitler did, including many Jews. My father was one of them."

Prakhina explained that when her parents were exiled, her father was sent as a political prisoner to a concentration camp in Siberia where he was later murdered, while her mother and other female relatives were sent via a freight train to exile in Uzbekistan. Her mother was removed from the train just before delivery, giving birth to Prakhina outside in the snow and below-zero temperature, attended to by local gypsies who saved the life of both mother and child.

Prakhina survived the war and moved to Leningrad, where she built a flourishing career as a chemist. After the death of her husband, Lazar, in 1993, Prakhina immigrated to New Jersey in 1996 in the footsteps of her two sons, Boris, 44, a doctor and Michael, 33, a businessman, who had come to the U.S. several years earlier. Three years ago, Prakhina and her sons set up the Prakhin International Literary Foundation, which provides financial and moral support to authors who educate the public about the Holocaust in the Soviet Union and the mass deportations and killings carried out by the Stalin regime. In addition to giving its annual award to a writer who focuses attention on the crimes of Hitler and Stalin, the foundation is working with the State of New Jersey Commission on Holocaust Education to develop a new curriculum for public schools in the state about what the foundation calls "Stalinist genocide and mass murder."

"The story of the Holocaust inside the Soviet Union is less known than what happened in Poland and other parts of Europe," said Prakhina, noting that the Nazis carried out their first mass killings of Jews not in death camps like Auschwitz and Treblinka as is commonly believed, but at sites of mass shootings inside the Soviet Union like Babi Yar and other places filled with mass graves that have been all but forgotten. "As little as the Holocaust in the Soviet Union is known here, the story of the Stalinist repressions and anti-Semitic acts like the killing of Jewish intellectuals in 1948 and Doctors' Plot in 1952-53 are even less known. My sons and I feel it is our responsibility to bring this story to light, especially for the younger generation, for which that terrible era is ever more distant."

Igor Kotler, a historian of the Soviet period who works closely with the Prakhin Foundation, commented, "Stalin's repression of Jews in the late 1940s and early 1950s is directly linked to the Holocaust in ways that are little understood. The fact that anti-Semitism increased dramatically in the Soviet Union after the war has much to do with the fact that millions of Soviet citizens lived under Nazi occupation and witnessed what was possible to do to the Jews. We now know that Stalin gave a secret order in 1942 stipulating that Jews played too large a role in Soviet life and that needed to change. The order came to fruition six years later with the murder, at Stalin's order, of leading Jewish intellectuals such as playwright Simon Mikhoels and novelist Peretz Markish.

Milshteyn, 80, miraculously survived the Berdichev massacre and a series of Nazi concentration and slave labor camps only to be later exiled to Siberia by the Stalin regime along with millions of other former Soviet prisoners of war for the supposed crime of having been taken prisoner by the Germans. On accepting his award he remarked, "I experienced firsthand both the Nazi and Soviet repressions, and they were very similar in that both were absolutely cruel and merciless. By writing this book, I have fulfilled my promise to my father who predicted that I would be the only member of our extended family to survive the Nazis and urged me to tell the story of what happened to us."

Milshteyn, who changed aspects of the life story he told people after being freed from the gulag in 1949 and hid his true story even from his wife and children out of fear he might be arrested again, remarked, "For 40

years, I lived in terrible fear of exposure. I only breathed easily after I crossed the borders of the Soviet Union to freedom in 1989.”

Milshteyn wrote “A Journey Through Hell,” and Jacob Mankovich, a onetime Soviet journalist, had it translated into English. The two are now searching for a publisher for the book. “I am gratified that I received this award, but it is very important to me to get this book to the widest possible number of readers,” Milshteyn said. “Young people need to learn the full story of what happened under Hitler and Stalin if we are to ensure it never happens again.”

#16

A New Debate on Where Antisemitism Comes From

By J.J. Goldberg

Forward, February 25, 2009

Responding to mounting signs of a resurgence of aggressive antisemitism in Europe and elsewhere, the British government recently hosted an unusual gathering to discuss ways of fighting the threat. Known as the London Conference on Combating Antisemitism, the mid-February gathering brought together 125 members of parliaments from 40 nations for two days of emotional calls to action, along with scholarly analyses of what speakers called “the new antisemitism.”

The conference, staged in Britain’s magisterial Houses of Parliament, succeeded in bringing some needed attention to a genuine crisis. The lawmakers, most of them non-Jews, left London with 35 action proposals in hand, which they vowed to bring back to their respective governments. What most of them apparently didn’t know was that they had walked into the middle of an ongoing debate among Jews over how to define antisemitism and how to explain its causes.

The debate pits those who believe that the latest waves of antisemitic attacks are simply the latest mutation of the ancient virus of anti-Jewish hate, versus those who believe the rise in antisemitism is at least partly a product of frustration and rage over the deadlocked Israeli-Palestinian conflict, spilling over into attacks on Israel’s closest allies and kin.

That there is a crisis appears indisputable. Antisemitic attacks and threats have been rising in numbers and severity around the globe at an alarming rate for nearly a decade, roughly since the outbreak of the Al Qsa Intifada in 2000. In just one year, from 2003 to 2004, attacks in Britain jumped by 42%, according to Britain’s Institute for Jewish Policy Research. Moreover, as the visiting lawmakers were told, antisemitism has entered ordinary discourse throughout the West and has reappeared in state-sanctioned form in places like Iran and Venezuela.

Just before the conference convened, however, antisemitism took a sudden, quantum leap. The month of January saw a virtual explosion worldwide, coinciding with the start of Israel’s three-week war in Gaza.

There were more reported attacks and threats in Britain during the first three weeks of January than in the first six months of 2008. Totals for the rest of Europe are not known, but a catalogue of select incidents in January in 18 countries, compiled by the Anti-Defamation League, shows the severity. Included were nine openly antisemitic assaults on individuals, most of them with guns, knives or bats, and at least 17 fire-bombings or arson attacks on synagogues or kosher stores, plus dozens more cases of synagogue and cemetery vandalism, Nazi-style graffiti, slurs and death threats. “Ess brent — it’s burning,” said the ADL’s national director, Abraham Foxman, echoing a World War II-era Yiddish partisan hymn.

“It’s a pandemic — not an epidemic that breaks out somewhere, but a pandemic that’s everywhere,” Foxman told the Forward shortly after returning from London. “We haven’t seen anything like this since 1945.”

How to respond is as vexing as the problem itself, and the debate over the place of Israel in the crisis is never far from the surface. The prevailing approach was summed up in a pre-conference paper distributed to attendees at the London gathering, written by Canadian lawmaker and former justice minister Irwin Cotler.

“Classical” antisemitism, Cotler wrote, means discrimination or attacks against Jews as members of various societies in which they live. “The new antisemitism,” he explained, “involves the discrimination against the right of the Jewish people to live as an equal member of the family of nations — the denial of, and assault upon, the Jewish people’s right even to live — with Israel as the ‘collective Jew among the nations.’”

The alternative view, that Muslim anger directed at Jews is at least partly a product of the Middle East conflict, was not part of the official conference program. Nonetheless, it greeted conferees on February 16, the day after the conference opened, on the pages of the left-wing British daily *The Guardian*, in the form of an open letter addressed to the conference’s senior British host, Lord Mark Malloch-Brown, minister of state for the foreign office. The letter was written by one of Europe’s most respected researchers of antisemitism, Antony Lerman, who was until very recently the head of the Institute for Jewish Policy Research.

The “obvious policy conclusion,” Lerman wrote, is to “make international efforts to achieve a just Israel-Palestine peace the top priority. This is probably the most constructive policy recommendation the parliamentarians could make.” It was one of several articles Lerman published in recent months on similar themes. Lerman was not invited to the conference, according to a source close to the organizers.

The idea of linking global antisemitism to the vagaries of Israeli-Palestinian relations has been all but taboo in Jewish community discourse for years. It is commonly described at best as a covert way of pressuring Israel, and at worst as a form of blaming the victim. But the notion that Israeli actions have the potential to spark antisemitic attacks, and should perhaps be modulated accordingly, is appearing with increasing frequency in some surprising quarters.

The Jewish People Policy Planning Institute, a Jerusalem think tank created in 2002 by the Jewish Agency for Israel, issues an annual survey of the state of the Jewish community worldwide, which is submitted to Israel’s prime minister each year at a formal meeting. The first report, in 2004, called repeatedly for an institutionalized strategic dialogue between the Israeli government and Diaspora Jewish communities, in order to give Diaspora Jews a chance for input on Israeli decisions that may affect them. Every annual report has repeated the recommendation, including the latest report issued February 22.

The recommendation is explicitly intended to let Israel adjust its defense measures in case of possible backlash against Diaspora Jews. This was spelled out in the institute’s second report, in 2005, which cited the deadly bombing of the AMIA Jewish communal center in Buenos Aires in 1994. According to Israeli intelligence estimates, the bombing was a direct retaliation for Israel’s assassination in 1992 of the head of Hezbollah, Sheikh Abbas Mussawi.

“It seems that the question of whether the Israeli action might trigger an attack on Jewish people targets was not considered,” the report said. “There exists no formal mechanism in the Israeli government to systematically take into account considerations pertaining to the Jewish people.”

The creation of the institute, and the recommendation of strategic dialogue, came directly from the then-chairman of the Jewish Agency, Sallai Meridor, currently Israel’s ambassador in Washington.

“I was in the situation room of the Defense Ministry in 1991, when the decision was taken to go after Mussawi,” Meridor told the *Forward* in a 2005 interview. “I promise you that nobody in the room considered for a moment that it might end in an attack on Jews in Argentina.”

“You have to be smart as well as strong,” said Rep. Gary Ackerman, the New York Democrat who chairs the House Subcommittee on the Middle East and South Asia.

“You’re not going to stop attacks against Jews all at once,” said Ackerman, who did not attend the London conference. “You’re not going to stop people looking for excuses.” Still, he said, by making progress toward peace and showing Palestinians that moderation yields results, “you remove the fertile recruiting ground that they have.”

#17

A Historic Chance to Strengthen Relations

By Matthew Rojansky

Moscow Times, February 26, 2009

In international relations, as in life, opportunity often knocks once, and it tends not to stand around waiting for an answer. A historic opportunity has emerged for U.S.-Russian cooperation based on restored trust and confidence, made possible by positive gestures and rhetoric from both sides. Given the potential benefits of enhanced cooperation on issues ranging from nuclear nonproliferation and disarmament to addressing the global financial crisis, neither Moscow nor Washington can afford to let this opportunity pass unanswered.

The key to cooperation will be for both countries to emphasize shared interests over areas of disagreement, and both will need to take steps to rebuild trust and confidence. A bipartisan policy road map should include the following recommendations:

- Emphasize the importance of the NATO-Russia Council and invite Russia to participate fully in a collective security strategy, beginning with peace and stability for Afghanistan.
- Engage in discussions aimed at securing Russian cooperation to establish effective defenses against missile attacks for Europe while providing Russia with security assurances.
- Encourage Russia to take a leadership role in multilateral negotiations with Iran to stop uranium enrichment.
- Advance the U.S.-Russia dialogue on arms control and nonproliferation and work to extend or replace the Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty, which could be followed by another stage of verified nuclear disarmament.
- Reiterate U.S. support for Russia's World Trade Organization candidacy, appeal to Congress to repeal the Jackson-Vanik trade sanctions and encourage other member states to offer Russia a clear path to membership based on its commitment to the WTO charter.
- Expand the U.S.-Russia dialogue on energy and climate change to include seeking common ground on environmental concerns and new oil and gas pipelines to guarantee reliable energy supplies for the entire North Atlantic region.

This bipartisan road map provides neither a detailed policy prescription nor an exhaustive list of all possible high-level initiatives. What it does offer is a promising beginning.

As new leaders, Presidents Barack Obama and Dmitry Medvedev have an opportunity to re-establish trust and work toward a genuine strategic partnership based on shared interests. This should be a top priority not only for Obama but also for Democrats and Republicans in Congress, whose support is necessary to normalize the U.S.-Russian trade relationship, ratify bilateral security agreements and appropriate funding for cooperative programs.

The issues dividing the United States and Russia are significant, but there is too much at stake to miss this opportunity for reconciliation.

Matthew Rojansky is executive director of the Partnership for a Secure America, a Washington-based nonprofit organization founded to help rebuild a bipartisan center in U.S. foreign policy.

#18

Russian-US relations get warmer?

Russia Today, February 26, 2009

US Congress members have discussed a new line in relations with Russia. Some Representatives think that the countries should get closer.

Wednesday was a busy day in Washington D.C. as the House of Representatives Foreign Affairs Committee discussed improving Russian–American relations with two hearings held on Capitol Hill.

In one room antiballistic missiles were discussed. The gathering ruled that Russia is not the only obstacle to these plans as Lieutenant General O’Reilly mulled over the economic and technological bumps in the road as well.

The next room gathered US lawmakers for an overview of cooperation between Russia and the US. The general tone here was to welcome a brighter future.

Howard Berman, the chairman of the committee, said that the countries’ shared goal should be improving the relations and bolstering cooperation over Iran.

Some congressmen have also proposed dropping the Jackson-Vanik amendment – brought in during the Cold War – which limits trade with Russia.

Not everyone seemed ready for such a scenario, however.

Representative Ileana Ros-Lehtinen, who has never missed an opportunity to talk about Russia – either on gas disputes, supplying arms to Syria and North Korea, or alleged human rights abuses – had something to say this time as well.

“We cannot continue to support such integration, however, if it serves to spread corruption and destabilization in the regions neighboring Russia and lying on its periphery,” she said.

This time, Ros-Lehtinen enlisted the help of former Russian official Andrei Illarionov who was brought in as an expert. Mr. Illarionov made Ros-Lehtinen sound positively moderate with his doomsday scenarios.

“We know that a full retreat or surrender will get not peace, but war. A war with unpredictable and nasty results,” he warned.

Despite his best efforts, Illarionov’s war mongering rhetoric didn’t seem to convince many in the audience.

“We are not going in the right direction with our relationship [with Russia] and there is no reason why now the United States cannot be best friends with the Russian people and the Russian government,” said Representative Dana Rohrabacher.

America is trying to move forward instead of dwelling on mistakes of the past. At the same time, in its annual human rights report, the US Department of State accuses Russia of serious shortcomings in human rights.

The report said that the political power in the country is continuously centralized in the presidency and the prime minister with a legislature molded by unfair elections.

It also blamed Russia for human rights abuses that emerged during the year, especially in the North Caucasus, and decried the deaths of five journalists.

#19

U.S. Chides China, Iran, Central Asian States Over Rights (Part 1) RFE/RL, February 26, 2009

The U.S. State Department has issued its annual report assessing human rights around the world during 2008. Among its most notable passages, the report criticizes Russia for putting civil liberties "under siege" and faults China for a record that "remained poor and worsened in some areas." We summarize the report in a two-part series. Here in Part 1, we look at the State Department's assessment of Asian states.

WASHINGTON -- U.S. officials sharply criticized China's human rights record as they presented the annual State Department Human Rights Report in Washington on February 25.

The report says China's record "remained poor and worsened in some areas" even as the country hosted the summer Olympics -- an event that brought China much favorable international attention.

The report says "the Chinese government increased detention and harassment of dissidents, petitioners, human rights, defenders and defense lawyers." There were also extra judicial killings, torture and coerced confessions of prisoners, the report said.

"We continue to press our concern that...one of the areas in which China's human rights record worsened this year was in the treatment and the social, cultural, and religious restrictions on Tibet and on the Xinjiang Autonomous Region," acting Assistant Secretary for Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor Karen Stewart told journalists at a press conference to introduce the report.

China's state media immediately rejected the report, calling it groundless and irresponsible.

Washington also had harsh words for North Korea.

"North Korea certainly falls in that category...in the general trends of a country where you have a very authoritarian leadership -- and human rights, I have to say, are really, when you look at the whole situation and read the report from North Korea, abysmal in that case," Stewart said.

Middle East

Turning to Iran, the State Department report says Tehran "severely limited citizens' right to change their government peacefully through free and fair elections" and that "security forces were implicated in custodial deaths and committed other acts of politically motivated violence, including torture."

"We will continue to encourage Iran to abide by its international commitments, to respect human rights," Stewart said. "And in this report, we call attention to where we see the problem areas."

Looking at Iraq over the year 2008, the report finds "a climate of violence; misappropriation of official authority by sectarian, criminal, and extremist groups; (and) arbitrary deprivation of life."

It adds: "[I]nsurgent and extremist violence, coupled with weak government performance in upholding the rule of law, resulted in widespread and severe human rights abuses."

In Afghanistan, the report finds "the human rights record remained poor. Human rights problems included extra judicial killings; torture; poor prison conditions; (and) official impunity." It says that "although the government deepened its authority in provincial centers, Taliban or factions operating outside government control exercised authority in some areas."

Central Asia

Moving to Central Asia, the report says in Kazakhstan there were "severe limits on citizens' rights to change their government; military hazing that led to deaths; detainee and prisoner abuse" and lack of an independent judiciary and freedom of assembly and expression.

In Kyrgyzstan, the report says, "there were isolated cases of serious human rights abuses," including torture. There are also restrictions on citizens' right to change their government and pressure on nongovernmental organizations and opposition leaders.

In Tajikistan, the State Department says, "the government's human rights record remained poor, and corruption continued to hamper democratic and social reform." Problems include "restricted right of citizens to

change their government; torture and abuse of detainees and other persons by security forces" and restricted freedom of speech and freedom to worship.

In Turkmenistan, the report finds that "although there were modest improvements, the government continued to commit serious abuses," including severe restrictions on political and civil liberties, torture and mistreatment of detainees, and arbitrary arrest and detention. It said "measured improvements in human rights included registration of the first community-based nongovernmental organization (NGO) in three years."

In Uzbekistan, the report finds continued instances of security forces torturing, beating, and otherwise mistreating detainees under interrogation to obtain confessions or incriminating information.

It adds: "[H]uman rights activists and journalists who criticized the government were subject to harassment, arbitrary arrest, politically motivated prosecution, forced psychiatric treatment, and physical attack."

The report equally faults Tashkent for pressuring other countries to return forcibly Uzbek refugees who were under the protection of the UNHCR.

In summarizing the annual report, Stewart praised those people in repressive systems who press for their own rights and those of their fellow countrymen and women, often at the risk of their own freedom or lives.

Stewart said human rights abuses come when too much power is in too few hands.

"Human rights abuses remain a symptom of deeper dysfunctions within political systems," Stewart said. "The most serious human rights abuses tended to occur in countries where unaccountable rulers wielded unchecked power, or there was government failure or collapse, often exacerbated or caused by internal or external conflict."

The annual report is the first to be issued by the new administration of U.S. President Barack Obama, who took office five weeks ago. It was largely compiled, however, under the previous administration.

#20
Russia's Putin warns against economic protests
By Oleg Shchedrov
Reuters, February 27, 2009

Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin warned opposition critics on Friday not to use the economic crisis as an excuse to challenge his government and told them to abide by the law.

Unrest across Russia over economic upheaval has been muted, with the biggest protests so far taking place in the Far East port of Vladivostok where hundreds were arrested in January demonstrations over car tax.

Speaking at a meeting with leaders of Russia's dominant political party, United Russia, ahead of regional elections this weekend, Putin said that criticism of the Russian government during a crisis was allowed, but only within the laws.

"If opposition actions go outside the law, it means they are not pursuing the goals of improving people's lives, but their own selfish goals and the state has the right to defend itself properly," Putin said at his residence outside Moscow.

Russia has tight controls that restrict opposition groups from holding rallies or marches without official sanction. Applications from groups like chess grandmaster Garry Kasparov's 'Other Russia' movement are frequently rejected.

Putin and other senior Russian officials have criticised "people's revolutions" in ex-Soviet Georgia and Ukraine which propelled pro-Western leaders to power through street protests.

"We won't allow events to happen like in some other countries, to which I will not point a finger now. At the same time, we won't limit lawful forms of protest," Putin said.

ELECTORAL TEST

The ballot will mark the first electoral test for Putin since the global slowdown hit Russia last summer.

Opposition groups this month started a series of protests across Russia and are hoping to expand their limited base of support to those affected by the dramatic slowdown in the Russian economy that has sent unemployment soaring.

After a decade of steady growth, the economy is set to shrink by at least two per cent this year, which economists say will push up the jobless rate, now standing at over 8 percent.

Putin's comments were dismissed by opposition figure Ilya Yashin of the newly-formed Solidarity group who said authorities define any criticism as a threat to national interests.

"This is an indicator of the nervousness of the authorities which understand how huge is the probability of public unrest," said Yashin.

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Russia proposes NATO talks on Georgia to ease ties Agence France Presse, February 26, 2009

Russia is ready to discuss its war in Georgia to help unblock ties with NATO but alliance nations are divided over resuming formal talks and no de-freeze is likely before April, diplomats said Thursday.

The war in early August brought NATO-Russia tensions to a head, especially Moscow's decision to recognise the independence of the breakaway Georgian regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia and its plans to base troops there.

"We are proposing a special session of the NATO-Russia Council on the Caucasus," Ambassador Dmitry Rogozin told AFP, a day after he made the proposal to alliance ambassadors in Brussels.

"The only condition is that this meeting happen in the presence of a representative of the Russian chiefs of staff, so we can explain our view of the events that led to the conflict with Georgia in August," he said.

Rogozin said the meeting could also focus on "our project to install bases in Abkhazia and South Ossetia," the breakaway Georgian regions which Russia has recognised, to widespread western condemnation.

Official high-level talks between NATO and Russia have been frozen since Moscow sent its troops into Georgia last August, but resumed informally in December.

A NATO spokeswoman declined to say whether the alliance, whose foreign ministers will discuss the issue in Brussels on March 5 with new US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton present, would accept the proposal.

"We speak about Georgia at all our meetings. The allies expressed (Wednesday) their concern about the bases that Moscow wants to install" in the breakaway Georgian regions, she said.

According to diplomats, several nations want to resume formal meetings of the so-called NATO-Russia Council, which meets routinely among ambassadors, but also at ministerial and head of state and government level.

France, Germany, Italy, Norway and Spain maintain that the sanction against Russia is counter-productive and have called for a resumption of official ties for months.

Britain came around to that position at the end of last year.

One diplomat said that NATO "must ask what it has to win by isolating itself", when the European Union -- which has 21 members in common with the alliance -- relaunched partnership talks with Moscow in November.

Were NATO to decide next week to unblock ties, Clinton could use that momentum on March 6 in Geneva, where she is set to hold talks with her Russian counterpart Sergei Lavrov.

But several eastern European countries -- notably the Czech Republic -- and Canada, which has a big Georgian community, refuse any early return to normal relations.

In preparing to set up bases in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, they believe, Russia has crossed an important red line.

"Because of the Russian bases, the allies are not going to be able to re-engage and launch the dialogue this time around," another diplomat said.

"They would prefer to wait until the summit," in Strasbourg, northern France and the neighbouring German city of Kehl on April 2-3, he said.

Much will depend, as usual at NATO, on the position of the United States, the biggest and most powerful of the allies.

"It seems that the United States wants to send positive messages to everyone, to Russia as well as Ukraine and Georgia," which are both trying to join NATO, an alliance official said.