

WASHINGTON, D.C. May 22, 2009

TO: NCSJ Leadership and Interested Parties

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



In Brief: NCSJ May Mission to the FSU

Dear Friend:

I am writing to you from Riga, Latvia, where an NCSJ leadership mission is participating in an international conference, co-sponsored by the Euro-Asian Jewish Congress and the Council of Jewish Communities of Latvia, on “Jewish Life in the Post-Soviet Space: Experience, Problems, Achievements.” NCSJ Chairman Richard Stone is chairing a panel on the work of Israeli and non-profit organizations in the region’s Jewish communities.

Our stay in Riga caps the end of a remarkable trip for our group, having traveled first to Moscow and then to Kyiv. In each city, we’ve had the opportunity to meet with government officials and Jewish community leaders.

In both Moscow and Kyiv we met with the U.S. and Israeli ambassadors. In Moscow, we also met with Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, and with several members of the Federation Council, Russia’s upper house of parliament, including Foreign Affairs Committee Chairman Mikhail Margelov and Boris Spiegel, who is also President of the World Congress of Russian Jewry. In Kyiv, we met with members of the Presidential administration and Ministry of Foreign Affairs, as well as with the head of the state security service.

Our discussions during these meeting covered issues ranging from communal property restitution and xenophobia and anti-Semitism to the Iranian nuclear threat and bilateral relations with Israel. When I return, I look forward to updating you with a complete trip report.

Finally, I want to remind you of our upcoming Board of Governors meeting on Tuesday, June 9 from 10:00 a.m. to 1:00 p.m., at our offices in Washington. We will focus on the upcoming summit and current conditions that affect the Jewish communities of the former Soviet Union. [Click here](#) for more information, and to register.

Sincerely,

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

Mark B. Levin
Executive Director



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



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NCSJ WEEKLY NEWS BRIEF
Washington, D.C. May 22, 2009

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

1. *New Website Helps Russian Jews Track Ancestors; Soviet Jewry activist Si Frumkin dies; Kremlin Demands New History Lessons; Israeli pressure halted Russian jet sale to Syria*
Briefs, May 17-20, 2009
2. *Russian Minister of Foreign Affairs Sergey Lavrov Meets with Representatives of NGO 'Advocates on Behalf of Jews in Russia, Ukraine, the Baltic States & Eurasia'*
Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, May 19, 2009
3. *New JCC dedicated in Ukraine*
JTA, May 17, 2009
4. *EU budget chief favorite for Lithuanian president*
By Liudas Dapkus
AP, May 17, 2009
5. *Crisis bad news for Russia's shrinking population*
AFP, May 17, 2009
6. *Behind Moscow's Eurovision extravaganza, a less harmonious Russia*
By Fred Weir
Christian Science Monitor May 18, 2009
7. *Clock ticking as Russia, US kick off nuclear arms talks*
AFP, May 17, 2009
8. *Kazakhstan and Israel: Good friends and reliable partners*
By Galym Orazbakov
Jerusalem Post, May 19, 2009
9. *Russia Sees Gloom Despite Rise in Oil*
By Gregory L. White
Wall Street Journal, May 19, 2009

10. *A Tank That Brings Judaism to Moscow Streets*
By Elizabeth Shockman
Moscow Times, May 20, 2009
11. *Cold War Leftovers*
By Stephen Sestanovich
New York Times, May 20, 2009
12. *U.S. and Russia Begin Arms Talks With a December Deadline*
By Ellen Barry
New York Times, May 20, 2009
13. *Gorbachev laments Russian rollback on democracy*
By Vladimir Isachenkov
AP, May 21, 2009
14. *Kremlin upbeat on EU summit, warns on WTO, Ukraine*
By Oleg Shchedrov
Reuters, May 21, 2009
15. *EU Can Offer Moscow Lots of Carrots*
By Fraser Cameron
Moscow Times, May 21, 2009
16. *EU: Use Russia Summit to Build Reform Momentum*
Human Rights Watch, May 21, 2009
17. *A 'Reset' Is Not Enough*
By E. Wayne Merry
New York Times, May 23, 2009
18. *Russian history 2.0: Kremlin wants to 'correct' the record.*
By Fred Weir
Christian Science Monitor, May 21, 2009
19. *Opposition Groups Are Called Corrupt*
By Natalya Krainova
Moscow Times, May 22, 2009
20. *Russian recession roars on as 200,000 lost jobs*
By Toni Vorobyova
May 22, 2009, Reuters
21. *EU should lend Ukraine money for gas payments: Medvedev*
AFP, May 22, 2009

#1a

New Website Helps Russian Jews Track Ancestors Lubavitch.com, May 17, 2009

A new Russian language website – www.Jekl.ru – is helping Jewish families discover their ancestors and visit their gravesites in St. Petersburg's Preobrazhenskiy Jewish Cemetery.

The extensive site, developed by the Jewish Community of St. Petersburg and supported by local businessman Mikhail Khidekel features a searchable archive and photographs of headstones and gravesite.

Project coordinator Moishe Treskunov said that “For years, people from all over have been calling or visiting the community for help navigating the local registry and finding grave sites.”

“They are interested in their family history or want to honor their ancestors by visiting their graves.”

Before the website, says Treskunov, there was no way of finding the exact grave even if someone knew their relative was buried somewhere in the Preobrazhenskiy Cemetery. “The site lets you search and verify that your relatives are there, and locate the burial site.”

Soon to be added services include gravesite restoration and regular caretaking.

“It puts peoples’ consciences at ease knowing that their relative’s grave is cared for and the gravestones restored,” said Treskunov. “Our staff will regularly send photos of the grave via e-mail so that they can see its condition with their own eyes.”

The Jewish community of Saint Petersburg is a member of the Federation of Jewish Communities of Russia.

#1b

Soviet Jewry activist Si Frumkin dies JTA, May 19, 2009

LOS ANGELES -- Leading Soviet Jewry and human rights activist Si Frumkin has died.

Frumkin, who founded the Southern California Council for Soviet Jews in 1968 and helped make it a mainstream American cause, died Friday after battling cancer. He was 78.

At a packed funeral service Monday, Los Angeles County Supervisor Zev Yaroslavsky eulogized his close friend and fellow activist as “a one-man rapid response force for Jews in trouble.”

Citing one of many examples of Frumkin’s ingenuity, Yaroslavsky recalled that when a Soviet freighter arrived in the port of Los Angeles, the two buddies rented a motorboat and headed out to the ship. Their plan was to paint “Let the Jews Go” on the side of the ship, but when they cut their boat’s engine, it kept drifting away. Frumkin solved the problem by attaching a toiler plunger to the ship’s side and keeping hold of the handle.

Born Simas Frumkinas in Kovno (now Kaunas), Lithuania, Frumkin was 11 when he was consigned to the Kovno ghetto and 14 when he was liberated from the Dachau concentration camp.

He arrived in New York in 1949, earned a college degree, and after moving to Los Angeles became the owner of a successful downtown textile company.

When news of the plight of Jews trapped in the Soviet Union trickled out in 1968, Frumkin turned to full-time advocacy for their cause and founded the Southern California Council for Soviet Jews. In the following decade he was instrumental in moving the issue from a fringe movement to a mainstream American cause.

With the Soviet Jewry battle won, Frumkin turned to integrating the newly arrived immigrants into American life and took up the causes of Ethiopian Jewry, insurance payment for impoverished Holocaust survivors, and the fight against neo-Nazis in Skokie, Ill., and elsewhere.

#1c

Russia: Kremlin Demands New History Lessons Reuters, May 20, 2009

The Kremlin is starting an official drive to try to reverse what it sees as an anti-Russian view of 20th-century history. President Dmitri A. Medvedev issued a decree on Tuesday ordering “the creation of a presidential commission to

counter attempts to harm Russian interests by falsifying history.” Russia says its former allies have forgotten the sacrifices made by the Soviet Union during World War II. But critics see the effort as an attempt to whitewash Russia’s imperial past and the crimes committed under Stalin. Oleg Orlov, a human rights advocate in Moscow, said the commission was an attempt “to halt any objective view of what really happened in Russia’s past.”

#1d

Report: Israeli pressure halted Russian jet sale to Syria JTA, May 20, 2009

JERUSALEM -- Russia halted plans to sell fighter jets to Syria because of pressure from Israel, a Russian newspaper reported.

The Kommersant daily, a Russian business newspaper, reported Wednesday that the contract to sell MiG-31 fighter jets had been cancelled due to pressure from Israel, according to Reuters. The report quoted an unnamed person close to Russia’s state arms exporter.

Another source told Kommersant that the contract had been cancelled because Syria could not pay for the jets.

#2

Russian Minister of Foreign Affairs Sergey Lavrov Meets with Representatives of NGO ‘Advocates on Behalf of Jews in Russia, Ukraine, the Baltic States & Eurasia’ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, May 19, 2009

Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation Sergey Lavrov received on May 19 a delegation of the American NGO ‘Advocates on Behalf of Jews in Russia, Ukraine, the Baltic States & Eurasia’ (former National Conference on Soviet Jewry).

In the course of the meeting the main attention was paid to examining topical themes of the agenda of Russian-American relations. An exchange of views also took place on a number of international problems, including the situation in the Middle East, the resolution of the Iranian nuclear problem and the issues of combating manifestations of religious and ethnic intolerance, anti-Semitism and xenophobia as one of the conditions for overcoming conflicts in the contemporary world.

The meeting participants emphasized the importance of cooperation between the public circles of Russia and the United States as an integral part of efforts for the further strengthening of mutual understanding and for the construction of long-term equal relations between the two countries.

#3

New JCC dedicated in Ukraine JTA, May 17, 2009

KIEV, Ukraine -- A new Jewish community center was dedicated in a central Ukrainian industrial city.

The new JCC of Kryvoy Rog dedicated May 12 includes a children’s center and facilities for youth activities. The Britain-based World Jewish Relief donated funding for the JCC.

The Beit Graham center offers facilities for welfare support, Jewish education and community life, including a computer center, concert hall and space for communal festival celebrations.

In 2005, World Jewish Relief adopted Kryvoy Rog -- a major steel town in central Ukraine -- as an “Our Town” project, committing to fully support the Jewish community there. World Jewish Relief purchased the JCC building, which until recently was a dilapidated site that was unfit for use.

Four years later, following dedicated fund-raising efforts by World Jewish Relief and its supporters to raise the remaining funds needed, the JCC can now act as a focal point for a Jewish community in Kryvoy Rog of about 12,000. The city's population is approximately 700,000.

"The building is a gift to you from the Jews of England through World Jewish Relief," said Richard Graham, one of World Jewish Relief's major donors. "However, this center has only come to fruition because of the remarkable achievements of the Kryvoy Rog Jewish community itself in creating a vibrant Jewish life out of the ashes of the Holocaust and oppression of communism."

The JCC's children's wing is named in memory of Tony Brooks, a staunch World Jewish Relief volunteer who died in 2006. His wife, Bonnie, plus many members of her extended family, joined the 40-strong group from the United Kingdom to pay tribute to Tony Brooks and open the wing.

Many guests, including local officials and residents, and Jewish leaders from abroad, World Jewish Relief staff, volunteers and donors attended the official opening and dedication.

#4

EU budget chief favorite for Lithuanian president

By Liudas Dapkus

AP, May 17, 2009

VILNIUS, Lithuania — Lithuanians voted for a new president Sunday, with the European Union's budget chief strongly favored to become the first female head of state in the crisis-stricken Baltic country.

Lithuania — along with neighbors Estonia and Latvia — ranks among Europe's most depressed economies in the global downturn, and many voters hope EU Budget Commissioner and karate black-belt Dalia Grybauskaite can help the country rebound.

Grybauskaite, 53, decided to run for president after public anger flared in January over Lithuania's economic collapse. A rock-throwing mob attacked Parliament in the worst street violence Lithuania had seen since it regained independence from the Soviet Union in 1991.

"I voted for myself today and I hope there will be no need for a run-off," Grybauskaite said after casting her ballot in Vilnius. To avoid a second round on June 7, Grybauskaite needs to win more than 50 percent of the votes, and at least half of the nation's 2.6 million voters must turn out.

An April 28 survey by the Baltijos Tyrimai pollster gave Grybauskaite 53 percent support. Her closest rival, Social Democrat lawmaker Algirdas Butkevicius, got 9 percent in the poll of 1,002 people. The margin of error was 2.5 percent.

Butkevicius told supporters this week he would seek to disband the current center-right government and nominate a new coalition that would "stimulate the economy, save jobs and guarantee better social support."

Five other candidates are running in the first round. Campaigning has focused on Lithuania's economic problems, with many left-wing candidates criticizing the government for not doing enough to stem the crisis.

Lithuania has long been considered more stable than its Baltic neighbors, but EU statistics this week showed the economy plummeted nearly 10 percent in the first quarter of 2009, compared to the previous three months. Unemployment in March was 15.5 percent, a dramatic jump from 4.3 percent a year earlier.

Even though economic policies are set by the government, Grybauskaite's budgetary experience is seen as a big plus.

"Grybauskaite is the only reasonable choice for Lithuania at these difficult times," said Vincenta Dapkiene, a retired journalist in Vilnius. "She has been managing the budget of the entire EU. She would be a strong and bright leader of the nation."

Grybauskaite has spent five years on the European Commission, the EU's executive branch. If she wins the election, she will leave that post.

The winner replaces President Valdas Adamkus, who is stepping down after serving a second five-year term. Adamkus' predecessor, Rolandas Paksas, was ousted for violating the constitution and abuse of office, making him the first European head of state to be impeached.

#5 Crisis bad news for Russia's shrinking population AFP, May 17, 2009

MOSCOW -- In the face of financial trouble, it's a bad time for having babies. And babies are what Russia badly wants.

State-sponsored posters call for Russians to do their duty and have big families. One lining the Moscow metro shows a woman juggling three stout babies, another preaches "love for your nation, starts with the family."

Only in January, President Dmitry Medvedev touted the success of the government's drive to boost the population, saying births were up over eight percent in 2007 and six percent in 2008 -- the highest birth rates in 25 years.

But the demographic outlook is bleak. According to a recent UN report entitled "Russia Facing Demographic Challenges," the country's population has shrunk by 12 million people in the last 16 years.

And the population of the world's largest country could further dwindle from 142 million in 2008 to 116 million by 2050, the report predicted.

Now the financial crisis has added to Russia's pernicious mix of ill-health and low birth rates, heralding an early reversal of the cheerier birth rates of the last three years, statisticians and sociologists said.

Russia's state statistics agency Rosstat recorded 270,800 births in January and February, down by 3,700 from last year.

Rosstat head Vladimir Sokolin last month said the economically active population was shrinking by one million people per year and the country could face labour shortages as it emerges from the global financial crisis.

"At this rate, the crisis could reduce to nothing all the government's efforts of the last years to stimulate births," said Valentina Petrenko, the head of Russian upper house's committee for social policy and health.

"The risk of losing employment is in a big way linked to pregnancy and caring for young children. Expectant mothers and women, as a rule, are the first to be laid off," she said.

Experts say that in the face of financial uncertainty more women plan against pregnancy and are opting for abortions.

Only five percent of women surveyed by state pollster VtsIOM as the first economic stress was felt in November said they planned pregnancies in the next two years.

'More women want to have abortions'

Outside a city-run maternity hospital in northern Moscow, two women stood apart from the knots of chatty families waiting in the spring sun with flowers and bottles of sparkling wine to celebrate a new addition to the family.

The two sat heads together, smoking and looking almost under dressed in jeans and sneakers.

Irina, who preferred not to give her last name and nervously grasped her friend's hand, had come for the free abortion services offered at such clinics.

"I am still paying down my apartment each month, I can't imagine being without a job much less anything else right now," she confided, adding she was not living with her boyfriend.

"A friend of mine lost her job, but she said it would give her time to raise her child, but I don't know.... I think it's a bit crazy," she said.

Andrei Akopyan, the head doctor at one of the Moscow's reproduction and family planning clinics, predicted the number of abortions would increase by 10 to 12 percent due to the economic instability.

"It may be some families planned to have children, but they then found themselves forced to turn back on that decision," he said.

"There are, of course, already more women who want to have abortions," Khazem Alsoabi, a doctor at one private clinic, MedClinica, said. "The reasons I hear are financial, there's no question of that."

Searches for "abortion" on the Russian Internet portal Yandex have more than doubled since the onset of the financial crisis. The number of people who keyed in the search jumped from 94,526 in October to 151,471 in November.

According to the United Nations, Russia has the highest rate of abortions in the world, in a hold over from Soviet times when the operation replaced traditional forms of contraception.

Last year was the first since the fall of the Soviet Union when the number of births narrowly outstripped the number of abortions in the country.

"There is even a new social category of women who say they are having abortions because they can't pay back their loans," said Svetlana Rudneva, who heads the Family and Childhood fund, offering counseling for unplanned pregnancies.

She said the charity fund had seen a hike in calls to its crisis line and more inquiries from women seeking late-term abortions. The operation is legal up to the 12th week in Russia.

Women are increasingly citing economic insecurity as the reason why their families might pressure them to have an abortion, said Irina, a psychologist at another pregnancy hotline.

"It's one of many reasons cited to justify the abortion. But today, material difficulties is the main reason," she said.

Migration to Russia could help compensate for the country's drastic population decline, said Anatoly Vishnevsky, head of the Institute of Demography at the Higher School of Economics.

But, for want of work, migrant workers are leaving Russia in droves. The number of migrants in the country fell by 27 percent in the first quarter of this year, according to the federal migration service.

"The situation was bad already. We've always been seen as a country in a demographic crisis. The population is falling and will keep falling," Vishnevsky said.

"Of course, the current crisis will have an effect and that effect can't possibly be good."

But the real demographic crisis for Russia, he and other sociologists say, will hit in about two years.

The reproductive-age population then will consist of those born in the chaotic post-Soviet decade of the 1990s, when the number of births in the country fell by 25 percent.

#6

Behind Moscow's Eurovision extravaganza, a less harmonious Russia

The same day it hosted the finals of the 42-nation singing contest, police quashed a gay rights parade.

By Fred Weir

Christian Science Monitor May 18, 2009

MOSCOW – Two very different Russias, the paradoxical outcome of nearly 10 years of relative prosperity dubbed “the Putin era,” were on full display in the streets of Moscow this weekend.

One Russia, keen to excel in all forms of international competition, opened its collective heart to participants of the 42-nation Eurovision contest, which climaxed Saturday night with a boisterous, standing-room-only extravagant finale in the 80,000-seat Moscow Olympisky Stadium.

The contest, won by the Belarussian-born Norwegian singer Alexander Rybak, reportedly garnered a global TV audience of 100 million, making it one of the most watched spectacles on the planet.

In Russia, it seems that nearly everyone watched the extended television coverage that went on for much of the night, including interviews with winners and losers among the 25 final acts.

In one case, many members of a studio audience – including ultranationalist Vladimir Zhirinovskiy – burst into tears of appreciation as two Armenian sisters, Inga and Anush Arshakyan (who came in 10th), offered their deep-throated impromptu rendition of a famous old Russian folk song.

“It was just beautiful. It feels like Moscow has become a regular European capital now,” says Tanya Marchenko, a Moscow music student. “It was a really civilized event, everyone communicated through music and got along together very well.”

Well, not quite.

Though local media barely mentioned it, quite a different Russia massed over 1,000 riot police in the city's central Pushkin Square on the same day to thwart a planned rally by Russian gay rights activists and a handful of their foreign supporters.

When protesters switched locations, and tried to show up on the Sparrow Hills – in front of the hulking main campus of Moscow State University – they found scores of plainclothes cops waiting for them. About 30 activists, including Russian gay rights leader Nikolai Alexeyev and British supporter Peter Tatchell, were efficiently seized, bundled into waiting vans, and driven away.

It all happened so fast that even some passersby on the Sparrow Hills, a favorite spot for weekend promenades, said they didn't notice a thing.

The rally organizers, pointing to the extensive gay influence on popular culture, had hoped that Eurovision participants would speak up for gay rights in Russia. In the event, none of the contestants did so.

Homosexuality was decriminalized in Russia in 1993, but gay activists say social acceptance still eludes them. For several years running, gay groups have been unable to obtain a permit to hold any sort of public assembly in Moscow.

Moscow Mayor Yury Luzhkov has described gay parades as the equivalent of “weapons of mass destruction” and vowed never to allow them to take place inside the city limits.

“The Russia you see on TV is for outside consumption,” says Yevgeniya Albats, deputy editor of New Times, a critical Moscow newsweekly. “That Russia is very friendly and open to outside cultures. That Russia is happy to pour \$42 million into staging the Eurovision contest” and bask in the glow of popular festivity that it generates, she says.

“But the other Russia, for domestic consumption, is a rather dark and intolerant place, where it’s up to the authorities to decide who can march in public,” she adds.

Ms. Albats points out that Russian nationalists and communists are permitted to hold rallies in central Moscow – an antigay meeting near Pushkin Square was left undisturbed by police on Saturday – but “people with a different sexual orientation are treated as enemies.

“There are two Russias, and this is the problem of my country,” she says.

#7

Clock ticking as Russia, US kick off nuclear arms talks

AFP, May 17, 2009

MOSCOW -- Russia and the United States open fresh nuclear disarmament negotiations this week under pressure to strike a deal by year's end that experts say will have far-reaching consequences for world security.

The talks mark the resumption, after a generation of drift, of a process begun in 1969 at the height of the Cold War and are a central element of US President Barack Obama's stated desire to "reset" frayed ties with Russia.

The initial two-day negotiating session was due to start Tuesday. Heads of the US and Russian delegations held a technical meeting in Rome last month, but the Moscow talks marked the formal start of the process, officials said.

Disagreements between the two countries on the size, nature and purpose of their nuclear arsenals and strategic weapons systems abound, but both have indicated recently that the political will to overcome them now exists.

"There are good chances for bringing our positions closer and for working out agreements," Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov said last week after meeting US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton in Washington.

Pressure on negotiators was heightened after the White House announced Obama will travel to Moscow on July 6 for a summit meeting with his Russian counterpart Dmitry Medvedev on reducing nuclear weapons arsenals and other security challenges.

The meeting will allow the United States and the Russian Federation an opportunity "to deepen engagement on reducing nuclear weapons, cooperating on non-proliferation, exploring ways to cooperate on missile defense, addressing mutual threats and security challenges," the White House said in a statement.

The main agreement governing US and Russian strategic nuclear weapons, the Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START), expires on December 5 and there has so far been little specific discussion on what the two sides should do next.

Areas of discord include the limits on nuclear warhead numbers, whether the treaty should cover delivery systems like bombers and missiles, verification procedures and other issues of information sharing and confidence-building.

But despite the technical complexity and tight schedule of the negotiations, both countries have deep-seated national interests in ensuring the talks happen and conclude with results both can hold up to the world as meaningful progress.

The format of the talks gives Russia strategic "parity" with the United States, a matter diplomats say is of huge importance to Moscow as it seeks to recover global prestige enjoyed prior to the 1991 collapse of the Soviet Union.

And a return to direct engagement in substance with Moscow on a bilateral matter of international importance helps dispel perceptions that Washington acts unilaterally and will smooth cooperation with Russia on other issues.

That the United States has a need to enter disarmament talks with Russia for reasons that go beyond just limiting nuclear weapons was acknowledged in a report published earlier this month by a high-level Washington policy group.

"The moment appears ripe for a renewal of arms control with Russia," the Congressional Commission on the Strategic Posture of the United States, headed by former defense secretary William Perry, said.

"In support of its arms control interests and interest in strategic stability more generally, the United States should pursue a much broader and more ambitious set of strategic dialogues" with Russia and others, it said.

For Vladimir Dvorkin, a retired general involved on the Soviet side in the landmark Strategic Arms Limitation Talks (SALT) of the 1970s and the START talks of the 1980s, the new US-Russia negotiations are of major significance.

"It is not just about the numbers of weapons," Dvorkin told AFP. "The process itself is important, because the idea of total nuclear disarmament is out there now.

"The process is long -- it will take decades. But it is necessary, because in the final analysis the liquidation of all nuclear weapons is a prerequisite for a new global security arrangement that is not based on the threat of force," he said.

The US delegation to the negotiations is headed by Assistant Secretary of State Rose Gottemoeller while the Russian delegation is headed by Anatoly Antonov, head of the foreign ministry department for security and disarmament.

#8

Kazakhstan and Israel: Good friends and reliable partners

By Galym Orazbakov

Jerusalem Post, May 19, 2009

The occasion of the 17th anniversary since the establishment of diplomatic relations between our countries is an appropriate time to note that Israel was one of the first states to recognize the independent Republic of Kazakhstan - in December of 1991.

A few months later, in April of 1992, diplomatic relations were established. Since then Kazakhstan-Israel relations have been strong, boosting progress in political, trade and economic, scientific, humanitarian and military-technical fields.

Relations between our two peoples have historical roots. By 1870 there was a Jewish community in the city of Almaty (Verniy), and in 1884 the first synagogue opened. From 1941-45 Jews from Kazakhstan bravely battled on the Great Patriotic War fronts against the Third Reich. In the period of 1948-53, when the Stalin regime fought "cosmopolitans," many Jewish intellectuals were banished to Kazakhstan. During the '50s, the Jewish population of Kazakhstan grew through the arrival of Jews from the rest of the Soviet Union as part of the Komsomol groups sent to develop virgin lands and as well as industry, science and culture.

In 1990 Jewish organizations and cultural centers were established in Kazakhstan, and the newspaper Shalom began publication. In 2004 in Astana, the synagogue of Beit Rahel-Habad Lubavitch, the largest in Central Asia, was opened. It should be pointed out that this was the first synagogue constructed in Central Asia in the modern period.

Visits on different levels between our countries have been frequent. President Nursultan Nazarbayev has twice been to Israel. Representatives of political and business circles in Kazakhstan have repeatedly come here.

Pilgrims from Kazakhstan, both Muslims and Christians, regularly come to the Holy Land. On Easter alone, Israel was visited by 85 people from all over Kazakhstan.

THE KAZAKHSTAN MODEL of interethnic and interconfessional cooperation is of particular interest here in Israel. We, together with Jewish emigrants from Kazakhstan and Central Asia, last year held round tables and meetings that included members of parliaments of both countries.

Since independence, Kazakhstan has experienced massive changes. A new political system was created; economic, legal, judicial and other sectors underwent reform. All this has led independent Kazakhstan to become one of the most dynamic developing countries in the world (over the last nine years, including the last difficult crisis year, annual GDP growth in Kazakhstan was more than 9.3 percent).

Both our countries support the efforts of the international community to strengthen regional safety and dialogue between civilizations. Both countries participate in the work of the Conference on Interaction and Confidence-Building Measures in Asia (CICA). The chief rabbis of Israel - Yona Metzger and Shlomo Amar - will take part the third Congress of Leaders of World and Traditional Religions in Astana. Rabbi Metzger took part in the two previous forums and is a frequent visitor in Kazakhstan. The congress itself is under the aegis of the United Nations.

It's worthwhile noting that during the two last congresses, religious leaders of Judaism, Islam, Christianity, Buddhism and other faiths gathered around the same round table.

Kazakhstan has become an international platform for dialogue, where leaders who have different views can and do meet. The Kazakhstan initiatives on a dialogue establishment are supported by the majority of the countries in Asia. President Nazarbayev's offer made on October 20, 1992 at the UN General Assembly to convene the CICA was accepted - remarkable in that the burden of responsibility for creation of structures of safety in Asia was taken up by such a young country.

In this context, Kazakhstan's foreign policy is aimed at the development of widespread cooperation with the countries of Europe, Asia, America and the Muslim states.

THROUGHOUT THE last 17 years, Kazakhstan and Israel have maintained a positive dynamic. Trade turnover between the two in 2008 was almost \$2.5 billion, more than double in comparison with the previous year.

The potential of our country for large Israeli companies is great, particularly in the areas of road building, extraction of mineral resources and alternative power. The largest Israeli telecommunication companies during the last few years have partnered with Kazakh information technology companies. Considerable potential is seen for expanded cooperation in hi-tech, agriculture, finance, medicine and medical technologies.

From the pages of this newspaper I would like to invite businessmen of Israel to take part in those spheres in which Israel has advanced experience.

We view Israel as an important partner in the Middle East. Most important in realizing the immense potential that increased cooperation can bring is political will and desire on both sides. Kazakhstan-Israel relations have broad and bright prospects.

The writer is the ambassador of Kazakhstan in Israel.

#9

Russia Sees Gloom Despite Rise in Oil

By Gregory L. White

Wall Street Journal, May 19, 2009

MOSCOW -- Gloomy news about Russia's economy -- figures on Monday showed April industrial production plunged 17% year-on-year -- has been mixed with some rare positives in recent weeks. Oil prices are surging, the ruble is up and Russian stocks have taken off.

But even the good news has economists worried. "Oil prices now are as awful as they could be -- not low enough to force real reform and not high enough to allow free spending like before," says Vladimir Mau, a prominent economist who heads an advisory panel to a government team dealing with the financial crisis.

Pressure is high on the government to keep spending to support the flagging economy, while many economists and fiscal hawks inside the regime warn that the Kremlin needs to tighten its belt in order to cut the deficit and bring down surging inflation.

An indication of which approach is prevailing will come by the end of this month when President Dmitry Medvedev delivers his annual budget message, officially starting preparations of a draft to be ready by midsummer. Prime Minister Vladimir Putin and other officials have pledged no cuts in social spending.

As the Kremlin struggles to turn around the shrinking economy, cope with surging unemployment and deal with a rising wave of bad-debt problems among its banks, the recent upturns in oil prices and the country's markets are providing little relief.

Higher oil prices -- now around \$56 a barrel, up from less than \$40 earlier this year -- don't feed directly into the economy, analysts say, as most of the increase is absorbed by taxes. In Russia, taxes fluctuate with the oil price, effectively meaning revenue above around \$30 a barrel goes to taxes.

Analysts credit the ruble's recent strength mainly to high interest rates -- which business groups complain are starving companies of credit. The stock-market gains, meanwhile, are being driven by speculative inflows that could reverse if oil prices slide.

Last fall, top Russian officials said the global crisis would largely pass the country by, counting on a "rainy day" fund saved from oil revenue -- valued at \$143 billion at its peak -- and underestimating dependence on exports of oil and metals and flows of cheap foreign credit.

But Russia's economy has been hammered, contracting an estimated 9.5% in the first quarter. Official forecasts now say the recession could continue into next year. Unemployment has surged, reaching 10% in March. Unlike in Europe and the U.S., where price growth has all but stopped, inflation in Russia remains in the double digits, partly as a result of years of heavy government spending.

With public discontent growing, the Kremlin put in place a massive stimulus package. To cover its first budget deficit in nearly a decade, it plans to spend a large part of the rainy-day fund.

Finance Minister Alexei Kudrin -- a prominent advocate of tight budgets -- last month said the fund is likely to run out next year and the deficit will need to be reduced in order not to stoke inflation.

He said the government needs to get used to lower revenue and more modest annual-spending increases because it will be decades before Russia again sees the combination -- of high commodity prices and cheap credit that fueled growth in recent years.

According to government advisers, other officials dismiss those warnings, calling for continued increases in spending to stimulate the economy, as well as tax cuts for business to offset planned increases in payroll levies.

So far, Mr. Kudrin seems to have strong support from his longtime ally, Mr. Putin, who has often come down on the finance minister's side in policy debates. But even Mr. Putin seemed dismissive when asked last month about Mr. Kudrin's comments on the international economic environment. "Alexei Leonidovich [Kudrin] is stressed now," Mr. Putin said.

Critics warn loosening the purse strings would fuel inflation, drive up interest rates and stifle efforts to develop new businesses to wean the economy from its dependence on oil.

Oil prices are complicating the picture. The government cut its forecast for crude prices to \$41 a barrel early this year. But with prices now nearly \$60, that is looking conservative.

"When oil was \$40, it was easier for Kudrin to make his argument" about the need for spending cuts, says Yevgeny Gavrilenkov, economist at Troika Dialog, a Moscow investment house.

So far, the Kremlin's stimulus package, which amounts to 1.6 trillion rubles (\$50 billion) in this year's budget, hasn't had much impact, economists say.

Mr. Medvedev last week said that a 300 billion ruble program of state loan guarantees to stimulate lending to industry this year had been a failure. Industry officials say little of the stimulus has actually made it to industry, outside of the oil sector, one of the first to win tax breaks as the crisis took hold.

#10

A Tank That Brings Judaism to Moscow Streets

By Elizabeth Shockman

Moscow Times, May 20, 2009

As an unusual combination of symbols -- a camping trailer painted in synagogue-stone browns with a giant menorah on its side -- the Mitzvah Tank was not created to blend into Moscow's urban environment. In fact, with a back seat full of rabbis, this synagogue on wheels is strategically designed to change the way Muscovites think about Judaism and spur on its revival in Russia.

Part of the worldwide Chabad-Lubavitch Jewish education and progress movement, the Mitzvah Tank project was originally launched in New York in 1974. More than 30 years later, as a part of the Moscow Jewish Community Center's educational outreach program to Russian Jews, a new Mitzvah Mobile was unleashed on the streets of Moscow during Hanukkah 2007. Currently, the Mitzvah Tank can be seen in Moscow almost every day except on Shabbat or Jewish holidays.

The Mitzvah Tank's education and outreach strategy is simple: get Jews to perform a mitzvah -- a commandment or good deed. With full beards and black hats, the Mitzvah Tank's crew can be seen approaching Muscovites and asking, "Are you Jewish?" If the answer is yes, they are invited to step inside the redecorated camping trailer.

Inside the mobile synagogue, Mitzvah Tank's crew offers guest a chance to perform one of many mitzvahs. They might find themselves trying on a prayer shawl or rolling up their sleeves and tying a tefillin, a small box containing sections of the Torah scroll, around their arm or forehead. Tea and kosher snacks are served, Jewish literature in Russian is for sale, 30-minute Hebrew courses are taught and information about different Jewish ceremonies and educational programs is offered.

In a country with a history of anti-Semitism, one would expect many negative responses to a crew of rabbis handing out tefillin, kosher food and Hebrew lessons. But that has not been the experience so far.

Daniel Yakovlev, however, who provides informational support for the social and charitable programs of the Federation of Jewish Communities of the CIS (FEOR) and who has been along on several Mitzvah Tank outings, was surprised and inspired by Muscovites' reactions to the new project.

"I've seen the work of Mitzvah Tank, and I was pleasantly surprised at the reaction of complete strangers: people stepping into the automobile, smiling and joking," Yakovlev said. "I didn't expect such a response. It's a big city, everyone has a lot of problems, but ... they lost their inhibition. ... In general, I think that people are naturally good. You just need to let them feel that they are needed by others, by their city, their country or their world."

The Mitzvah Tank project's success is one of many for FEOR, an organization dedicated to the revival of Judaism in Russia. Yakovlev has noticed a growing trend of Jewish pride in Russia. "Even some 10 years ago, it was hard to find anyone who would want to visit a synagogue on Shabbat -- the Saturday holiday -- not to mention wanting to send your children to a Jewish school. Now, it has perhaps even become fashionable -- people just don't hide their

Jewishness. In fact, they're not shy about their Jewishness -- they're proud that they're Jewish, proud of their faith, their culture, the spirituality of Judaism."

Rabbi Simon Jacobson, a recent visitor to Moscow, was similarly encouraged at the revival of Judaism in Russia's capitol. He wrote on FEOR's web site: "To see the renaissance of Jewish life in Moscow ... is quite overwhelming. ... Yesterday, Moscow all but annihilated Jewish life and morale. Today, Jewish life is thriving here."

Encouraged by their current success, FEOR hopes to set up similar Mitzvah Tank projects in other Russian cities.

#11
Cold War Leftovers
By Stephen Sestanovich
New York Times, May 20, 2009

Washington -- No new administration is done with its foreign-policy housecleaning until it confronts that cold war fossil, the Jackson-Vanik amendment. First enacted in 1974, it made normal trade relations with the Soviet Union contingent on free emigration. Russia has now allowed such freedom for years, and a law that once embodied the importance of human rights in East-West relations remains in force merely to provide Congress with leverage in trade negotiations.

By discarding this outdated, meaningless policy, President Obama can help define a much-needed new strategy toward Russia. But getting rid of Jackson-Vanik has proved difficult. Bill Clinton, in 1994, affirmed that Moscow was in full compliance with the amendment and yet never managed to free Russia from its provisions permanently. George W. Bush also tried and failed.

Like his predecessors, the president will find his efforts stymied by Congress. Russia is in the last phase of negotiations to join the World Trade Organization — a process that has already dragged on for 16 years. By keeping Jackson-Vanik on the books until the process is complete, Congress expects to be able to demand more favorable treatment for American goods in the Russian market. Lawmakers who invoke this amendment nowadays aren't thinking about human rights, but about DVD piracy and chicken exports.

The Bush administration saw what it was up against when Russia tightened meat and poultry import quotas for the United States in 2003 — and provoked a Congressional rebellion in response. Thirty-eight states, with their 76 senators, had a stake in these sales. The message to Mr. Bush was that Jackson-Vanik had to stay on the books until Russia's W.T.O. membership, and all the petty haggling associated with it, was finally wrapped up.

If President Obama wants members of Congress to act sooner — and he should — he will need to make a better case than his predecessors.

Economic reasons are the least likely to carry the day. Although American companies may complain about the obstacles they face doing business in Russia, trade is booming. American exports to Russia have tripled since 2004, and our own imports from Russia have more than doubled. Russia remains the world's single largest importer of American poultry, and in 2008 its pork imports from the United States were up 94 percent from the year before. Russian-American trade relations are not exactly "normal" with Jackson-Vanik on the books, but the economic cost is actually zero.

A political rationale might carry slightly more weight on Capitol Hill. Despite its negligible impact on trade, Russians still consider the law a bone in their throat. As Boris Yeltsin once joked, "Every single kid in Russia knows who these people are, Jackson and this guy Vanik," referring to Senator Henry Jackson and Representative Charles Vanik, the amendment's co-sponsors. Repealing this law would re-affirm (as presidents never tire of doing) that the

cold war really is over. Doing so might also shift attention to Russian foreign-policy attitudes, which remain more obsessively focused on the past than do ours.

Yet the best reason for scrapping Jackson-Vanik is to fashion a more up-to-date way of addressing the concerns that gave rise to it in the first place. In the years since George W. Bush's efforts to deal with the amendment, American confidence that Russia is moving in a democratic direction has dropped sharply. Our confidence that we have any leverage over the process, or that we know how to use it, has also declined. Leaving this symbol of long-gone issues on the books keeps us from thinking clearly about today's concerns.

Russian human-rights advocates and their Western supporters want to understand how, once Jackson-Vanik is put to rest, the United States will view and respond to Russia's internal evolution. No one wants President Obama to pursue the same unsuccessful strategy — by turns lecturing and fawning — as his predecessor. But they do want to know whether he has a strategy.

Without saying much on the subject, President Obama has already suggested that he does. In their first meeting, he surprised the Russian president, Dmitri Medvedev, by asking about the beating of a famous human-rights advocate in Moscow a day earlier, telegraphing a concern that few Russians had expected — and that George W. Bush had long since ceased to express.

Mr. Medvedev's unorthodox politics themselves invite a renewed dialogue on these issues. Free of the defensiveness of his own predecessor, Vladimir Putin, he has said that Russia cannot enjoy the respect of other countries until it establishes the rule of law at home. He calls it "dangerous" that Russian officials see civic advocates as "enemies of the state," and insists that in addressing the nation's problems "nothing can replace" political competition. No Russian leader has talked like this in 20 years.

Jackson-Vanik once played an important role in defining American policy toward the Soviet Union. The Obama administration's task is to make putting it aside just as important to our relations with Russia.

Stephen Sestanovich, a senior fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations and a professor of international diplomacy at Columbia University, was the American ambassador at large for the former Soviet Union from 1997 to 2001.

#12

U.S. and Russia Begin Arms Talks With a December Deadline

By Ellen Barry

New York Times, May 20, 2009

MOSCOW — After months of prelude, Russian and American teams sat down in Moscow on Tuesday to begin renegotiating the 1991 Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty, or Start, a key plank in the promised "reset" of relations between the countries.

The negotiators face a tight timeline if they are to replace the old agreement, which runs more than 700 pages, before it expires on Dec. 5. In recent days, top Russian officials have suggested that success at renegotiating Start is contingent on changes to an American plan for a missile defense system, a difficult negotiation in its own right.

But leaders in Washington and Moscow have a "strong political motivation" to propel the process forward, said Richard Burt, a former ambassador to Germany, who served as Washington's chief Start negotiator in the waning days of the Soviet Union.

For Russia, Mr. Burt said, a return to arms talks asserts its role as a global player after a long and frustrating hiatus. The United States, meanwhile, sees the agreement as a first step toward a broader nonproliferation strategy that could eventually curb the spread of weapons to "irresponsible nuclear states" like Pakistan, he said.

Basic outlines of an accord have already emerged. A short-term agreement signed in 2002 by President George W. Bush and Vladimir V. Putin, the president of Russia at the time, requires each country to reduce its arsenal to fewer than 2,200 deployed warheads by 2012; the new agreement is likely to lower the ceiling to 1,500 apiece or fewer.

Assistant Secretary of State Rose Gottemoeller, Washington's chief negotiator, this month signaled a willingness to count delivery vehicles as well as warheads, a longstanding Russian request, but not to address the question of counting warheads in storage, which Russia has also sought, until after the December deadline.

On Wednesday, Ms. Gottemoeller will meet for a second day with her counterpart, Anatoly Ivanov, who leads the Russian Foreign Ministry's security and disarmament department. The meetings are closed.

A Foreign Ministry spokesman told the Interfax news agency that Russia was hoping to see a written proposal from the Americans, calling this week's meetings "a switch to a detailed discussion of the future treaty." The teams will try to resolve as many questions as possible before a July summit meeting between Russia's president, Dmitri A. Medvedev, and President Obama.

Vladimir Z. Dvorkin, a retired major general who acted as an adviser to the Russian side during the original Start negotiations, said either side could speed the process with key concessions. "There is little time, and lots of time," Mr. Dvorkin said. "If there is a desire, they will get it done."

Separately, a report released Tuesday by the EastWest Institute, a New York-based policy organization, concluded that a European missile defense system — a bone of contention between Russia and the United States — would not protect against a nuclear threat from Iran. The group recommended canceling plans to station radar facilities and interceptor missiles in Poland and the Czech Republic, deployments the Kremlin sees as a threat.

#13

Gorbachev laments Russian rollback on democracy

By Vladimir Isachenkov

AP, May 21, 2009

MOSCOW — Former Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev harshly criticized Russia's political system on Thursday, saying that the nation's leaders have steadily rolled back the democratic achievements of his rule.

Gorbachev accused Russia's current government of trying to consolidate its grip on power and stifle opposition voices, but avoided specific mention of President Dmitry Medvedev or his predecessor Vladimir Putin, who is now prime minister.

"We have seen the step-by-step monopolization of political activities," Gorbachev said at a conference marking the 20th anniversary of the first democratically elected Soviet parliament.

The Congress of People's Deputies, which convened in May 1989, served as the main arena for fierce political battles between supporters and enemies of Gorbachev's reforms. Live broadcasts of its stormy sessions attracted public attention, contrasting sharply with sedate meetings of today's Kremlin-controlled parliament.

Gorbachev says Russia's tightly orchestrated politics now evoke the Soviet era, when lists of parliament members were compiled by the Communist Party leadership for rubber-stamp elections.

"The electoral system has been revised to serve the interests of a single party, the interests of those who are now at the helm," he said. "Step by step, we have been going back to the past."

While Gorbachev carefully criticized the main pro-Kremlin United Russia party for shunning political debate, he avoided any personal criticism of Putin and Medvedev.

His remarks echoed a recent statement by Medvedev, who scolded United Russia for its refusal to debate rivals in December 2007 parliamentary elections. The party has even faced criticism from Putin himself, who backed it in the elections and became its leader last year but has never actually joined.

Medvedev's election in March 2008 followed years of tightening Kremlin control over Russia's political scene during Putin's tenure. During his eight-year rule, Putin abolished popular elections of provincial governors and initiated other electoral changes that further strengthened the Kremlin's dominance. He also oversaw state takeover of independent television networks and growing state control over key industries.

Medvedev has not diverged significantly from Putin's course, but has sought to cast himself as a more conciliatory leader. He has criticized Russia's "legal nihilism" and called for greater respect for the law.

Some Russian liberals hope that Medvedev may take a more independent stance as economy worsens, but other Kremlin critics expect him to continue toeing the line drawn by his mentor.

#14

Kremlin upbeat on EU summit, warns on WTO, Ukraine

By Oleg Shchedrov

Reuters, May 21, 2009

KHABAROVSK, Russia - Russian President Dmitry Medvedev said on Thursday he hoped a summit with the European Union would help improve relations but a senior Kremlin aide warned there could be sparring over trade and energy. The two-day summit in Khabarovsk, a city on the Chinese border, is expected to bring little real progress after bickering between Russia and the European Union over gas supplies and the war last year in Georgia.

"We are developing a partnership and it is very important to get a sense of each other," Medvedev told a meeting with students in Khabarovsk, a city 8,000 km (5,000 miles) east of Brussels. "The European Union is our key partner."

European Commission President Jose Manuel Barroso and Czech President Vaclav Klaus had dinner with Medvedev on Thursday evening ahead of more formal talks on Friday.

The Kremlin's chief foreign policy advisor, Sergei Prikhodko, said Moscow was losing patience with Western promises to let it join the World Trade Organisation (WTO) and questioned EU promises to modernise Ukraine's gas pipeline network.

The EU is Russia's biggest trading partner. The 27-member bloc imports more than a quarter of its gas from Russia.

Recent summits have been dominated by public spats over Russia's rights record and democratic standards. Vladimir Putin responded to every criticism of his rule with a similar example of corruption or rights abuse in EU countries.

Putin's May 2008 exit from the presidency inspired hopes for a friendlier era between Moscow and Brussels, and EU officials had praised Medvedev as a man they could work with.

UKRAINIAN PIPELINES

But on the eve of Medvedev's third EU summit, the Kremlin questioned EU participation in modernising the pipeline system in Ukraine, which was at the heart of a spat this winter that left EU customers without Russian gas.

"The European Union signed a declaration on the modernisation of the Ukrainian pipeline network, but will they help Ukraine where the help is really needed?" Prikhodko said to reporters on Wednesday night.

"Are they going to allocate cash to cover mounting gas debts?"

Prihodko warned that Russia was losing patience after more than a decade of attempts to join the 153-member WTO.

"It is an open secret that certain reprimands about resorting to protectionism are addressed at us," he said, adding the EU had also asked for Georgia to be discussed at the summit.

Ties with the European Union were badly strained last year when Russia fought a short war against Georgia over the Moscow-backed separatist Georgian province of South Ossetia and then recognised the region as an independent state.

The agenda of the summit includes the EU's new eastern partnership, which brings six ex-Soviet republics closer to its orbit, cooperation on tackling the global economic crisis and talks on a new bilateral framework agreement.

#15
EU Can Offer Moscow Lots of Carrots
By Fraser Cameron
Moscow Times, May 21, 2009

When leaders meet in Khabarovsk on Thursday for the next EU-Russia summit, they will review progress in negotiations for a new strategic agreement.

Since the last summit in Nice in November, there have been a number of major developments affecting the relationship. Russia has come to recognize that it is not immune from the global economic crisis. Indeed, its economy has been severely affected by declining growth, high inflation, rising unemployment and capital flight.

Second, there is a new occupant in the White House keen to see some progress in U.S.-Russia relations. Presidents Barack Obama and Dmitry Medvedev enjoyed a good first meeting during the April Group of 20 summit in London and agreed to initiate a new round of arms control negotiations. This could bring dividends to the EU-Russia relations as well.

Third, the European Union has launched its Eastern Partnership designed to align several former Soviet republics closer to the EU. Moscow has criticized the new policy as an EU attempt to expand its sphere of influence in Russia's backyard.

Fourth, the Kremlin has still not complied with all elements of the cease-fire agreement on Georgia in terms of withdrawing its troops to prewar levels. To make matters worse, three weeks ago Medvedev authorized sending additional Russian border guards to South Ossetia and Abkhazia.

The EU-Russia summit will take place just before the fifth round of negotiations on a new strategic agreement. So far, there has been little progress in the areas of security, human rights, economic cooperation, research, education and culture. Moscow is pushing for a framework agreement, and the EU prefers a comprehensive agreement where nothing is agreed until everything is agreed. But both sides are beginning to understand each other better, which is essential if progress is to be made.

The difficult areas of the negotiations are not surprising with energy and human rights at the top of the list. Russia was annoyed that the EU and Ukraine discussed a deal to modernize the gas pipelines running through Ukraine without involving Moscow. The Kremlin has sought more explicit EU support for both the Nord Stream and South Stream pipelines. Medvedev has announced proposals for a revised energy treaty that would replace the Energy Charter that Russia has signed but not ratified. European Energy Commissioner Andris Piebalgs, however, has rejected this new proposal. On human rights, Russia is seeking to minimize commitments already undertaken at the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe and Council of Europe.

The European Parliament is pressing the European Commission to be tough on Russia, stressing that the violation of Georgia's territorial integrity and the January gas dispute have seriously endangered EU-Russia relations. They also want a tougher EU line on human rights and support for civil society. There are a limited number of areas of

agreement between the two sides, including terrorism, drug trafficking, science and culture. No one knows how long the negotiations will last. An educated guess would suggest a minimum of 18 months to two years, and ratification will require the same amount of time.

The recent spat between Russia and NATO over military exercises in Georgia and tit-for-tat spy expulsions will also affect EU-Russia relations. Russia seems split between those who think that the country can still go it alone in world affairs and those who would like to integrate the country fully into the global community. The debate on accession to World Trade Organization is a good example of this struggle. Relations with the EU are another.

Many in the business community and the more forward-looking politicians would prefer to continue working toward a strategic partnership with the EU. Most economists understand that Russia can only modernize its economy with the support of the EU. Despite the rhetoric about not fearing another Cold War, both Prime Minister Vladimir Putin and Medvedev know that the country could not sustain another arms race. In addition, with a falling population Moscow must be worried that the country does not have the resources to provide adequate defense of its own territory, let alone engage in reckless expansionism.

How should the EU react to inevitable Kremlin pressure and attempts to divide it? The first step is for member states to recognize that the EU has a number of strong cards to play in negotiating with Russia. The EU has almost 500 million citizens compared to Russia's 140 million. The far wealthier EU has the largest and most attractive internal market in the world, and Russian companies want a slice of this pie. Europe pays top rates for Russia's natural resources, and Gazprom gets 70 percent of its profits from sales to the EU. The EU buys nearly 60 percent of Russia's total exports. Moscow wants to join the WTO, and the EU can help facilitate this process.

Although the EU has no single big carrot, it has many things that the Kremlin would like. EU policy, therefore, must be based on a firm understanding of its common interests and then pursuing these interests with a single voice. It is difficult, but not impossible.

#16
EU: Use Russia Summit to Build Reform Momentum Urge Easing Restrictions on Civil Society, Accountability for Abuses in Chechnya
Human Rights Watch, May 21, 2009

European Union leaders should build on President Dmitri Medvedev's recently expressed readiness for human rights reform by pushing for concrete and urgently needed changes at the upcoming EU-Russia summit, Human Rights Watch said today in a letter to EU heads of state. The summit is scheduled for May 21 and 22 in the far eastern city of Khabarovsk.

"Medvedev has given strong public signals that he is ready to strengthen civil society and support human rights and freedoms," said Allison Gill, Russia office director for Human Rights Watch. "The EU should jump at this chance to work with him to make some real and urgently needed changes."

In its letter in advance of the summit, Human Rights Watch urged EU leaders to press for reform on two issues. One is the hostile and deteriorating environment in Russia for civil society, including a 2006 restrictive law on nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). The other is Moscow's failure to comply with the rising number of European Court of Human Rights judgments that have found Russia responsible for serious human rights violations in Chechnya.

In April, Medvedev acknowledged the difficulties faced by nongovernmental organizations, including "restrictions... without sufficient justification" imposed by the NGO law and the fact that many government officials view NGOs as a threat. He later formed a working group to draft changes to the law.

"While President Medvedev stopped short of making specific commitments on reform, he recognized that reform was necessary," said Gill. "Forming the working group was a good first step. Now the EU should encourage Russia to ensure that the process is open and inclusive, and that it results in meaningful improvements."

Russia's NGO law subjects Russian and foreign NGOs to excessive government scrutiny and interference, and burdens Russia's NGOs with unreasonable bureaucratic requirements.

Some Russian human rights NGOs and activists also face attacks and threats. Human Rights Watch said the goal of these attacks, especially against those who speak out about torture, abductions, and extrajudicial executions in the North Caucasus, can only be to silence these important voices for human rights and the rule of law.

The Human Rights Watch letter also called on the EU to press Russia to comply fully with the European Court rulings on Chechnya, a step that is essential to ending abuses in the North Caucasus region.

In nearly 100 rulings to date, the court has repeatedly found Russia responsible for grave human rights violations in Chechnya, including torture, "disappearances," and extrajudicial executions. Russia has generally paid court-ordered monetary compensation to the victims. But it has failed to undertake effective investigations, which the court has repeatedly ordered it to do, and to address the underlying causes of abuse in order to prevent similar violations in the future.

The Russian government is the only Council of Europe member state that has not ratified protocol 14 to the European Convention on Human Rights, which would streamline cases for the overburdened court.

"The court rulings provide the EU with a golden opportunity to persuade Russia to take the action necessary to break the cycle of abuse in Chechnya," said Gill.

Human Rights Watch's letter to EU leaders outlines a number of steps they should ask Russia to take in the context of the summit, including the following:

- Establish a transparent process to reform the NGO law that involves meaningful consultations with NGOs, legal experts, and other stakeholders;
- Foster an environment in which civil society can operate freely by imposing only such regulations on NGOs that are strictly compatible with international standards and absolutely necessary, and narrowly defining the terms under which the government can interfere in legitimate private citizen activity;
- Amend the NGO law to streamline the registration process so that NGOs can register in a prompt and straightforward manner, remove the most restrictive and intrusive provisions of the law – such as those that allow authorities to conduct unlimited inspections and attend all NGO events, and provide remedies other than liquidation for violations of the NGO law, which can help noncompliant NGOs to come into compliance;
- Ratify the full Protocol 14 to the European Convention on Human Rights;
- Re-open investigations in cases where the European Court of Human Rights has determined that prior investigations were inadequate and conduct the investigations in a manner that ensures they are meaningful and effective, resulting in those responsible for violations being brought to justice;
- Undertake a thorough review and revision of domestic legislation and regulations regarding the use of force by military or security forces to ensure their compliance with human rights law.

#17

A 'Reset' Is Not Enough

By E. Wayne Merry

New York Times, May 23, 2009

The Obama administration has offered to "reset" relations with Russia. But what is really needed is a change of operating system.

A reset seeks to restore a previous relationship, which for former officials of the Clinton administration now back in office means the Yeltsin years. This will fail because Moscow views that period as emblematic of Russian weakness and exploitation by the West, and especially by the United States.

Relations with Moscow deteriorated under both Bill Clinton and George W. Bush. The U.S. neo-liberal project of the '90s not only failed but deeply alienated Russians. The bilateral nadir was the Kosovo war, a worse episode than last year's Georgia conflict. A new opportunity after 9/11 was frankly squandered.

Washington regarded Russia as a loser and treated it as such. It forgot that Russia would not be weak forever, and would remember.

Two structural problems limit the relationship and its improvement. First, it is very narrow, with few automatic stabilizers. Unlike Russian-European or U.S.-Chinese relations, the scant economic and human ties between the U.S. and Russia provide inadequate ballast when problems arise. Relations are highly vulnerable to outside events and defined more by disputes than cooperation. When malice is added to the mix, the result is dangerous.

Second, for Moscow the relationship is largely zero sum, in that Russian diplomacy succeeds where America's fails, as in Iran and Venezuela. This is the consequence both of the huge asymmetry in real power and influence of the two countries and an asymmetry of geography in that almost anything the United States does in Eurasia affects Russia's interests, often adversely. Thus Moscow worries that a successful Obama presidency will come at their expense with other countries. Russian commentators especially fear this may be the case with Iran, seeing the potential for a shift comparable to Mao's China or Sadat's Egypt.

The current Russian leadership bears a disproportionate share of the blame for our poisonous relations. But Washington needs to adopt new rules of engagement to not repeat mistakes of the previous 16 years:

One, minimize deliberate challenges to Russian interests and know that none will come free. If we push NATO, they will push back. When we sponsored an independent Kosovo, Moscow declared it would do the same in Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Reciprocity is real.

Two, accept the failure of the neo-liberal agenda in Russia. American concepts of what Russia should become are simply not welcome among Russians. It's their country, not ours.

Three, don't expect much in areas where Russia has little real influence, as in North Korea, the Middle East and even Iran.

Four, establish a pattern of substantive cooperation on Afghanistan and arms control, each containing major challenges.

Moscow is closer to Washington on the Afghan problem than are most European governments. Russia has interests and sees dangers in south Central Asia. It is willing to cooperate with the U.S., but not gratis. Large-scale northern access to Afghanistan as an alternative to Pakistani routes will require acceptance of the objective reality that Central Asia is Russia's hinterland (and China's) and not ours.

The U.S. is again committed to treaty-based strategic nuclear arms control, to preserve the legacy of Reagan and Gorbachev. The nuclear issues alone are difficult, but doable. A broader problem lies in American dominance in non-nuclear strategic weaponry. This is a basic security problem for Moscow. Russia cannot agree to deep reductions in its shrinking nuclear arsenal because U.S. non-nuclear systems, not constrained by arms controls, can be deterred only by nuclear weapons.

When American leaders call for the elimination of nuclear arms, Russian leaders see a world made safe for U.S. non-nuclear military supremacy. When this is combined with anti-ballistic missile deployments, the Russians construct a scenario of a potential U.S. disarming strike against them. The Russians practice the U.S. Cold War principle - only capabilities, and not intentions, count in national security.

The Obama administration genuinely wants to start fresh with Moscow, but it has inherited a legacy of bitter Russian mistrust. To "reset" risks repeated freezes and even a system crash. An upgrade is called for.

E. Wayne Merry, a former State Department and Pentagon official, is a senior associate at the American Foreign Policy Council in Washington.

#18
Russian history 2.0: Kremlin wants to 'correct' the record: Proposed law could make comparing Soviet rule with that of the Nazis a crime. Intellectuals fear a manipulation of Russia's past.
By Fred Weir
Christian Science Monitor, May 21, 2009

Moscow - A bitter joke from the Soviet-era has it that Russia is the world's only country with an unpredictable past. That jibe has come winging back in recent days, after the Kremlin announced the creation of a special 28-member panel tasked with examining and combating examples of "historical revisionism" that harm Russia's image.

The committee, which has no legal power, is chaired by the head of President Dmitry Medvedev's administration, Sergei Naryshkin, and includes a sprinkling of historians but also lawmakers, Kremlin officials, the armed forces' chief of staff, and members of the FSB security service.

But a companion law, drafted by the pro-Kremlin United Russia party and soon due to be introduced into the State Duma, will stipulate fines and prison sentences of up to five years for anyone found guilty of "denying the decisions of the Nuremberg Tribunal."

This is a reaction to a growing body of historiography in former Soviet and Eastern European countries that depicts the long years of Soviet domination as similar in nature to the Nazi occupation, and suggests that for these nations, liberation arrived only when the USSR collapsed. Even more irritating for the Russians are perceived attempts in some places, like Ukraine and Latvia, to "rehabilitate" citizens who wore German uniforms during World War II to fight against the oncoming Red Army.

"It is high time to make a study of what is going on here, and to decide what kind of documents we need to dig up and publish to counter these new interpretations," says Natalya Narochnitskaya, a historian, former Duma deputy, and member of the new commission. "If a nation is unable to come to a united view in interpreting its own past, it will be unable to formulate its national interests."

Ms. Narochnitskaya insists that the panel's brief is to study the problem and make recommendations, not to impose a Sovietesque party line. "All nations have this problem of balance and need to find their own path between humiliation and normal self-criticism," she says.

Critics are alarmed by what they see as a blatant throwback to Soviet methods of intellectual control.

"You cannot struggle against falsifications of history by creating bureaucratic commissions," says Sergei Solovyov, editor of Sceptis, a Russian quarterly journal that aims to promote cross-cultural debate. "Either it will be completely useless or it will become a tool for suppressing people with different points of view."

Former Soviet states have a different view of the facts

The Kremlin has been infuriated by what it sees as attempts to "revise" the results of World War II in some Eastern European and former Soviet countries. The removal of Red Army war memorials in Poland and the Baltic states has drawn particular ire, as have street marches by Latvian SS veterans, a Lithuanian law banning the public display of Soviet symbols, and an Estonian prosecution of a decorated Soviet war veteran, Arnold Meri, on charges of genocide for his alleged role in postwar deportations of Estonians to Siberia. (Mr. Meri died two months ago, before the trial finished.)

Another sore point has been Ukrainian President Viktor Yushchenko's public praise for the Ukrainian Insurgent Army, which fought a CIA-backed guerrilla war against the USSR for nearly a decade following the end of World War II, as well as official Ukrainian efforts to get world governments to classify as an act of "genocide" the mass famine caused by farm collectivization in the early 1930s, which killed millions of Soviet peasants and is known in Ukraine as the "Holodomor."

In his recently launched blog, Mr. Medvedev recently complained that "such attempts [to revise history] are becoming more hostile, more evil, and more aggressive.... We find ourselves in a situation in which we have to defend the historical truth and once again prove facts that not long ago seemed most clear. But it is necessary to do."

War history a touchy subject

A public opinion survey conducted last month by the state-run VTsIOM agency found that almost two-thirds of Russians agree that attempts to "deny the Soviet victory in the Great Patriotic War" should be outlawed, referring to the Russian term for World War II. Many older Russian historians appear to agree that the panel, and its brief of fighting revisionism, is a good thing.

"We had to do this long ago," says General Makhmut Gareyev, a war hero and president of the official Academy of Military Sciences in Moscow. "One cannot tolerate historical falsifications, particularly of World War II. Once the state organs make their decision, some things will possibly be corrected in the near future."

Roy Medvedev, a dissident historian from the Soviet period, told the independent Ekho Moskvi radio station that the commission is not an objectionable idea in principle - if it sticks to reviewing history and opening up archive access. But he added, "I have strongly protested against any measures for criminal prosecution for falsification because this would be a restoration of Soviet practices.... It will be very bad if publishing various kinds of theories and research ends up being banned."

In search of a stable past

Russia's own national identity has been in flux since the collapse of the USSR, along with its ideology and multi-ethnic empire. The early post-Soviet years were marked by excoriating self-criticism and widespread public demoralization. Vladimir Putin came to power nearly a decade ago amid a patriotic backlash, which aimed to banish that pervasive sense of national humiliation by restoring pride in Russia and recognizing the positive achievements of the Soviet years.

Some ultranationalist thinkers, such as Alexander Dugin, who heads the influential International Eurasian Movement, suggest that the creation of a national myth that will unite Russians is a worthy goal.

"We should fix some limits to freedom of speech in order to establish a national consensus and preserve it for future generations," Mr. Dugin says. "To have a myth that provides a stable point of reference for society is necessary to define our historical path. That's not false."

But critics have long complained that the downside of the Putin-era "feel good" approach to Russian history includes a tendency to minimize a multitude of past crimes, including mass murders carried out by Joseph Stalin's NKVD security service.

"I don't even think [the commission] is legal. Our Constitution forbids the establishment of a state ideology and mandates ideological pluralism in Russia," says Vladimir Ryzhkov, a former independent Duma deputy. "You can debate history, but it shouldn't be imposed by those who happen to be in power. For centuries, our history has been written and rewritten by czars and commissars. So, this new commission can only raise doubt and protest."

#19
Opposition Groups Are Called Corrupt
By Natalya Krainova

Moscow Times, May 22, 2009

Two pro-Kremlin analysts and a United Russia party official presented a report Thursday that they said exposed corruption in opposition groups connected to The Other Russia coalition.

"The public must no longer support those politicians and representatives of the public sector," Maxim Grigoryev, head of the Fund on Research of Democracy Problems, the think tank that drafted the report, told a dozen reporters at the offices of state news agency RIA-Novosti.

Grigoryev also heads Upravleniye PR, a consulting group that provides PR services to United Russia and the Foreign Ministry, among others.

The report accuses the leaders of The Other Russia and its partners - Solidarity, United Civil Front, Oborona, the banned National Bolshevik Party and the Left Front - of receiving financial support from foreign groups and exiled Russian tycoons, using the money for personal enrichment, bribery and deceiving voters.

The accusations are based on media reports, public comments by opposition leaders and anonymous interviews with rank-and-file opposition activists, Grigoryev said.

Among the leaders named in the report are National Bolshevik co-founder Eduard Limonov, United Civil Front leader Garry Kasparov, former Deputy Prime Minister Boris Nemtsov and former Prime Minister Mikhail Kasyanov.

Ilya Yashin, a senior Solidarity official who formerly headed Oborona and Yabloko's youth branch, is accused in the report of receiving money for opposition activities from former Yukos co-owner Leonid Nevzlin, who fled to Israel in 2003.

Yashin called the accusations "a lie" in a brief telephone interview Thursday.

Kasparov, accused in the report of asking exiled tycoon Boris Berezovsky for money to finance his opposition activities, earlier denied any ties to Berezovsky in an interview with The Moscow Times.

Repeated calls to Limonov and Nemtsov went unanswered Thursday. Kasyanov was unavailable for comment Thursday afternoon, his spokeswoman Yelena Dikun said.

Opposition groups connected to The Other Russia "frankly admit" that they are financed by small and medium-sized businesses but refuse to provide any names, which means that the opposition groups are "corrupt," said Pavel Danilin, a consultant at the Effective Policy Foundation, a think tank with strong ties to the Kremlin.

"They are not accountable and not transparent, and this is a big problem," Danilin said at Thursday's news conference, flanked by Grigoryev and State Duma Deputy Alexander Khinshtein of United Russia.

In 2007, Danilin co-authored a book titled "Putin's Enemies" that describes opposition groups criticizing then-President Vladimir Putin as "Russia's enemies." He also wrote a chapter on sovereign democracy in a controversial 2007 history manual for teachers.

The report offers several definitions of corruption, including "political corruption," which was described by Grigoryev as "legal or illegal actions that contradict the public interests."

The report names several U.S. government and nongovernmental organizations that allegedly finance opposition groups, a practice that it says violate U.S. laws on corruption. Some other opposition activities violate Russian laws on corruption, it says.

#20

Russian recession roars on as 200,000 lost jobs

By Toni Vorobyova

May 22, 2009, Reuters

MOSCOW - Russian data on Friday showed it is too soon to call the bottom on the country's first recession in a decade, with unemployment rising to a 9-year high as 200,000 lost jobs in April and retail sales slumped for a third month in a row.

News that unemployment rose to 7.7 million in April, or 10.2 percent of the economically active population, comes hot on the heels of a record slump in industrial output.

Russia's once buoyant economy has fallen prey to lower oil prices at a time when the global slowdown reduces demand for its commodities, while the worldwide credit crunch leaves companies struggling to refinance foreign loans secured in better days.

That has filtered through into the domestic economy, with some 3.2 million losing their jobs since August, and many more forced to cope with lower salaries and shortened working weeks.

Politicians -- used to nearly a decade of oil-fuelled boom -- had hoped the worst of the slowdown came in the first quarter.

But the latest data adds credibility to the Economy Ministry forecast the recession could last for up to two years.

Retail sales fell 5.3 percent year-on-year, continuing their first contraction in nine years which started in February. Capital investment shrank 16.2 percent, along with unemployment and retail sales coming in gloomier than forecast.

However, the very fact that unemployment data was published should provide some relief to investors, who had been worried by the absence of a monthly breakdown in the March data, fearing this was a possible attempt to hide bad news.

Real wages shrank 3 percent -- less than expected but still their steepest fall in almost a decade.

Earlier on Friday, data showed foreign direct investment in Russia slumped 43 percent in the first quarter.

MORE TO COME

This week alone, Russia's largest carmaker AvtoVAZ said it would slash working hours next month while smaller rival Avto plans to shed 2,500 jobs, or half its workforce, from August.

The world's largest aluminium producer UC RUSAL expects stocks of the metal will keep rising until at least the third quarter, signalling lacklustre demand, while Russia's largest lender and most trusted bank Sberbank does not rule out a loss this year.

As they tighten their belts, consumers are switching to cheaper shops to the benefit of cut-price retailers like Magnit, which saw sales rising by one-third in April. Smaller supermarket bills weigh on the official retail sales data, which is calculated in billions of roubles.

So far, public unrest has been very limited and popularity ratings for President Dmitry Medvedev and Prime Minister Vladimir Putin are still running high.

The central bank's success in putting a lid on rouble depreciation earlier this year is seen as a key factor in keeping the population quiet, but unrest remains a key risk.

"Should the economic situation deteriorate and unemployment reach 15 percent, it may become a real challenge to the authorities," Merrill Lynch said in a recent note.

#21

**EU should lend Ukraine money for gas payments: Medvedev
AFP, May 22, 2009**

KHABAROVSK, Russia -Russian President Dmitry Medvedev on Friday urged the European Union to lend Ukraine money he said Kiev needed to meet its gas payment obligations.

The Russian leader said he doubted Ukraine's ability to pay four billion dollars for 19.5 billion cubic metres of gas that Kiev needs to replenish its underground reservoirs in time for winter.

He said a syndicated loan agreement should be reached, with European and Russian participation. The EU, however, should come up with most of the money, Medvedev added.

"We are ready to help the Ukrainian state but would like the European Union, those countries that are interested in reliable security of energy cooperation, to take upon themselves the bulk of this work," he said.

Referring to the financial problems Moscow believes Kiev is suffering, Medvedev said: "We have doubts about Ukraine's ability to pay."

Ukraine, one of the countries hardest hit by the global economic crisis, has asked Moscow for a five-billion dollar loan to help with its gas payments.

But the Russian finance ministry said this week a decision had not yet been made.

In Kiev on Thursday, however, Naftogaz spokesman Valentin Zemliansky denied there was any problems, telling AFP: "We're not anticipating any crisis. The financial situation of the company is stable."

A payment dispute between Russia and Ukraine was at the heart of the gas conflict that shut down supplies to a dozen European customers in January.

On Thursday, a Russian government official told the country's news agencies that Ukraine might find itself "on the brink of a new gas crisis" if it did not sort out its financial difficulties.

In response to a question from a reporter about whether Russia could guarantee there would not be a repeat of the last winter's crisis, a visibly irritated Medvedev said it was not Russia's job to do so.

"The Russian Federation has not given any assurances and will not give any," he said. "What would be the good of that? Let those who pay for gas give assurances."