

WASHINGTON, D.C. May 28, 2009

TO: NCSJ Leadership and Interested Parties

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



In Brief

Dear Friend:

We hope you can join us for 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. Our featured speakers will include Russian Ambassador [Sergei Kislyak](#) and Chief Rabbi of Moscow Pinchas Goldschmidt. [Click here](#) for more information, and to register.

We wish you a meaningful and joyous Shavuot holiday.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads 'Richard B. Stone'.

Richard B. Stone
Chairman

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads 'Alexander Smukler'.

Alexander Smukler
President

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. May 28, 2009

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#1a

Estonia PM aims to fire coalition partner ministers Reuters, May 21, 2009

TALLINN, May 21 - Estonia's prime minister said on Thursday he aimed to fire three ministers from the government's junior coalition party after weeks of dispute over how to handle the financial crisis.

The row between Prime Minister Andrus Ansip, whose Reform Party heads a three-party coalition, and his Social Democratic coalition partner has involved how to make tough budget cuts and change labour laws to save money due to a sharp recession.

Ansip told a news conference that he would go today to the president to ask leave to fire all three of the Social Democratic ministers, including the finance minister.

#1b

Ukraine commission bans Holocaust film in schools JTA, May 22, 2009

KIEV -- Ukrainian officials will not allow schools to screen a film about the Holocaust after pressure from an ultranationalist party.

A Jewish group had organized the screening of "Two Tangos," which deals in part with Ukrainian collaboration with the Nazis, in seven schools. A regional commission based in Lviv acceded to demands from The Freedom Party, led by Oleg Tyagnybok, to ban the film, Jewish.ru reported this week.

Popular support for the party has swelled in some recent regional elections, alarming human rights watchdogs.

Tyagnybok was ousted from the mainstream "Our Ukraine" political bloc in 2004 when he praised members of the Ukrainian Insurgent Army, a World War II force that combated Russians and Germans and targeted Jews. He had commended the army for having fought against the Russians, the Germans and "the kikes and other filth who wanted to take from us our Ukrainian state."

#1c

IMF approves Kyrgyz \$26 mln credit, warns on 2009 Reuters, May 22, 2009

WASHINGTON, May 22 - The IMF said on Friday it had approved a \$25.5 million credit for the Kyrgyz Republic under an 18-month facility to weather the global financial crisis, but warned growth would slow sharply this year.

The IMF said in a statement that it had completed its first review the Kyrgyz Republic's economic performance under the \$102 million facility, which was approved in December, and the central bank had scope to slacken monetary policy.

"The global crisis is causing a sharper economic slowdown in the Kyrgyz Republic than was expected at the time of the approval of the 18-month arrangement," the IMF said.

"As a result, economic growth is expected to slow sharply in 2009. The authorities are committed to take additional measures as needed," it said.

The IMF, in a regular review of the country's economy, said the crisis had put the Kyrgyz currency under pressure and it said the central bank would continue to use the exchange rate to absorb external shocks and limit reserve losses.

"Provided that inflation continues to decline and exchange rate pressures abate, monetary policy could be eased gradually to provide additional support to the economy," the IMF said.

#1d

Ukrainian party picks xenophobic candidate JTA, May 25, 2009

KIEV, Ukraine -- A right-wing nationalist Ukrainian party nominated its leader, who has made public anti-Semitic and xenophobic statements, to run for president.

Some 500 delegates of the Svoboda, or Freedom, political party unanimously endorsed Oleg Tiagnybok at the party's 20th congress on Sunday.

National elections in Ukraine are slated for January.

Support for the party has swelled since recent regional elections, worrying Jewish community and human rights activists. In a March 15 Ternopol regional western Ukrainian legislature election, Svoboda won 35 percent of the vote -- more than double the second-place Single Center party and four times more than the parties that make up the Ukrainian ruling coalition.

Svoboda's influence spurred the Lvov regional commission recently to ban a Lvov Jewish charity's screening of the film "Two Tangos," a movie about the Holocaust in Ukraine, for "ethnic incitement."

Tiagnybok was expelled in 2004 from the parliamentary faction Our Ukraine after he addressed a meeting at the grave of the Ukrainian Rebellious Army commander in the Ivano-Frankovsk region using anti-Semitic slogans.

At meetings in Lvov and Ivano-Frankovsk in 2007, Tiagnybok said that "kikes" and the "Russian Mafia who now rule Ukraine" are to blame for all Ukraine's problems.

Tiagnybok has denied he is anti-Semitic.

"I personally have nothing against common Jews, and even have Jewish friends, but rather against a group of Jewish oligarchs who control Ukraine and against Jews-Bolsheviks [in the past]," he told JTA in an interview in Lvov in 2007.

#1e
Jewish books presented to Ukraine Parliament Library
JTA, May 27, 2009

KIEV, Ukraine -- The Jewish Council of Ukraine presented two unique books to the Ukrainian Parliament Library in Kiev.

The books made their debut Tuesday.

A documentary photo album, Foundation: "Memory of Babi Yar," contains 400 photos dealing with the Babi Yar tragedy in 1941, when more than 33,000 Jews were killed over two days on the banks of the Babi Yar ravine. The book was published in honor of the 20th anniversary of the establishment of the Babi Yar Foundation and was printed with the financial support of the Jewish Council of Ukraine. Four hundred copies of the book were printed.

A collection of poetry devoted to writer Sholom Aleichem contains more than 80 poems in Russian and Ukrainian, including early works of poetry by Sholom Aleichem. Some 250 copies of the book, compiled by Ilya Levitas, president of the Jewish Council of Ukraine, were printed with the financial support of local sponsors.

The exhibition "Son of the Ukrainian Land," devoted to Sholom Aleichem, also opened at the parliament library.

#1f
Russia: Uranium Deal Is Signed
By Andrew E. Kramer
New York Times, May 27, 2009

Russia signed a \$1 billion agreement to provide low-enriched uranium to utilities from Missouri, Texas and California beginning in 2014. The companies, Ameren, Luminant and Pacific Gas and Electric, said the uranium would provide electricity for about 15 million households.

#2
The new American Girl doll: She's Jewish, she's poor and her name is Rebecca
By Sue Fishkoff
JTA, May 22, 2009

SAN FRANCISCO -- It's official: The newest American Girl doll is 9-year-old Rebecca Rubin, a Jewish-American girl who lives with her family on Manhattan's Lower East Side in 1914.

The much-anticipated latest addition to the American Girl series of historical characters, Rebecca goes on sale May 31 along with six books about her life. No cheap date, she costs \$95 with one book, or \$118 if accompanied by the complete set.

Rebecca joins 14 other historical dolls in the series -- from Kaya, a Nez Perce girl set in 1764, to African-American Addy, a Civil War doll, to World War II-era Molly, part of an Irish immigrant family. Her unveiling will include a tie-in at the Tenement Museum in New York City and a harbor cruise with "kosher-style" food, according to USA Today.

She's a feisty girl, our Rebecca. In one book she rescues her cousin Anna from the top of a stalled Ferris wheel. In another she marches in a garment workers' strike and gives an impassioned speech about labor rights. But she also cooks, crochets and dreams of becoming a movie star, just like a proper lass.

Rebecca lives with her Russian-immigrant parents, siblings and grandparents in a Lower East Side row house, just a step up from the tenements of Orchard Street, and they struggle mightily to save boat fare to bring more family over from the Old Country.

The Jewish blogosphere has been floating guesses about her name, release date and details of her life for more than a year with an intensity that belied her insensate status. She is, after all, just a doll, albeit a soft-bodied, large and quite beautiful one. But Jews love history, especially their own, and Jewish parents hip to the American Girl formula of nicely made dolls and well-written books about the period of American history they represent wanted a piece of their own people's story to give their daughters.

"This is our history, right here in this doll," says author Meredith Jacobs of Rockville, Md., host of "The Modern Jewish Mom" on The Jewish Channel.

Jacobs' family is also from Eastern Europe, and her Uncle Saul's dreams of becoming an actor were dashed by family pressure to enter the cantorate.

Jacobs plans to buy Rebecca and her books for her 13-year-old daughter, Sophie, even though she's just beyond the target demographic.

"I want her to read the books and talk to my parents about our history," Jacobs says. "I don't think people who aren't Jewish think about how big a deal it is for a mainstream doll company to make something Jewish."

Rebecca confronts many of the same dilemmas faced by today's American Jewish children as they navigate between tradition and modernity. In "Candlelight for Rebecca," her teacher asks the class to make Christmas centerpieces, and Rebecca agonizes over what to tell her parents. In "Meet Rebecca," she asks her father, an observant Jew who keeps kosher, why he opens his shoe store on Shabbat. (They need the money, he explains).

Children's author Jacqueline Dembar Greene penned the six books about Rebecca's life, basing some of the stories on her own family's history. She quizzed her mother-in-law about the correct usage of certain Yiddish words and her 92-year-old father about his memories of riding the Ferris wheel at Coney Island.

Greene's mother worked as a stitcher in a garment factory in Hartford, Conn., much like the one where Rebecca's uncle and cousin suffered two decades earlier.

"Nothing had changed," Greene says. "She told me about the bosses walking up and down yelling at the workers, about being locked in even though it was totally illegal. They weren't allowed to talk or hum; they were timed when they went to the bathroom."

Even the Christmas story came out of her own experience. Greene was in third grade in the 1950s when her teacher asked the class to make Christmas decorations.

"I brought mine home and burst into tears," she recalls. "My wise, wise mother said, 'I bet Mrs. Crocker would love it.'"

Mrs. Crocker was a widowed neighbor, much like the widower Mr. Rossi in Rebecca's book, whom the fictional character gives her own Christmas decoration.

"I gave it to her," Greene says, "and walked home feeling proud as punch."

#3

Ukraine Should Not Choose Between West And Russia-US Ambassador Itar-Tass, May 23, 2009

KIEV - Ukraine can have solid productive relations both with the West and Russia, US Ambassador to Ukraine William B. Taylor who is winding up his diplomatic mission in the country, said in an interview published by the Ukrainian newspaper Zerkalo Nedeli (Mirror of the Week). He noted that Ukraine needs positive, fruitful relations with all the neighbours based on mutual respect. The United States rejects the thesis that Ukraine should choose: the West or Russia.

Taylor again stated that Ukraine is an important partner for the United States. He said that President Obama had visited Ukraine when he was a senator and understands the importance of this country. Over the past 18 years the United States spent time, energy and finances in order to help Ukraine develop into a strong democracy. These relations will be developing also in the future, because the new US administration relies on the existing projects and partnership and considers new spheres of cooperation based on the mutual interests and values, the American diplomat noted.

He is certain that Ukrainians should unite for the sake of further development of a healthy economy and democracy. He said that Ukraine is going through an uneasy period in the political and economic aspects, and complex decisions cannot wait till the presidential election.

As for the economy sphere, in the view of the US ambassador, the overcoming of the aftermath of the crisis will be started already this year. However, the Ukrainian leadership all the same will have to make hard and unpopular decisions in the economy sphere, therefore Ukraine is to face serious challenges. Taylor advised the Ukrainian leaders to work in coordination with the IMF, World Bank, other international donors, to take measures that reform the pension system and the Naftogaz company. It is necessary to work out the foundations for the reform of the fragile banking sector that would make capitalisation of banks and the settlement of the issues of problem banks transparent and meeting the world practice, believes the US ambassador.

#4

The Rights Stuff By Jeffrey Gedmin New York Times, May 23, 2009

PRAGUE — Washington is in the throes of an increasingly self-indulgent debate about whether the promotion of human rights and democracy should play a central role in U.S. foreign policy. In a number of areas in the world, authoritarian leaders are gaining self-confidence; this is no time for us to lose ours.

Russia and Iran ought to top the list of our concerns. In each case, the United States is apt to be tempted by realist "grand bargains" in which we would in effect trade our commitment to democracy and human rights for security.

The proposition may be seductive at first glance. For one thing, we want Russia's help to persuade the mullahs to forgo nuclear weapons. For another, Moscow has reasserted itself in the Caucasus and Central Asia.

Should we fail to play nice with the Kremlin, the result may be diminished Western access to gas and oil as well as to transit routes to supply our forces in Afghanistan. At least so goes the argument.

The stakes in the case of Iran's nuclear program are at least equally high. If the mullahs get the bomb, a destabilizing arms race in the Middle East will likely ensue. Various terror groups will be emboldened, feeling safe to operate under the protection of Tehran's nuclear umbrella. Who wants to be distracted by secondary issues such as imprisoned journalists or womens' rights?

There are other reasons for our hesitancy to push democracy and human rights. The financial crisis, the debate over Guantanamo, and now the corruption scandal in Britain, have some asking: Who are we to export liberal values when our own house is not in order?

This misses the point. Obviously, we in the West are no more virtuous than anybody in any other country. But our system of democracy is. It's things like independent courts, free media and the verdict of the ballot box that help to sort our deficiencies. What's more, history shows that opportunistic deals with dictators not only betray our values; they seldom deliver over time on those very interests we claim to be pursuing.

What to do? First, let's not tire of affirming that individual liberty is a universal value and that democracy is the best way to protect freedom and human rights. The Russians and Iranians will accuse us of meddling in their internal affairs. We need to insist, though, that our support for free media and independent NGOs and our respect for human rights be an essential part of our dialogue with their countries.

Some in the West will claim that certain cultures are not suited to democratic ways. Don't believe it. We heard about Germany's authoritarian gene after World War II and the notion that Germans can't be democrats. Indonesia, the most populous Muslim country in the world, helps to dispel the myth that Islam and democracy are intrinsically incompatible.

Of course, culture matters. And liberal democracy would take time in either country. But why would the Kremlin or the mullahs worry so much about suppressing civil society and silencing independent media if they believed their respective peoples naturally enjoy authoritarian rule?

Second, don't fall for foolish, dead-end debates. One such debate is over engagement v. isolation. Let's engage Russia and Iran. It's already happening anyway. But engagement cannot be merely a cover for big business or an excuse to appease. An acquaintance in Berlin told me last summer that Germans felt for plucky Georgia, but no one was going to risk a cold winter just because Russia had invaded. This sort of thinking is becoming commonplace in many circles. It is not exactly the West at its best.

In the 1980s, Margaret Thatcher had British diplomats visit the grave of a slain Polish priest when they arrived in Warsaw. Father Jerzy Popieluszko, an eloquent voice for freedom in communist Poland, had been abducted and killed by the secret police. Other Western governments followed the British lead. Such gestures can be powerful. This is something President Obama might consider when he visits Moscow this summer.

Times change. Some things don't. It would be folly to give up our most cherished principles.

Jeffrey Gedmin is president of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty.

#5
As Economy Struggles, Russia's Market Has Surged
By Andrew E. Kramer
New York Times, May 23, 2009

MOSCOW — Despite continuing weakness in the Russian economy, the stock exchange here has surged to become the best performing in the world, after being the worst last fall.

After the sell-off last year pushed the valuations of Russian companies to record lows, rising energy prices in recent months have drawn investors back into the market, traders said, even as the government has twice downgraded its expectations for growth this year.

Other big emerging markets, including China, India and Brazil, have rebounded sharply in recent months on signs that the fractured global economy may be beginning to heal, but none have been more buoyant than Russia.

When the authorities reported this month that industrial output declined 16.9 percent in April, the stock market still continued a five-day streak.

“Investors are not analyzing macroeconomics when deciding whether to invest in Russia,” the chief economist in Moscow for Merrill Lynch, Yulia Tseplayeva, said.

“They look at oil prices, and believe that when oil prices rise so will the Russian market,” she said. “And that is true.”

Officials now expect a contraction of more than 6 percent in the Russian economy before it begins to improve. Yet investors who braved the yo-yo bounce in the Russian market have profited handsomely.

The Micex index of major Russian company shares, for example, is up 105 percent after bottoming out on Oct. 27. It rose 19.66 points, or 1.9 percent, on Friday to close at 1,054.03.

For some investors, the very air of dismal news hanging over the country inspired contrarian bets in February and March that shares were oversold.

“It seemed a consensus emerged generally that Eastern Europe was going to hell,” Ian Hague, a partner at Firebird Capital Management, a New York hedge fund that focuses on the former Soviet Union, said by telephone. “When you see that, it is very bullish. Because the reality is never as bad as people’s fears.”

Firebird, after selling Russian shares in the second half of 2008, reinvested in February, he said.

But for all Moscow’s effort to diversify the economy, the rise in Russian equity values has closely tracked the price of oil, by far its largest export commodity — much as the market plunge last fall coincided with the collapse of oil prices.

In the second half of last year, oil prices declined 75 percent and the RTS index fell by 72 percent, said an investor note from UralSib, a Moscow brokerage firm. This year, crude prices have risen 59 percent and the RTS index 58 percent. The RTS is denominated in dollars and its fluctuations reflect both share prices and the ruble-dollar exchange rate, unlike the Micex.

Still, Russian stocks plunged last fall not only because of oil price declines, but also because many Russian industrialists had pledged shares as collateral for loans, and were required to sell when credit lines were called in.

Then, uncertainty over the stability of the ruble prompted foreign investors to sell shares.

By late January, however, the ruble had stabilized and the forced selling was over, eliminating two Russia-specific risks and leaving a very depressed market behind. Then oil prices ticked back up.

Money is trickling back into Russian investments. For now, the inflow has not balanced the outflow of capital as companies repay foreign banks for loans that are not being rolled over. But the new money coming in was very nearly equal to the outflow in April, according to an estimate by Merrill Lynch.

In that month, the central bank reported a net loss of \$2 billion of capital. Since roughly \$10 billion in loan payments came due in April, the investor inflow probably was about \$8 billion for the month, the bank said.

And the Russian stock market bounce came in spite of looming troubles in the real economy that analysts say make it look tenuous.

But given Russia's dependence on the boom-and-bust commodity price cycles, a lack of so-called long money investing in the economy and a good deal of jitters about political stability and relations with the West, Russia's stock market probably will remain highly volatile.

In fact, since its inception after the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Russian stock market has been either in the top five performing markets in the world or the bottom five in every year except one, according to Renaissance Capital, a Moscow brokerage.

#6

Europe and Russia Fail to Agree on Gas Deal

By Clifford J. Levy

New York Times, May 23, 2009

MOSCOW — Russia and the European Union failed Friday to reach an agreement that would prevent future disruptions of energy supplies to Europe, and the two sides appeared unable to draw closer on a range of other matters.

Russia's president, Dmitri A. Medvedev, and his counterparts from the European Union sought to play down their differences at the end of their summit meeting by saying that the discussions had been useful.

The Czech president, Vaclav Klaus, whose country holds the rotating presidency of the 27-member European Union, said the meetings had enhanced "mutual trust."

Still, the very location that the Kremlin chose for the get-together — the city of Khabarovsk, in Russia's Far East, near the Chinese border and the Sea of Japan — seemed intended to highlight its unease at the state of relations.

By making European officials fly 10 or more hours, the Kremlin appeared to be underscoring the fact that Russia was not just a European nation and had many opportunities to its east as well.

European Union officials were eager to discuss an arrangement to guarantee energy supplies, less than five months after Russia, for the second time in three years, shut off natural gas to Europe in a pricing dispute with Ukraine.

Russia and Ukraine, which maintains pipelines that deliver Russian gas to Europe, have quarreled repeatedly over pricing and supplies in recent years, raising questions in Europe about whether Russia is a reliable source.

Mr. Medvedev brushed aside European concerns on Friday, saying that Russia had no need to give promises and suggesting that Ukraine was solely to blame.

"The Russian Federation has not given, and will not give, any such assurances," Mr. Medvedev said at a news conference. "What on earth for? From our side, there are no problems; everything is in order with gas and with fulfilling our obligations. Let those who are required to pay for the gas give the assurances."

Mr. Medvedev added that he doubted whether Ukraine, which has been severely affected by the financial crisis, would be able to continue to pay for Russian gas for its own use. He indicated that both Russia and the European Union might need to step in to send assistance.

The president of the European Commission, Jose Manuel Barroso, emphasized that even in the absence of a formal arrangement, Russia and Ukraine had to settle their problems without threatening gas supplies and leaving Europeans freezing during the winter.

“Disruption in the transit and export of gas must not be allowed to occur again,” he said.

Last winter’s supply disruptions and subsequent strong-arm tactics from the Kremlin shook up both European consumers and Central Asian suppliers, helping revive long-stalled plans to build a pipeline to provide an alternative to Russian gas. But the so-called Nabucco pipeline has never managed to put together the elusive formula of plentiful supplies, customers and financing.

#7

Latvia Races to Cut Deficit to Keep to Its Bailout Deal

By Carter Dougherty

New York Times, May 24, 2009

RIGA, Latvia — Many countries in the world have felt the sting of the economic crisis, but few can match Latvia for sheer pain. A harrowing contraction in the economy is reordering expectations for the future as the country’s leaders grapple with a credit-fueled boom turned to bust.

Two brothers, Matiss and Oskars Barkoviskis, see it every day as they make their rounds here in their borrowed Mazda pickup truck. In the three months since they founded a charity for feeding the poor, they have discovered a strong and growing demand for their services.

In just that time, the number of families they visit each week has nearly doubled, with new ones answering ads in Riga’s free newspaper every day. They started by delivering groceries down the dirt roads outside Riga and into decrepit, Soviet-era high-rise apartment buildings. But now they find themselves helping out families who live in apparently comfortable surroundings, but who can no longer afford to feed themselves.

“Before we started this project, I never thought people could live like this,” said Matiss Barkoviskis, 20. “There is a sadness that I did not expect.”

It is not hard to grasp what stands behind the sour mood in Latvia. Forced into the arms of the International Monetary Fund, the Latvian government is now slashing its budget and the wages of state employees in a bid to rebalance a society that had run badly out of whack.

Austerity is rippling down the social hierarchy, as the affluent cancel vacations, middle-class people fret about social descent, and Dickensian scenes of destitution multiply.

In Riga, the capital, abandoned construction sites, vast lots of repossessed cars and a new, utterly empty shopping mall testify to the misery. But the government’s tough medicine for the crisis, stiffer than Black Balsam, the syrupy herbal liqueur that is the country’s national drink, has defined the times.

Latvia is racing to halve an enormous government budget deficit, now estimated at 12 percent of gross domestic product, even as its economy is expected to contract by 16.5 percent this year. That is a condition of the \$10 billion bailout by the I.M.F. that the European Union, of which Latvia is a member, also supported.

Prime Minister Valdis Dombrovskis, acutely aware that the previous government fell after Riga was shaken by riots in January, must now convince wary lawmakers that the country’s choices have narrowed to bad and worse.

“There is a growing awareness of what the problems are, but also what the alternatives are,” Mr. Dombrovskis said in an interview. “The alternative is not receiving international financing.”

The alternative, in other words, is default.

In better times, the global financial system would barely flinch at the idea of Latvian insolvency. But the other Baltic countries, Estonia and Lithuania, as well as Romania and Bulgaria and even Western stalwarts like Ireland all gorged on cheap credit and are all groaning under a heavy debt load. The last thing they want to see is a default, which could reignite a crisis that appears to be easing.

“Latvia is a reminder that there are other countries struggling with huge imbalances, though nobody has turned out as bad as Latvia,” said Lars Christensen, chief analyst at Danske Bank in Copenhagen, who has long warned of a convulsion in the region. “Some come pretty close.”

In the heady days after it gained membership in the European Union in 2004, Latvia pegged its currency, the lat, to the euro in anticipation of eventually adopting the European currency. Its economy blossomed and Riga, blessed with its abundance of stunning Art Nouveau architecture, emerged as a kind of capital of the Baltics.

Euro-denominated lending exploded, to the point where 85 percent of household debt was held in euros. But that seemed immaterial at the time, since the euro would soon replace the lat as the country’s currency, or so it was thought.

The lat is still with Latvia, however, and so is a colossal problem of how to devalue the currency — the usual adjustment mechanism in a financial crisis — without creating a crushing debt burden. Rather than let the currency decline, the government has chosen what it calls an “internal devaluation,” in which wages are forced downward to restore the economy’s equilibrium.

In December, the previous government reduced wages by at least 15 percent for most civil servants, and Mr. Dombrovskis is promising more. The government’s procurement budget was cut by a quarter, while the value-added tax increased to 21 percent from 18 percent. Exceptions for books and hotels fell away; excise duties on alcohol and gasoline rose.

The experience is weakening the bonds that Latvians feel for their state. Though proud of their heritage in language and culture, many now speak openly of emigration, and fading memories of citizens standing together with leaders to throw off Soviet domination 19 years ago only accentuate the alienation.

“Independence or bondage is an easy question to answer,” said Krisjanis Karins, a former Latvian economy minister. “This time it is not so cut and dried.”

Girts, a lanky 40-year-old doctor’s assistant, works three jobs in three hospitals for a monthly salary of \$1,350 and spends half his income servicing a euro-denominated mortgage on his apartment.

The mood at Latvia’s state-run hospitals, he said, is now one of foreboding, as employees gripe that managers did not share in the pain of a 20 percent wage cut in January — one that covered all government workers — and will dodge another later this year. “I have very little faith left in the Latvian state,” said Girts, who asked that his surname be withheld for fear of retribution by supervisors. “I don’t know how much longer this can go on.”

For Latvia’s poor, the mood falls somewhere between bewilderment and frustration, as families struggle to comprehend why their world has come apart.

It did not make them rich, but Latvia’s boom over the past few years reached Aija Voitov and her husband, Juris, who live in a two-room shack heated by a crude metal stove down a dirt road outside Riga.

Though Mr. Voitov switched jobs from time to time, work was plentiful, and Mrs. Voitov had only to walk over to the nearby main road to find work at a big supermarket. Three months ago, Mr. Voitov lost his job at a food processing factory where he had earned \$735 a month, a tiny enough sum. Since then, as the family scrapes by on state assistance, Mrs. Voitov confesses little comprehension of exactly what went wrong, only that in the past, things were better.

“It was normal, it was good,” Mrs. Voitov said. “There was plenty of work.”

#8

**Moldovan Communists Fail In Presidential Vote
Reuters, May 20, 2009**

CHISINAU -- Efforts by Moldova's Communist Party to keep its leader, Vladimir Voronin, in a position of power suffered a setback when his protegee was rejected as presidential candidate in a parliamentary vote.

Voronin, president since 2001, cannot seek a third term in office; but he has secured the position of parliament speaker, a job he hopes will enable him to maintain control of Europe's poorest country.

A second round of voting was immediately scheduled for next week. Failure then to elect a president would result in the chamber being dissolved and new parliamentary elections.

The outcome of the vote had been all but clear after three opposition parties said they would boycott the contest.

Valeriu Sava, head of parliament's election commission, said Prime Minister Zinaida Greceanii won 60 votes -- one less than the 61 needed to win in the former Soviet republic's 101-seat chamber.

Greceanii is seen as a loyalist easily controlled by Voronin. A second Communist candidate, entered to make the contest look more competitive, won no votes.

"It is necessary to organize a second round of voting," Voronin told the session convened in a large meeting hall. Within minutes, he told deputies a second round of voting would take place on May 28.

Parliamentary elections that sparked riots last month left the Communists with 60 seats and the opposition parties with a combined total of 41.

Igor Botan, head of the Adept think tank, said before the vote that the Communists had a better chance in a second round.

"In the second round, the stakes will be raised," he said. "But I still think the chances of an early parliamentary election are about 50-50."

Solving The Separatist Problem

In her address to deputies, Greceanii vowed to uphold the sovereignty and neutral status of the former Soviet republic. She also pledged to promote Moldova's integration with Europe and intensify efforts to solve an 18-year-old "frozen conflict" with separatists in the Russian-speaking Transdniestrian region.

"I will direct all my strength to enhancing Moldova's statehood," she told the session.

"A solution to Transdniestria is absolutely necessary for the existence of our state. We need to resume negotiations on Transdniestria in an internationally recognized format."

Plunging Moldova into new parliamentary elections could produce new turmoil in the country wedged between Ukraine and EU-member Romania, with which it shares historical and linguistic ties.

After the April elections, students disheartened by an economic crisis and the prospect of further Communist rule ransacked the presidential and parliamentary buildings. The opposition said the election was rigged and accused the police of brutality against protesters.

Leaders of opposition parties, broadly pro-Romanian and favoring closer links to the European Union, walked out of the session before voting started. They demand a new poll.

Voronin said the violent protests in April amounted to an attempted coup fuelled by Romanian support.

Voronin has overseen stability and economic growth but has been unable to solve the rebellion in Transdnister, a sliver of land populated by Russian speakers that broke away in 1990 because of fears Moldova might one day unite with Romania.

Voronin was at first close to Russia, then fell out with Moscow over its peacekeeping troops based in Transdnister, which he said blocked any resolution to the conflict. He has in the past year restored closer ties with Russia.

#9

Expert Says EU Must Act As 'One Voice' On Energy RFE/RL, May 22, 2009

Dr. Stefan Bouzarovski of the University of Birmingham, a visiting professor at Charles University in Prague, is an expert on the socioeconomic, environmental, and political aspects of energy production, transport, and consumption -- in particular energy equity, security of supply, and energy pipelines.

RFE/RL's Turkmen Service talked to Bouzarovski about the EU's Southern Corridor project and the Nabucco pipeline project to bring Caspian energy resources to Europe bypassing Russia.

RFE/RL: Developments in recent years have shown that using energy as a tool, Russia is increasingly able to influence EU decision-making, primarily through "divide and rule" tactics. The European Union moved to curb its heavy dependence on Russian gas on May 8 by signing a declaration to smooth the way for more natural-gas imports from the Caspian region. However, Central Asian countries, including Caspian country Turkmenistan, failed to sign the document while EU officials say negotiations with Turkmenistan are ongoing and progressing well. On account of this, experts seem divided on realizability of EU's Southern Corridor project, which includes the Nabucco pipeline. How do you see the future of this project?

Stefan Bouzarovski: I have to admit to being a little skeptical about the Nabucco project. It has been on the drawing board for a very long time and hasn't really taken off.

The project has two major barriers to overcome: a commercial and a supply one. In other words, it is unclear who will pay for it, and whether there will be enough gas for its supply. The source areas and transit routes of the pipeline are also mired in a set of very complex geopolitical and technical circumstances, because the supply from Turkmenistan (and possibly Kazakhstan) is unclear, and the possibility of getting gas from Iraq, Iran or other Middle Eastern countries has a whole host of additional difficulties associated with it. Using Turkey as a transit route, opens up, inter alia, the uncomfortable question of delayed EU accession for that country.

I am all for the diversification of Europe's piped gas supply through new overland routes, but Nabucco has to become more than just a top-down political project in order to be successful. Hopefully this will happen (and perhaps is already happening) without the need for too much government support.

RFE/RL: Russia is devising plans to avoid unfriendly transit countries. The Nord Stream and South Stream pipelines under the Baltic and the Black Sea are said to be part of this strategy. The policy would apparently help Moscow keep traditional transit countries under pressure, as supplies to those states could be cut without affecting deliveries to the West. While Russian gas giant Gazprom is drawing up long-term plans to strengthen its grip on Europe with pipeline projects backed by the Kremlin, what do you think the EU's response strategies should be?

Bouzarovski: I am not sure I agree that the sole purpose of Nord Stream or South Stream is to create the possibility for Russia to selectively cut supplies to "undesirable" EU member states, as there are a host of additional economic and technical considerations that make these routes more attractive for Gazprom.

And after all, overland gas flows are like love or war: it takes two to make them work. Any politically motivated interruption of gas supplies would immediately decrease Russia's credibility in Western European countries as well, forcing them to look for energy elsewhere.

Anyway, whatever Gazprom's intentions or interests may be, one thing is clear: the EU doesn't have a common energy policy. The EU has to act as one actor and one voice at the international stage, through policies backed by a common, strong, institutional framework within the EU itself.

As a continent, we also need to look into changing our energy demand patterns in order to decrease our import dependence and address climate-change issues. We keep thinking about energy security as a large international issue, but at the end it boils down to the energy security of individuals and local communities, and very little is being done in terms of devolving energy decision-making power to that level of governance.

EU Energy Cooperation

RFE/RL: Some expect that gas-rich Turkmenistan and other Central Asian countries may be tempted to choose the Russian option, especially since human rights groups are urging the EU to seize the opportunity to apply pressure on the Turkmen government to improve its record in this area. What policy do you think the EU should follow in this case to balance its focus on energy security and human rights issues?

Bouzarovski: Well, the answer to this is brief. I cannot see any rationale or justification for a Western democratic government or public to overlook human rights abuses in a Central Asian country in the name of supposed energy-security concerns.

RFE/RL: EU dependence on Russian gas does not appear to be quite so risky, unless figures for individual countries are considered. While Spain does not import any Russian gas at all, Poland, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, and Finland receive 100 percent of their gas from Russia. Accordingly, there seems to be lack of unity among EU countries on the energy-security strategies. What can help the EU to achieve intergovernmental solidarity among its member states in this situation?

Bouzarovski: The figures you quote are not entirely accurate and there are some other countries in the EU that are de facto more dependent on Russia for their gas supplies than the ones you listed, as evidenced, for example, by the severity of the January gas crisis in countries like Slovakia and Bulgaria, among others.

Paradoxically, I think it was thanks to that particular gas crisis that public opinion and politicians in some of the "older" EU states started to gradually become more aware of the deep extent to which we are politically, economically, and socially connected in this little continent of ours. Even though each state was left to fend for itself during the crisis, and in the end it seemed to be limited to countries that seem peripheral and not particularly influential within the EU, I don't think it will be so easy to provide containment if an infrastructural collapse like this happens in the future.

Not only does the geography of the continent force us to cooperate in political terms, but we are also inclined to develop stronger infrastructural linkages as well. If we had more LNG [liquefied natural gas] terminals, better transcontinental energy-supply connections, or a wider choice of alternative energy sources, the January gas crisis might have been avoided altogether across Europe.

RFE/RL: To what degree can the recent Eastern Partnership program (EPP) help the EU to secure its energy supplies?

Bouzarovski: The EPP can potentially provide a good institutional framework for developing closer political, social, and economic links with states at the EU's eastern border. In order to be more successful in the energy domain, however, it has to involve Russia in a more concerted way. Many of the countries in the EPP are themselves very strongly linked to Russia in energy and political terms.

I would also recommend the further strengthening of, and reliance on, formal institutional instruments for EU-Russia cooperation, like the Energy Charter treaty and the EU-Russia Energy Dialogue.

RFE/RL: Last week, Russia released a national security report that says battles over energy may lead to military conflicts. While there Russia has warned Europe to stay out of its so-called sphere of influence, do you think it might cause the EU to back away from attempts to strengthen its ties with potential Nabucco supplier Turkmenistan? Why or why not?

Bouzarovski: It is difficult for me to answer this question, as I am not an expert on Central Asian geopolitical issues and cannot speak about them with any confidence or certainty. I can only say that am aware that the international relations and politics of energy supply linked to places like Turkmenistan are highly complex, and that the vast majority of power games and horse trading take place far from the public eye. I don't think that one report or political statement can change that very easily.

RFE/RL: Is it reasonable to think of new energy solutions that the West might seek to find for its industries in the near future that will lead to a gradual drop in oil and gas prices beyond global crisis effects?

Bouzarovski: I am glad you asked this question, as I believe that energy-security concerns or oil- and gas-price volatility are just symptoms of a much wider problem: the intimate link between the political economy of capitalist development and large-scale hydrocarbon exploitation.

Until we decouple this link and move towards more environmentally and socially sustainable energy policies, everything we do will be like putting a plaster on a gaping wound. In the EU, we need a much more aggressive promotion of locally sourced renewable energy in order to move closer to this goal, among other policies.

#10

33 arrested in connection with Georgian mutiny AP, May 23, 2009

TBILISI, Georgia — Georgian police have arrested nearly three dozen people in connection with a recent mutiny led by tank battalion officers, a top lawmaker said Saturday.

Gigi Targamadze, a pro-government lawmaker who heads the parliament's defense committee, told Rustavi-2 TV that 20 of the 33 people arrested are military personnel, the rest civilians.

His comments came two days after police shot and killed a former military officer and wounded two others suspected of plotting the May 5 mutiny, which embarrassed President Mikhail Saakashvili's government and fueled opposition demands for him to resign.

The two wounded officers, Koba Otanadze and Levan Ameridze, were ordered jailed without bail Saturday for two months while the investigation continues, defense lawyer Onise Mebonia told the Associated Press.

Government officials initially claimed the short-lived mutiny was part of a Russian-backed plot to bring down the government, but later backtracked and said its apparent aim was to disrupt NATO military exercises under way in Georgia. Russia has criticized the exercises, which end June 1.

Georgia's long-standing political tensions have risen sharply since August's disastrous war with Russia, which saw Georgia's U.S.-trained and -supplied army routed and two of its breakaway regions effectively occupied by Russian troops. Moscow has since recognized the regions — South Ossetia and Abkhazia — as independent nations.

Saakashvili, a staunch U.S. ally, has faced weeks of street protests by opposition forces pressing for him to step aside over the war and allegations of authoritarian rule.

Opposition leaders have said they doubted the government's account of the mutiny, and accused Saakashvili of using it to draw attention away from the protests and problems facing the country.

#11

Russia's Medvedev raps ministers for gloomy forecasts

Reuters, May 26, 2009

BARKVIKHA, Russia - Russian President Dmitry Medvedev on Tuesday lashed out at ministers who give gloomy economic forecasts, a move widely seen as a rebuke to Finance Minister Alexei Kudrin.

The remarks come as Russia goes through the painful process of drafting the budget for 2010 -- in which Kudrin is playing a key role - after being forced to drastically cut spending in 2009 due to a sharp fall in the price of oil.

Kudrin, a finance minister since 2000 despite periodic rumours about resignation, is a regular subject of criticism from ministers, governors and politicians for his hawkish fiscal role in keeping a lid on state spending.

"When my colleagues from the government say that Russia will not come out of the crisis for another 50 years, it is unacceptable. If you think so - go and work somewhere else," Medvedev told a meeting with Russian businessmen.

Kudrin in April predicted that Russia's first recession in a decade may last for a very long time. Former Kremlin chief Vladimir Putin, who now serves as prime minister, said the comment showed Kudrin was stressed out.

Kudrin, while in Washington for the G20 finance ministers meeting, said that he was not under stress and that his remarks had been misinterpreted.

He said he had meant that Russia may not see a period of windfall oil and gas revenues for another 10, 20 or perhaps 50 years.

#12

Russian Uranium Sale to U.S. Is Planned

By Andrew E. Kramer and Matthew L. Wald

New York Times, May 26, 2009

MOSCOW — Russia, already a large supplier of nuclear-reactor fuel to Europe and Asia, is expected on Tuesday to sign its first purely commercial contract to supply low-enriched uranium to United States utilities.

With the signing, Russia's nuclear-fuel trade with the United States will shift to a commercial footing, similar to Russia's dealings with other consumers of fuel, like France and the Netherlands, both longtime buyers of Russian uranium.

For the United States, the change is a sign that Washington is acquiescing to the idea of a major Russian role not only in the international nuclear power market, but also in the domestic market. Russia's outsize role in supplying uranium to American utilities had previously been justified because the fuel was a byproduct of a program to eliminate nuclear weapons. Now the Russians will be selling nuclear fuel from virgin uranium.

Yet the contract signing, after North Korea's nuclear test on Monday, also underscores a counterintuitive element of American nonproliferation policies.

The policy of buying diluted, or blended-down, Russian weapons-grade uranium yielded a clear nonproliferation benefit. The new mode — of having the Russians enrich new uranium for United States markets — is not directly beneficial for nuclear security because it does not remove weapons-grade uranium from stockpiles.

Yet by encouraging the commercial availability of Russian enrichment services, the United States deprives other countries of the rationale to have enrichment programs of their own.

The United States continues to want to see Russian weapons material blended down where possible, and is encouraging a largely open market to allow Russian enrichment facilities built for military purposes to become part of the international market for enrichment.

As a legacy of the cold war, Russia possesses about 40 percent of the world's uranium enrichment capacity, much more than it needs to service its domestic reactors, and it has sought direct access to the American utilities market for years.

"We are finally working in the principle of mutual profit," Sergei G. Novikov, a spokesman for the Russian state nuclear energy company, Rosatom, said in an interview about the expected first contract signing.

Techsnabexport, the Russian state company that exports low-enriched uranium, is expected to sign the contract in Moscow with a consortium of American nuclear companies. Techsnabexport declined to identify its American partners or the size of the contract on Monday.

The new contract is separate from a program to dilute surplus weapons uranium into civilian fuel for use in American reactors. Under that so-called megatons to megawatts program, begun in 1993, Russia is already the largest supplier of enriched uranium to American utilities and provides about half of all uranium consumed in civilian reactors in the United States.

Yet Russia has been prohibited from selling directly to the utilities by provisions of American law to prevent dumping at below-market prices, and it was compelled to deal only through a monopoly importer, the United States Enrichment Corporation.

That company was originally part of the United States Department of Energy, and the megaton-to-megawatts deal was a government-to-government agreement. When the United States sold off the enrichment corporation to a private company, the new entity was given a continuing monopoly on the sale of blended-down warhead materials from Russia. The company, USEC, said it paid competitive prices for the material. The Russians, meanwhile, complained that they were being underpaid.

In a negotiated settlement in February 2008, the United States agreed to allow Russia to sell low-enriched uranium directly to domestic utilities without the involvement of the enrichment corporation. But all sales of diluted weapons uranium will still go through the corporation. A spokeswoman for the company said the initial direct Russian sales will be small and will not harm its business.

Nuclear reactors run on uranium that is composed of 3 to 5 percent uranium 235. In nature, uranium is only 0.7 percent uranium 235.

Uranium used in weapons and in the reactors that power nuclear submarines use more than 90 percent uranium 235. "Enrichment" means raising the proportion of 235 compared with the dominant type, 238, and the Russian industry was set up to provide large volumes of high-enriched uranium for weapons and marine reactors.

Russia is a major supplier to the developing world by tapping this cold war-era military industrial base. It has provided 80 tons of low-enriched uranium manufactured into fuel assemblies to Iran for use in that country's Bushehr reactor, for a price of \$46 million, according to Atomstroyexport, the Russian contractor building the reactor.

#13

For Whom the Kremlin Bell Tolls

By Nikolai Petrov

Moscow Times, May 26, 2009

The Kremlin-connected Public Opinion Foundation regularly conducts polls in 60 regions across the country. Although the foundation does not usually divulge its findings to the public, it recently released the results of two surveys conducted in November and March.

The latter survey reported that for the first time in six years, only 36 percent of those questioned held a favorable opinion of their regional leaders, while 37 percent held a negative opinion. Similarly, 38 percent of respondents nationwide felt that the government is doing a good job, and 36 percent thought just the opposite. Only in the three regions where the leaders enjoy broad popular support -- Tatarstan, Khanty-Mansiisk and Tomsk -- were more people satisfied than dissatisfied with the state of affairs.

The survey revealed a direct correlation between a region's economic condition and the popularity of its leader, with the Voronezh region and its governor faring the worst and the republic of Tatarstan and its president at the top of the list. It turns out that people hold their regional leaders to be more directly responsible for the situation in the region than they do the federal government.

Although respondents in some regions gave similar ratings to both their regional heads and the federal government -- with high marks given in Tatarstan and Khanty-Mansiisk and a more critical assessment in the Tver and Saratov regions -- the results in a number of other regions were mixed. For example, people questioned in the Udmurtia and Tambov regions gave a relatively positive appraisal of the federal government but a more negative evaluation of their regional leaders.

The survey revealed that a number of major gubernatorial figures had suffered a serious blow to their authority, with popularity ratings falling by an average of 20 percent for Valentina Matviyenko of St. Petersburg, Valery Shantsev of Nizhny Novgorod, Eduard Rossel of Sverdlovsk, Alexander Tkachyov of Krasnodar and many others.

It appears that the governors of the urbanized and industrialized regions that suffered the worst by the crisis fell furthest in their ratings. Among the few regional heads whose popularity actually increased, the most notable are the recently installed governors of Kirov, Orlov and Khakasia. But this is not so much a vote of confidence in their performance as it is hope that things might improve.

Respondents gave their lowest evaluations to governors Dmitry Zelenin of Tver, Alexander Mikhailov of Kursk, Pavel Ipatov of Saratov, Sergei Katanandov of Karelia and to the governors of Voronezh and Pskov.

Overall, the governors of the Urals and Siberia received above-average ratings, even though their regions did not escape the effects of the crisis, while the heads of the northwest and southern regions were seen as below average.

It would be incorrect to interpret the survey results as necessarily a negative appraisal of any particular governor, although it seems that was precisely the intention of the Kremlin in releasing the data. First, the findings show an overall decrease in people's faith in the authorities and not in any particular public official. Second, governors are seen as Moscow strongholds or "ambassadors" appointed by the Kremlin. They are like a fence between the federal government and citizens, and this protects Prime Minister Vladimir Putin from negative fallout during the crisis.

But even if the federal authorities manage to deflect some of the responsibility for the crisis onto regional leaders, they won't be able to get away with this forever.

Nikolai Petrov is a scholar in residence at the Carnegie Moscow Center.

#14
History And The Politics Of Blame
In some post-Soviet states, current interpretations understate Russia's sacrifices in defeating fascism.
By Peter Lavelle
RFE/RL, May 26, 2009

The past is never really in the past as long as it pervades our present. And recent history is very much with us.

This is why Russian President Dmitry Medvedev has established a commission to protect against "falsification of historical facts and events aimed at damaging Russia's international prestige." This move has sparked considerable controversy both in Russia and in Western mainstream media. This is as it should be; history matters.

Medvedev's history commission is a reaction to the way history, particularly events before, during, and after the Second World War, is being reinterpreted and even rewritten in a number of post-Soviet and Eastern European states. This approach often undermines, or even denies, the role the Soviet Union played in the defeat of Nazi Germany. In some Baltic republics and Ukraine, Nazi collaborators are even honored as war veterans, while Soviet war memorials are moved or dismantled. Many in Russia consider this not only insulting, but also a dangerous rehabilitation of ideas that their countrymen paid such a high price to eliminate.

The hitherto accepted history of the Second World War (or the Great Patriotic War, as it is known in Russia) is undergoing revision. This should not surprise anyone; that traditional narrative was a product of the Cold War. The ideological conflict that pitted Soviet developed socialism against Western capitalism resulted in diverging, ideologically couched explanations for the defeat of Nazi Germany.

The Western take was that the Allies, specifically the United States, "saved the world from tyranny in the name of democracy and other liberal values." Soviet ideologists, by contrast, stressed "the defeat of a murderous and very aggressive ideology: fascism."

As long as the Cold War continued, these two renditions could coexist, although the West consistently understated the Soviet contribution to Hitler's defeat. All of this started to change with the self-collapse of the Soviet Union.

Every country and every society needs a common history. National narratives bind a nation together and create a sense of community. All the new sovereign states that came into being with the end of the Soviet Union are very keen to establish new national histories. But in doing so, most of them have to address specific episodes related to the Second World War.

Warring Histories

As the successor state to the Soviet Union, Russia adheres steadfastly to the belief that it liberated a great swathe of Europe from fascism. To craft what they believe are coherent, if not self-satisfying, national histories, many in the Baltics, Ukraine, and some eastern European states are challenging Russia's historical rendition. They claim that not only did the Soviet Union not liberate them from fascism, but that it replaced Nazi Germany as the occupying power.

Embedded in this claim is a double-edged sword. First, those who argue that the Soviets should not be credited with defeating fascism implicitly also deny the role of those in the Baltic republics, Ukraine, and Eastern Europe who sacrificed their lives to end Nazi rule. Second, there is also denial about how many Soviet republics, and even eastern European countries, bowed to Soviet domination, but also benefited from it.

To be sure, there were those who didn't, and their grievances are legitimate and should be heard. However, history is not as black and white as nationalist historians and governments would like us to believe. For example, I lived in Poland during much of the 1980s when the free trade union Solidarity was enjoying its greatest popularity. At the time, Polish society was polarized; one-third of the population strongly supported Solidarity, and one-third the pro-Moscow regime, while the remaining third waited on the sidelines to see how the standoff between those two would end. And to this day, some Poles still have many good things to say about Communist Poland.

What is very disturbing about historical revisionism when it comes to the Second World War is the attempt to airbrush from the record fascist ideas, groups, and individuals that infested Europe in the 1930s and 40s. The Cold War-era interpretation of the Second World War was a convenient opportunity to overlook nasty homegrown fascism all over Europe, particularly in the east.

After the war ended, few wanted to dwell on how fascism and gross rightwing nationalism -- very often anti-Semitic -- captured the imagination of the European body politic. Political imperatives were far more important, and so confronting the Soviet Union took precedence. It became acceptable to ignore unpleasant episodes.

This is still happening today. Instead of facing up to the sins of the past, it is all too easy to blame contemporary Russia for the real or imagined sins of the Soviet Union. Using this line of argument, Russia can and should claim it, too, was a victim of the Soviet Union.

It is unfortunate that a new discursive pathology has come into vogue. Many feel that the sole way to prove their historical legitimacy and virtue is by casting themselves in the role of victim. This is history gone wrong. All too often a person's national identity is defined by how someone else wronged him or her.

Today states blame other states for their own problems in the present because of a very specific, and again self-serving, interpretation of what happened in the past. Equally unfortunate is the knee-jerk tendency to blame "undemocratic" Russia for the woes of its neighbors. This is politics on the cheap and a contemptible attitude to what history should really be all about.

Denying the Holocaust is a legal offense in Germany. This is the case in many countries in the world, and is morally right. Consigning to oblivion the murder of millions of people is simply wrong. Russia wants the same to hold true for the 27 million Soviet citizens (at the very least) who gave their lives to defeat Hitler's murderous regime.

It is a real shame that Russia feels it needs a commission to monitor how others interpret history. History should not be used as a political tool to divide people and countries. In fact, just the opposite should be happening.

Germany and France embarked upon an open and honest discussion to reconcile their long-standing historical differences. What we see now is the opposite: history is being used to divide countries and peoples. These divisions in turn open the door for the worst possibility: the slow but very real rehabilitation of a new form of fascism.

Peter Lavelle is a political commentator for Russia Today television (RT) and is the host of the weekend program "In Context." The views expressed in this commentary are his own, and do not necessarily reflect those of RT or RFE/RL.

#15

Competing for Privilege

By Dmitry Trenin

Moscow Times, May 25, 2009

Sooner or later, it was bound to happen. While Russia was determined to create a center of power in the Commonwealth of Independent States, the enlarged European Union started paying more attention not only to the "new Eastern Europe" (Belarus, Moldova and Ukraine), but also to the South Caucasus and Central Asia -- all areas of what is still being called, with decreasing validity, the former Soviet Union. Europe's Eastern Partnership with Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine is the clearest statement so far of its capability and willingness to project its soft power onto what Moscow regards as its hereditary sphere of influence.

Few in Moscow were amused by the EU's move, sponsored as it was by Stockholm and Warsaw and presented in Prague. The Kremlin sees the Eastern Partnership -- under the guise of innocent-enough goals that few could oppose, such as increased trade and cooperation -- as yet another geopolitical attempt by the West to wean these countries away from Moscow's orbit. The tension was seen at the EU-Russia summit on Friday in Khabarovsk, despite the smiles and friendly protocol that was observed.

For some, the only solace is that Eastern Partnership may be too weak and unsustainable for a real breakthrough. With just a few hundred million euros in the bank and no prospect of EU membership for any of the six former Soviet republics in the foreseeable future, the initiative might as well fizzle out after the Swedish EU presidency in the second half of 2009. When it comes to relations with Russia, the EU is notoriously disunited.

Whether apprehensive or dismissive, Moscow sees the situation in terms of a geopolitical competition between itself ("defending its birthright") and an assertive West ("expanding its influence.") Some may even remember the mock warnings heard from some U.S. observers a decade ago: For Russia, NATO's enlargement to the east will have very "light" consequences compared with the EU's. To those Russians who at the time took the position of "anything but NATO," they quoted the old Chinese curse, "be careful what you wish for." Now, these warnings are being vindicated.

The Russians are right about increased competition in their neighborhood but wrong about its nature and its drivers. The name of the game is not dominance and allegiance but freedom and models of development. The new Eastern Europeans and nations of the South Caucasus are not a prize to be won or lost in a global geopolitical game. They decide for themselves who they want to align themselves with -- the EU, Russia or perhaps some combination of the two.

The choice is not a simple "switching of alliances." For all the talk of a Brussels diktat, the six countries -- just like the Central Europeans before them -- feel much more comfortable dealing with a nonhegemonic EU than a heavy-handed Moscow. Europe may see the six nations as backward and requiring economic assistance, but it treats them as independent. Moscow, by contrast, unabashedly views the neighbors as its own "zone of interests" (or "privileged interests," as President Dmitry Medvedev distinctively coined.) This creates apprehension in those countries that remember very well what it is like to spend decades under Moscow's control. It is noteworthy that in the aftermath of the Georgia war last August, not a single Russian ally or integration partner followed Moscow in recognizing Abkhazia or South Ossetia. They all refused not out of any affection or sympathy for Georgia or President Mikheil Saakashvili. They were simply sending a Moscow a distinct message: We are independent states, not adjuncts of a former superpower.

The issue is not just money either. Although money is important, especially in a crisis, it is the opportunity that the world's largest economy generates that motivates Russia's neighbors. By contrast, Russia remains an economy largely built on energy and raw material resources, and once it phased out subsidies for its gas deliveries and started using economic sanctions for political ends, its power of attraction diminished greatly. Countries that seek paths to faster development and economic modernization look to the West, not to Moscow.

Whether the six Eastern Partnership countries succeed or fail makes a lot of difference to themselves, the EU and Russia. They need all the support and attention from Brussels and the EU member states that they can get. Ukraine, in particular, is crucial. Putting the divisive NATO issue to one side, Kiev and Brussels need to focus on the EU to help modernize the largest country in Eastern Europe. Moldova, one of the EU's smallest and poorest new partners, requires urgent attention in Brussels to prevent a social and economic meltdown on Europe's doorstep. In Moldova and the South Caucasus, the EU needs to become more present and effective as Russia's partner in resolving the many conflicts. And as Europe diversifies its energy imports, it will need to become more seriously involved with the countries in the Caspian region. This calls for a long-term EU strategy and a coordinated foreign policy. This is a tall order, but if successful it will be a quantum leap for Europe.

Ironically, Russia is likely to benefit from Europe's cohesion and its neighbors' success. Moscow's obsession with the 19th-century notions of geopolitics is a drag on its own post-imperial adjustment. Only when it is fully divested of these hang-ups will it be able to find a fitting place and a useful role for itself in the globalized environment.

In the long term, Russia will probably not follow its neighbors into the EU, although joining a pan-European economic area and a European-Atlantic security compact would make a lot of sense. Russia will stay as a separate unit, but it will recognize the EU not as its geopolitical rival, but as a regional leader and a rich source of modernization. The Kremlin will live to enjoy the proximity and learn to profit from the occasional friction.

Finally, it will also learn the art of dealing with smaller neighbors through methods other than dominating, bullying or punishing them.

By 2030, United Europe for Russia may begin just beyond Belgorod and Bryansk. This will be a huge relief for a country whose standing in the world will be decided not by what occurs in Europe but by what happens in Asia.

Dmitry Trenin is director of the Carnegie Moscow Center.

#16

In Siberia, the Death Knell of a Complex Holding a Deadly Stockpile

By Clifford J. Levy

New York Times, May 27, 2009

MOSCOW — Soon after the Soviet Union's collapse, an American inspection team arrived at a decrepit storage complex in Siberia. The front gate was guarded by a scrawny teenage soldier who had not been paid in months. Giant sheds seemed to hold little of value. Why else would their doors be secured only with rusty bicycle locks?

The reality was far more disturbing: the sheds contained two million artillery shells and warheads filled with nerve agents, extremely deadly substances, row after row, stacked like cordwood. Many were portable, and a single one detonated in a stadium or other crowded area could kill tens of thousands of people.

Today, the site has been transformed. The inspection in 1994 was a catalyst for a far-reaching American plan to destroy those chemical weapons, culminating in the formal opening scheduled for Friday of a facility nearby to carry out the work.

The new facility, built with \$1 billion in American aid, represents a milestone in a longstanding partnership between the United States and Russia to safeguard and in many cases liquidate enormous quantities of chemical, nuclear and biological weapons manufactured by the Soviet Union.

This overall arrangement between the nations has often been troubled, and the project to eradicate the chemical weapons site in the Siberian city of Shchuchye, first proposed in 1996, has been repeatedly delayed. Some members of Congress sought to end financing, asserting that Russia should pay for the program itself, and the United States Defense Department's oversight of the project was questioned by Congressional auditors.

For its part, Russia imposed unwieldy regulations on the project, and it was reluctant to use its own money. In general, the Kremlin under Vladimir V. Putin has grown much more secretive about these weapons sites, making it more difficult for American officials to verify how money is being spent.

Still, American and Russian officials are hailing the opening of the new facility at Shchuchye (pronounced SHOO-che), 1,000 miles east of Moscow and just east of the Ural Mountains. They said these chemical weapons were in some respects a far more potent terrorist threat than nuclear ones because they are much easier to steal and deploy.

The opening of the facility underscores how the United States and Russia have been able to hew to certain arms agreements even as overall relations soured during the Bush administration.

"This is one of the most historic steps forward ever in nonproliferation," said Paul F. Walker, who took part in the 1994 inspection as a Congressional aide and is now a senior official at Global Green USA, an affiliate of an environmental organization begun by Mikhail S. Gorbachev, the former Soviet leader.

"One of the most dangerous chemical weapons arsenals in the world is finally getting demilitarized," Mr. Walker said. "And it's been a long, long time."

As the early inspection of Shchuchye demonstrated, Russia's economic and political disarray in the early 1990s had severe consequences for its military infrastructure. American officials became alarmed that unconventional weapons could fall into the hands of terrorists.

In 1991, two senators, Sam Nunn, Democrat of Georgia, and Richard G. Lugar, Republican of Indiana, proposed a program to help the countries of the former Soviet Union secure and destroy those weapons.

However rocky, the relative success of the Nunn-Lugar program has been cited by some Obama administration officials as offering hope for negotiations on future treaties. Russian and American officials are now engaged in talks on a new version of the Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty, or Start, which expires in December.

The shells and warheads at Shchuchye contain about 5,950 tons of nerve agents, including sarin and VX. To dispose of them, a hole will be drilled into each, and the agents will be drained and mixed with other chemicals to neutralize them. The residue will be solidified in asphalt or a similar material.

While the facility's formal opening is on Friday, it began preliminary operations in March. Russia ended up allocating roughly \$600 million for the project, and other countries contributed as well.

It has taken years to develop the process to eliminate the nerve agents, with the Russians choosing not to incinerate them because of local opposition. It might be five years or more before all the weapons are neutralized.

"It turns out that it is a lot easier to produce chemical weapons than to destroy them," said Igor V. Rybalchenko, a scientist who is a senior adviser to the Russian government.

Mr. Rybalchenko said the methods being used were safe. However, environmental groups expressed concern about the potential for accidents at the new facility. They contend that the Russian government has long violated environmental laws at such sites.

Lev A. Fyodorov, president of the Russian Union for Chemical Safety, said people in Shchuchye had seen fires and other accidents at the storage complex in recent years, yet the government had never publicized them or explained what safety measures it had undertaken.

"At American storage bases, many kinds of accidents have occurred, and we know about them," Mr. Fyodorov said. "In Russia, do we know about such things at Russian bases? Of course not. I am a Russian citizen, and the Russian government does not tell me anything. Do we need to destroy chemical weapons? Of course. But do we need to violate the environmental rules of Russia to do this?"

Russia and the United States have the vast majority of the world's chemical weapons, and they have pledged to dispose of them under the Chemical Weapons Convention. Both countries have encountered problems in financing and logistics, and they are not expected to meet the 2012 deadline.

Shchuchye, in fact, has only 14 percent of Russia's chemical weapons, which are kept at seven sites.

But Shchuchye is considered perhaps the most critical location because many of the nerve agents are in shells. The city is close to Kazakhstan, which itself is near Afghanistan.

Senator Lugar recalled that he often had to fend off Congressional opposition to the Shchuchye project, especially from Republicans who said that American aid was allowing Russia to spend its own money on bolstering its military.

But Senator Lugar, who plans to attend the opening ceremony on Friday, said that on an earlier visit, a single gesture showed that the storage site endangered the whole world.

"I took one of those shells," he said, "and put it in a briefcase."

#17

Israeli parliament marks Yiddish Culture Day

By Aron Heller

AP, May 26, 2009

JERUSALEM— Oy Gevalt! Yiddish has been uttered in the Israeli parliament!

Long disparaged in Hebrew-speaking Israel as the native tongue of Diaspora Jews, the centuries-old lingo made a comeback Tuesday with the first ever Yiddish Culture Day.

Marking 150 years since the birth of Sholem Aleichem, the popular Russian-Jewish author of Yiddish literature, and 20 years since the establishment of the Yiddish theater in Tel Aviv, lawmakers gathered to discuss ways to preserve and promote the German-based language written with the Hebrew alphabet.

It was the language of Jews of eastern Europe. They were decimated in the Nazi Holocaust of World War II, just as the founders of the Jewish state were promoting Hebrew and ridiculing Yiddish, leaving the language without a wide base.

At Israel's parliament on Tuesday, organizers handed out a Yiddish handbook to lawmakers so they could study poignant Yiddishisms, and guests were treated to a Yiddish concert.

Yiddish traces its origins to the 10th century and flourished among Jewish Ashkenazi culture in the 20th century before the Holocaust.

Sholem Aleichem's Yiddish stories about Tevye the Milkman were the inspiration for the 1964 musical "Fiddler on the Roof." The most notable Yiddish writer of recent years is Isaac Bashevis Singer.

The language is currently spoken in patches of ultra-Orthodox Jewish communities in Israel, the United States, the former Soviet Union and elsewhere.

"People have been eulogizing Yiddish for 500 years, but it is much too soon for that — Yiddish will live on forever," said lawmaker Lia Shemtov, chairwoman of the parliamentary lobby for the preservation of Yiddish. "It is more than a language. It is the culture and the history of our people."

Zevulun Orlev, a 63-year-old lawmaker, recalled how Yiddish was his mother tongue as a child in Israel before he and his older sister forced their Polish-born parents to adopt the local language.

"So my parents learned Hebrew, but we lost our Yiddish," he said. "Today, I regret that very much. Only now, when we have shed our Diaspora complex, do we feel secure enough in our Israeli identity to appreciate this rich language."

#18

Medvedev reaches out to Russia's struggling businesses

By Anna Smolchenko

AFP, May 26, 2009

BARVIKHA, Russia → President Dmitry Medvedev reached out on Tuesday to Russian businesses hit hard by the downturn, as officials gave more stark warnings on the state of the economy.

After issuing a stern rebuke to officials for their doom-and-gloom predictions, Medvedev quipped that he might decree the country had reached the bottom of the crisis if that would help ease businesses' access to loans.

"It is clear that without successful entrepreneurship our state will not have a future," Medvedev told two dozen business leaders, most from small and medium sized companies, gathered at his residence outside Moscow.

Some of those gathered in a white tent pitched on the lawn at Medvedev's Barvikha residence complained it was very difficult to get bank loans, with interest rates as high as 24 percent, and access to foreign-made agriculture and other equipment was scarce, among other issues.

Igor Kim, chief executive of MDM bank, said it would be hard for companies to get access to credit from banks before the economy reached a trough.

Medvedev jokingly replied: "There is a possibility to issue a decree about the crisis reaching the bottom."

He insisted lenders were not the "enemies of the people" and that there would be "more or less normal rates in the foreseeable future."

Russian officials on Tuesday announced an even gloomier economic outlook than previously anticipated.

One unnamed official told Russian news agencies the budget deficit this year would equal nine percent of gross domestic product (GDP) and Deputy Economy Minister Andrei Klepach said GDP shrank by 10.5 percent in April compared to the same month last year.

The government has taken a series of steps to prop up the economy as the country heads into its first recession in a decade but businesses have long complained they are not receiving money from state banks meant for them.

During the two-hour meeting, which was fully open to the media in a break with the Kremlin tradition, Medvedev took pains to show his knowledge of the problems the business faced.

"Ninety-five percent of what you told me about I am aware of," he said. "We don't have a movement forward."

Several of those present told Medvedev that being a private businessman was so hard in the country that young Russian people would rather land state jobs than become entrepreneurs.

"Entrepreneurship is not a dream for people," said Ruben Vardanyan, chairman of Troika Dialog, a leading investment bank.

Medvedev said he was an optimist, however. "I believe that the youth should also be oriented towards working in business, private business first and foremost," he added.

#19

'Red Dawn' redux: Russia begins massive military modernization effort

Some 36,000 officers are expected to be cut this year and many Soviet-era 'phantom divisions' eliminated. But will the economic crisis undercut reforms?

By Fred Weir

Christian Science Monitor, May 26, 2009

Moscow - After nearly two decades of false starts and failures, the Kremlin appears determined to begin the radical military reforms needed to fashion a modern army from the tangled wreckage of its Soviet-era armed forces.

Unlike previous attempts, little public fanfare accompanies the current effort to modernize Russia's army, begun in earnest after the dismal assessments began rolling in of the military's performance in last August's war with the tiny Caucasus republic of Georgia.

But behind-the-scenes infighting has reportedly been furious, pitting Prime Minister Vladimir Putin and President Dmitry Medvedev against most of the military's general staff, as well as some powerful nationalist and conservative political forces.

In the past month, several top generals and defense ministry officials have been sacked by the Kremlin, including chief of the GRU military intelligence Valentin Korabelnikov and head of the main personnel directorate, Mikhail Vodzakin, effectively crushing institutional resistance to the reforms, experts say.

Although the overall size of Russia's armed forces will slip modestly from just under 1.2 million to 1 million men, the planned changes will slash the 355,000-strong officer corps, particularly the bloated upper ranks, by almost 150,000. More importantly, it will reconfigure the forces to eliminate many Soviet-era "phantom" divisions, which have generals but no troops. In their place, a smaller number of fully staffed units will be formed and — eventually, it is hoped — retrained, equipped with modern weapons, and handed a fresh mission that expresses Russia's post-Soviet national priorities.

Supporters of the reform are jubilant. "By the end of this year Russia will have a new army," says Vitaly Shlykov, a former deputy defense minister who now works as a civilian adviser to the defense ministry. "All these skeleton formations from Soviet times will be replaced with real, functioning units. This alone is an achievement we have not seen in Russia for 150 years, a triumph of common sense over bureaucratic inertia."

But opponents insist this reform, which comes after almost two decades of futile tinkering with the military, will only hasten the collapse of Russia's once-proud armed services.

"This is not a reform, it is the final blow to the army," says Viktor Ilyukhin, a leading Communist parliamentarian and deputy chair of the State Duma's Security Committee. "The essence of these measures seems to be to cut staff, especially the officer corps. We are losing the professional basis of our army, and demoralizing those who remain. Officers have been constantly under stress of these endless reforms for the past 15 years or more, and they are exhausted and harassed by the constant threats of dismissal or demotion. This is the biggest damage."

A more efficient fighting force

At the heart of the debate are sweeping plans to abolish the Soviet-era "mobilization" army, which was designed to fight World War II against the massed forces of the West. In line with that model, the Russian military still maintains far-flung facilities, vast stockpiles of armaments, and an organizational structure that is meant to be filled out with millions of reservists in short order.

Besides streamlining the army's structure, the plans call for the military to sell off many assets that will not be needed in future, including factories, tracts of land, massive fuel dumps, and armories stuffed with outdated weapons.

"Our authorities are spurred by genuine necessity to make these changes," says Viktor Myasnikov, a military expert with the independent Moscow daily newspaper *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*. "The mobilization army utilizes the resources of the entire country; the whole economy serves its needs first, the country's needs second. It's expensive and threatens to bring Russia to the brink of bankruptcy. If we're to have a market economy, the army must be separated from the economy."

A 'complete outsider' is leading the reforms

The Kremlin's point man in this effort is Anatoly Serdyukov, the former head of a furniture company, who was appointed as defense minister by Mr. Putin two years ago. Although Mr. Serdyukov's immediate predecessor, the former KGB general Sergei Ivanov, was technically Russia's first-ever civilian defense minister, experts say that Serdyukov's advantage is that he's a pure politician, with no ties to any segment of the former Soviet military machine.

"Attempted military restructurings failed in the past because a minister would come into office, start favoring his branch of the service at the expense of others, and call that 'reform,' " says Mr. Shlykov, who was a war planner for the GRU intelligence service in Soviet times. "That's why a minister who's a complete outsider was the right idea."

Another difference is that Serdyukov is open to fresh ideas, Shlykov says. "In the past, to mention US or German experience was anathema" to the military brass, he says. "But we need to learn from the experience of other countries, and Serdyukov is willing to listen. That's a big change."

No end to conscription

One reason the Kremlin has waged a low-key battle for military change, without attempting to mobilize public support, is that most Russians view abolition of the hated military draft as the most urgent priority of reform, and that does not appear to be in the cards anytime soon. Like his predecessor, Boris Yeltsin, Putin reneged on pledges to end conscription, though he did shorten the length of obligatory service to just one year.

Supporters of the current reform argue that conscription will have to remain until all the preconditions of a professional army have been put in place, though they admit this is unlikely to attract much popular support. "The task right now is to make structural changes, equip the military with modern arms, and improve social welfare of army people," says Valentin Rudenko, a military expert with the independent Interfax-Military news agency. "It's still too early to say how it's going to work, because we don't see any results yet."

Paying for the reforms?

One glowering threat on the horizon is the growing economic crisis, which could force the Kremlin to scale back its ambitious \$200 billion rearmament program, thus validating critics who argue that the army is simply being gutted, not rebuilt.

Another threat is that some of the officers to be let go – an estimated 36,000 this year – might fail to find new jobs in Russia's economy, where unemployment now tops 10 percent, and end up turning to crime. Following the collapse of the USSR, thousands of trained military and KGB specialists poured into the private sector, many of them going to work for the notorious Russian "mafia."

"The economic crisis has broken the plans for military reform," says Viktor Baranets, one of Russia's best-known military experts who has a regular column with the popular Moscow daily Komsomolskaya Pravda. "My computer is literally burning with all the letters I get from officers complaining. We see serious reductions in supplies, procurement of modern equipment, and cutting off of social programs for officers" due to the economic downturn, he says.

"Military officers seem to lack any confidence in the future, and if this continues the army is going to go into shock and nothing else."

#20

After Initial Mild Reaction, Kremlin May Consider Tougher Stance on Tests

By Philip P. Pan

Washington Post, May 28, 2009

MOSCOW, May 27 -- For years, Russia has appeared to take a back seat in international efforts to persuade North Korea to abandon its pursuit of nuclear weapons. It urged diplomacy and resisted tougher sanctions, but usually let China take the lead in relations with Pyongyang.

There are signs, however, that the Kremlin may be considering a more active, tougher stance following Monday's surprise test of a nuclear device by North Korea less than 60 miles from the Russian border.

After an initial, mild expression of "concern" by the Russian foreign minister, the government issued a high-level statement denouncing the underground blast as a "direct violation" of U.N. resolutions.

"Initiators of decisions on nuclear tests bear personal responsibility for them to the world community," said Natalya Timakova, chief spokeswoman for President Dmitry Medvedev, adding that the test "deals a blow to international efforts to strengthen the global regime of nuclear nonproliferation."

Timakova also said North Korea's nuclear program was "linked to the development of rocket technologies" and described the connection as "a source of particular anxiety," according to the Interfax news agency. Russian officials previously played down the threat posed by the North's missile program.

Meanwhile, Russia's ambassador to the United Nations convened an emergency meeting of the Security Council to condemn the test and pledged to support a strong new resolution against North Korea. Russia holds the rotating presidency of the council this month.

"The reaction has been quite serious and quite unusual," said Alexander Pikayev, a top arms control expert at the Institute of World Economy and International Relations here. "Moscow is really concerned. North Korea most likely has an operational deterrent now with this successful test. So this changes the whole situation."

Pikayev said the Kremlin generally defers to China on how to manage North Korea because it recognizes that Beijing has greater leverage over Pyongyang. But the government now appears to favor tougher sanctions, he said, and "might try to convince the Chinese to take more serious actions."

Vasily Mikheev, a senior Asia scholar at the Russian Academy of Sciences, said Medvedev seemed to be driving the more forceful response, perhaps to assert his authority over foreign policy a year after succeeding Vladimir Putin, now the prime minister.

Medvedev may see the issue in the context of his efforts to improve relations with the United States, Mikheev added. "Nonproliferation is one of the most important areas where Russia and America can work together," he said.

The nuclear test came just weeks after Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov traveled to Pyongyang to try to persuade North Korea to return to the six-nation disarmament talks it quit in April.

During the trip, Lavrov presented a proposal to help North Korea launch satellites into space from Russian territory, which analysts said was an early hint of the Kremlin's desire to play a more active role in resolving the nuclear dispute.

But Lavrov was not granted a meeting with North Korean leader Kim Jong Il. Russian analysts have interpreted that as a snub and a sign of North Korea's displeasure with Moscow's decision to support a U.N. statement condemning its April 5 launch of a three-stage rocket. North Korea announced it was withdrawing from the six-nation talks in retaliation for the council statement.

Alexander Khramchikhin, a researcher with the Institute of Political and Military Analysis, said that even if the Kremlin wants to assume a leading role in resolving the dispute, it cannot. The Soviet Union once served as North Korea's patron, but Moscow withdrew support after the Soviet Union's collapse, and Beijing took its place.

"You can see some shift in policy perhaps, but I think Russia is simply following China," he said. "Russia just doesn't have the tools to influence North Korea."

#21
Moldovan assembly puts off presidential vote
By Sabina Zawadzki
Reuters, May 28, 2009

CHISINAU - Moldova's parliament postponed from Thursday a final ballot to elect a president, a vote outgoing Communist President Vladimir Voronin hopes will enable him to hold on to the reins of power.

Voronin, who intends to wield authority in his new job as speaker of parliament, proposed the postponement to June 3 and deputies approved it. Within 10 minutes, the session was adjourned.

The assembly in the ex-Soviet republic wedged between Ukraine and European Union member Romania had been due to vote on a loyal protegee, Communist Prime Minister Zinaida Greceanii, who fell one vote short in the first ballot last week. A total of 61 members must endorse the nominee in the 101-seat assembly.

A second failure by Greceanii to win the presidency would trigger another parliamentary election a month after a Communist victory in the last contest triggered violent protests and opposition accusations of vote-rigging.

The postponement indicated the Communists, in power since 2001, had failed to secure the necessary additional vote. Three opposition parties boycotted the ballot.

"We took a break in order to have another chance for consultations with the opposition and to try to elect a president," Voronin, who also remains acting president, told journalists after the session. He said Greceanii would remain the communists' presidential candidate.

"We do not want a (parliamentary) election. Nobody wants it apart from a narrow group of people," he said.

The opposition says the April election was rigged and has long called for a new contest or for Voronin to step down.

"We are ready for negotiations but one of the conditions is that Voronin quit all his posts," said Serafim Urechean, head of the Our Moldova party. "The communists have turned everything in the country and in parliament itself into a farce."

SCRAMBLE FOR A VOTE

Voronin, who presides over a farm-dominated economy in Europe's poorest country, cannot stand for a third straight term.

Some have suggested he may play a role like that of Russia's former president Vladimir Putin who, as prime minister, exerts influence alongside his chosen successor Dmitry Medvedev.

Analysts said the Communists would desperately try to find a way to persuade a single opposition deputy to back Greceanii.

"In the next week they will either try to bribe one of the deputies from the opposition or to reach a broader political agreement with the opposition," said Vitalii Andrievschi of the ava.md analytical Internet service said.

The economy has suffered from the economic downturn as remittances from Moldovans working abroad have tumbled. The country also faces an intractable conflict in Transdnistria, a strip of land bordering Ukraine whose Russian-speakers seceded in Soviet times.

The three opposition parties are liberal and pro-European in outlook and also favour closer ties with Romania. Voronin has seesawed back to better links to Russia.

Young protesters sacked the presidential and parliamentary buildings after the April election. They see few prospects if Voronin and his Communists, in power since 2001, stay in office. Moldova shares a linguistic and historical legacy with Romania but also has long-standing ties with Russia. Voronin made a career in the Moscow-based Soviet Communist Party apparatus before the disintegration of the Soviet Union in 1991.