

WASHINGTON, D.C. July 24, 2009

TO: NCSJ Leadership and Interested Parties

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



In Brief: Biden's Trip; Russia; Lithuania; Senate Dems Meet

Dear Friend,

This week, Vice President Joe Biden completed a successful visit to Ukraine and Georgia. He sent a clear message that U.S. support for both countries would not be sacrificed as the U.S. works to improve its relations with Russia. There are a number of stories about the trip in this week's update.

The Russian government is moving forward in their efforts to include religious education in the public school system. Schools in 18 regions will be given material to teach religious and secular ethics. The government is calling this an experiment, but the Russian Orthodox Church has been pushing this idea for some time. Government officials are saying that all necessary steps will be taken to preserve the constitutional guarantees of separation of church and state.

Last week, I wrote about the Lithuanian government proposal on communal property restitution. The proposal was deemed unacceptable by international restitution organizations and the Lithuanian Jewish community. Unfortunately, as detailed in a story in this week's update, the government has decided to move forward despite these vigorous objections.

I participated in a meeting earlier this week between Senate Democrats and leaders of the American Jewish community. More than 20 Senators attended this wide-ranging discussion covering our community's international and domestic concerns. Senator Carl Levin (D-MI) recognized NCSJ's leadership role on the issue of Russia's graduation from the Jackson-Vanik amendment. The Senator has been a leading voice in support of Russia's removal from the amendment.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Mark B. Levin". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, prominent "M" and "L".

Mark B. Levin
Executive Director



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

NCSJ WEEKLY NEWS BRIEF
Washington, D.C. July 24, 2009

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

1. *Jewish poet murdered in Ukraine; Ukrainian Jewish youth meet; Ukrainian Jewish cemetery finishes facelift; Holocaust monument dedicated in western Ukraine; Ukrainian committee bans xenophobic books; New Jewish Publications Issued in Russian; Teacher convicted of hate speech still at work in Ukraine*
Briefs, July 17-23, 2009
2. *The Grimmett Waiting List in Russia*
By Ellen Barry
New York Times, July 19, 2009
3. *Minorities in Russia want action not words*
By Stefan Wagstyl
Financial Times, July 20, 2009
4. *Russia still blue over moon landing 40 years later*
By Jim Heintz
AP, July 19, 2009
5. *Old allies signal loyalty to Russia has its limits*
By Denis Dyomkin and Oleg Shchedrov
Reuters, July 20, 2009
6. *'Israel holding money that could save Jewish schools in FSU'*
By Alex Sorin
Jerusalem Post, July 20, 2009
7. *Biden: US supports Ukraine's NATO bid*
By Maria Danilova
AP, July 21, 2009
8. *Kyrgyz leader - Russia wants anti-terror hub in C. Asia*
By Maria Golovnina, editing by Ralph Boulton
Reuters, July 20, 2009
9. *Biden's Big Chance: Kyiv Visit Offers Opportunity to Combat Racist Violence in Ukraine*
By Charles Asante-Yeboah
Human Rights First, July 20, 2009
10. *Russian pupils to have choice of religion, ethics*
By Mansur Mirovalev
AP, July 21, 2009
11. *Lithuania to stick to compensation plan*
By Liudas Dapkus
AP, July 21, 2009

12. *Who is really running Russia?*
By Fred Weir
Christian Science Monitor, July 19, 2009
13. *Ukraine freedom hinges on energy independence: Biden*
By Anya Tsukanova
AFP, July 22, 2009
14. *NATO, Russia consider ways to boost cooperation*
By Slobodan Lekic
AP, July 22, 2009
15. *Stop infighting, Biden tells Ukraine's leaders*
By Sabina Zawadzki
Reuters, July 22, 2009
16. *U.S. Overlooks Kyrgyzstan Rights Abuses*
By Clifford J. Levy
New York Times, July 22, 2009
17. *Biden Hears Georgia's Plea for Western Protection*
By Ellen Barry
New York Times, July 22, 2009
18. *Wishful Thinking Won't Solve the Crisis*
By Boris Kagarlitsky
Moscow Times, July 23, 2009
19. *Nixon and Khrushchev, the End of an Unscripted Era*
By Serge Schmemmann
New York Times, July 23, 2009
20. *Biden Delivers 'Tough Love' Message to Georgian Leaders*
By Philip P. Pan
Washington Post, July 23, 2009
21. *EU agrees to extend Georgia monitoring mission: diplomat*
AFP, July 23, 2009
22. *Another Example of a Winning Twinning Relationship*
World Union for Progressive Judaism, July 23, 2009
23. *Tajikistan Moves to Ban Russian Language*
By Natalya Krainova
Moscow Times, July 24, 2009
24. *Kyrgyz leader re-elected amid charges of widespread fraud*
July 24, 2009, AFP

#1a

Jewish poet murdered in Ukraine JTA, July 17, 2009

KIEV, Ukraine -- Yuri Kaplan, an award-winning Jewish poet, was found beaten and stabbed to death in his Kiev apartment.

A neighbor found the Russian-speaking Kaplan, 72, in the apartment on July 13.

Most Jewish leaders and activists are saying the killing was not ethnically motivated.

Central Kiev police detained a young couple from Berdichev, a northern Ukraine town approximately 100 miles from Kiev, on the day Kaplan's body was found. Police said they seized Kaplan's belongings during the search of the couple's apartment in Kiev, where they were living temporarily.

The couple remained in custody while police continued their investigation.

Among Kaplan's many works was "Babi Yar," although it did not achieve the renown of Yevgeny Yevtushenko's poem of the same name.

Kaplan was buried July 16 in Kiev.

#1b

Ukrainian Jewish youth meet JTA, July 20, 2009

KIEV, Ukraine -- Ukrainian Jewish youth met to discuss issues facing them and lobby for the interests of the country's Jews.

The 40 delegates from throughout Ukraine met last week at a seaside resort in Karolina-Bugaz, in the Odessa region, for the "To All" All-Ukrainian Summit of Jewish youth hosted by the Ukrainian Union of Jewish Students, a nongovernmental organization.

"This is very important summit that helps our students to unite their activities and increase Jewish self-identification," Eduard Dolinsky, executive director of the Ukrainian Jewish Committee, told JTA. "The participants from all over Ukraine got a great chance to unite their forces and felt a miracle of Jewish unity."

The Ukrainian Union of Jewish Students, which was established in 1995, aims to establish and develop a strong Jewish community. It organizes educational seminars and programs, and lobbies for the interests of the Ukrainian Jewish community.

#1c

Ukrainian Jewish cemetery finishes facelift JTA, July 20, 2009

KIEV, Ukraine -- A renovation project was completed at a historic Jewish cemetery in Ukraine.

A new synagogue, including a library and a kitchen, were built at the cemetery in the northern Ukrainian town of Nezhyhyn. New electric lines were strung, as well.

Mouli Cohen, an Israeli-born American businessman and philanthropist, and his wife, author Stacy Cohen, funded the work.

Nezhyn is located in the Chernigov region, northeast of the capital city Kiev. Once a major center of Chasidism, it is the site of the tomb of a Chasidic master, the second Lubavitcher rebbe, Rabbi Dov Ber Schneerson.

The renovations will make it easier for the thousands of travelers and guests who visit the sacred location each year.

#1d

Holocaust monument dedicated in western Ukraine JTA, July 20, 2009

KIEV, Ukraine -- A monument to Nazi victims was dedicated in western Ukraine.

The memorial in Elyhovichi village in the Zolochev district of the Lvov region, was dedicated July 15. The commemoration ceremony included local officials, rabbis, representatives of the Jewish community, and guests from Israel and the United States who were born in the region.

The memorial was built on the initiative of American and Israeli organizations, and personally on the initiative of Roald Hoffmann, a chemist and Nobel Prize winner who was born in Zolochev and survived the Holocaust with help from Ukrainian neighbors.

More than 3,000 Jews in Elyhovichi were killed by the Nazis, and more than 14,000 in the Zolochev district in 1941-42.

#1e

Ukrainian committee bans xenophobic books

JTA, July 21, 2009

KIEV, Ukraine -- A Ukrainian national commission banned two xenophobic books that it said incite interethnic hatred.

The National Expert Commission of Ukraine on Public Morals last week banned the books "The Secret History of Ukraine" by Aleksandr Shyrokorad and "Life, History and Reality" by Vladimir Putyatin for degrading the Ukrainian and Jewish nations.

The chairman of the commission said "The Secret History of Ukraine" contains a chapter in which the author denies that the Holodomor, or Great Famine, of 1932-33 took place, and is an outrage upon the memory of Holodomor victims and damages national dignity.

"Life, History and Reality," according to experts' findings and the decision of the commission, contains expressions and statements of undisguised anti-Semitism and thus incites xenophobia and interethnic hatred.

The commission examined the books at the request of the Ukrainian Secret Service.

Ukrainian Jewish leaders welcomed the decision of the commission of experts, but also believe that Ukraine must do more to counteract xenophobia and anti-Semitism in the country of 46.5 million.

Eduard Dolinsky, executive director of the Ukrainian Jewish Committee, in a statement noted the open selling of anti-Semitic books in the center of Kiev.

#1f

New Jewish Publications Issued in Russian

FJC, July 23 2009

MOSCOW, Russia – A new publication has just been released in Russian as part of the "BET: A Library of Jewish Texts" series. The collection "The Expression of Language" (Maane Lashon) contains prayers and texts to be recited at the resting places of the righteous. These texts were first compiled in the 17th century and the present edition is the one that follows the custom established by the second Rebbe of Lubavitch, Rabbi Dovber.

The book contains the original Hebrew prayers, Psalms and related part of the Zohar, as well as a translation into Russian. There is also an explanation of the laws and customs of visiting the cemetery and particularly, the graves of the righteous.

Another new release in the BET series is the treatise on astronomy of Abraham Ibn Ezra, one of the most celebrated and versatile figures from the Golden Age of Jewish culture in Spain.

Ibn Ezra is known for his Biblical commentary, as well as being a traveler, poet, physician and philosopher. In medieval Europe, however, he was most appreciated for his erudition in astronomy and astrology. The treatise "The Beginning of Wisdom" (Reishit Chochma) is an introduction to astronomy and related commentaries.

In addition to the actual translation of a number of Ibn Ezra's treatises, the book also includes a discussion of Ibn Ezra's life, his ideas regarding philosophy, medieval astrology and astronomy, and combining faith in G-d with an understanding of the universe.

"Project Bet" plans to release 50 volumes over the next five years that will include three types of publications: liturgical texts; original sources with explanatory notes, including the fundamental works of Chasidic philosophy; texts of Jewish law which can be used as a guide for daily life.

#1g

Teacher convicted of hate speech still at work in Ukraine JTA, July 23, 2009

KIEV, Ukraine -- A Ukrainian middle school teacher convicted of hate speech is still on the job.

Nikolai Yakimchuk, one of only two successful convictions on hate speech charges in Ukraine over the last decade, is still teaching children in the Kirovograd region, according to a July 23 report posted on Jewish.ru. The report quoted a letter from the Jewish Forum of Ukraine to the Ministry of Education demanding Yakimchuk's dismissal.

Yakimchuk was convicted of inciting ethnic hatred in 2008 after testimony revealed that he told his students that Jews "need to be exterminated and have no place among people." His comments appeared to be directed at Jewish students at the school, who he said "take up other people's spaces at our school that don't belong to them."

A court sentenced him to two years in prison, but he was quickly amnestied and released.

#2

The Grimmiest Waiting List in Russia By Ellen Barry New York Times, July 19, 2009

MOSCOW — They are a tiny group, the human rights investigators in Russia, so each death leaves a hole. Tanya Lokshina, who has spent the last decade researching abuses in Chechnya, was at a market comparing eggplants in 2006 when she heard that the journalist Anna Politkovskaya had been shot. She remembers mechanically paying and walking home, putting the eggplant in the refrigerator, before it sank in.

Last January, when she heard that Stanislav Markelov, a lawyer for an independent newspaper, had been shot, she was on deadline with a report on war crimes in South Ossetia. Thinking it was a joke, she typed away as she dialed his number. He wasn't picking up. She dialed a second time. She stopped typing. On the third call, listening to the long beeps, she understood that it was true.

A few days later she was in the prosecutor's office, answering questions about Mr. Markelov's last days. As she sat there, she realized that she had been in the same room two years before, answering the same questions about Ms. Politkovskaya.

And a question came into her mind: "I was thinking, who would be the next person?" she said. "In connection with whose murder am I going to be interrogated here in another half-year, or another two years? Or who is going to be here talking about me?"

Tanya told me all this three months ago in a cafe here, smoking narrow cigarettes one after another. I asked her to suggest a colleague I might profile whom she felt was in real danger. She suggested her friend Natalya Estemirova — Natasha, as Tanya knew her — from the Chechen office of the human rights group Memorial.

Tanya could joke about her predicament, but it was clear that fear had crept into her life. She would wake up at 4 a.m. in terror, certain that someone she knew had been killed. She would grope for her cellphone, send a

text message to Chechnya, and sit in the dark, waiting for an answer. If someone called in the night, she would snatch the phone, she said, "as if it were on fire."

The call she dreaded finally came on Wednesday, when Natasha was found dead by a roadside with gunshot wounds to the head and chest. Afterward, foggy from grief, Tanya said something paradoxical: The death of each friend was making it harder, not easier, to quit. She had talked about it with Natasha on the night of Mr. Markelov's funeral, and that is what Natasha had said. To quit would betray their memory.

"I realize this is a vicious circle," she said. "I still keep wondering who is going to be next."

#3

Minorities in Russia want action not words

By Stefan Wagstyl

Financial Times, July 20, 2009

Can a few fine words shed light to the dark corners of Russian justice even when they come from Dmitry Medvedev? No, not unless they are followed by hard action.

The Russian president did well to condemn the brutal killing last week of a leading human rights lawyer working in blood-soaked Chechnya and to make clear he suspected a connection between the murder of Natalia Estemirova and her work documenting human rights abuses. Ms Estemirova had been collecting statements from witnesses of alleged violence from law enforcers - including the Kadyrovtsy, armed bands loyal to Ramzan Kadyrov, the Moscow-appointed Chechen president.

The Russian president's uncompromising language came in sharp contrast to the response three years ago of his predecessor and mentor, Vladimir Putin, to the shooting in Moscow of another brave individual probing abuses in Chechnya, the journalist Anna Politkovskaya. Mr Putin took two days to react, only to dismiss her influence as "small".

Mr Medvedev, a St Petersburg lawyer, has already shown he knows better than the former KGB colonel what to say in these circumstances. This year he was quick to condemn the killing of Stanislav Markelov, a leading human rights lawyer, and Anastasia Baburova, a young journalist from the liberal newspaper Novaya Gazeta. Mr Markelov had been appealing against the parole of a Russian officer convicted of murdering a Chechen girl and Ms Baburova had been covering the case.

But if Mr Medvedev is serious about his pledge to impose the rule of law, he must act, and he must act over Chechnya. Russia is a huge country of 142m people, with 89 regions and scores of ethnic minorities, many with an ingrained hatred of Moscow.

Allowing these minorities political rights without compromising Russia's security or territorial integrity would strain the capacities of the most enlightened leaders. The threat presented by Chechen extremists was bloodily demonstrated in the Beslan school siege, in which 330 died.

That said, Mr Putin contributed to the violence by taking a particularly brutal approach to Chechnya. Even before he became president in 2000, he was, as prime minister, involved in launching a dirty war against Chechnya's secessionist guerrillas. Once the fighting died down, he recruited Mr Kadyrov, an ex-rebel, to impose peace.

Peace of a kind has been achieved in Chechnya, albeit with violent outbreaks as anti-guerrilla operations continue. But it is a deathly peace in which the shadows of war, including the crimes committed on all sides, are never far away. Meanwhile the atmosphere in the Caucasus, never cool, has been fired up by last year's war in Georgia and by fighting within Russia in Ingushetia and Dagestan.

A comprehensive peace in the northern Caucasus would require long-term policies to win over the non-Russian peoples through political and social inclusion and economic development, and stabilise the whole region.

This would take years. But one move Mr Medvedev could make now would be to show he really does intend to apply the rule of law in the northern Caucasus by bringing to justice Ms Estemirova's killers. That would mean pursuing not only those who pulled the trigger but those who ordered the execution. Memorial, the human rights group with which Ms Estemirova was working, has blamed Mr Kadyrov. He denies the charge. Mr Medvedev could show he is serious by appointing a prosecutor to investigate fully Memorial's claim.

Ms Estemirova's colleagues fear there is not the slightest chance this will happen because Mr Medvedev has already dismissed claims of Mr Kadyrov's responsibility. The president has an opportunity to prove them wrong - and prove when he says he wants justice, he means what he says. Chechnya would be a difficult place to begin, given that the chain of command in Chechnya leads to Moscow and that Mr Putin has personally played a big role in its recent bloody history. But the gravity of the Chechnya-linked cases means they cannot be ignored if there is to be justice in Russia. Murder is murder.

#4

Russia still blue over moon landing 40 years later

By Jim Heintz

AP, July 19, 2009

MOSCOW -- When Neil Armstrong stepped onto the surface of the moon, it was a first for the Soviet Union - the first time the U.S. had beaten the U.S.S.R in the space race. Forty years later, the memory of that loss of primacy still seems to sting the Russian soul. When state TV channel Rossiya reported last week on the restoration of video footage of the Apollo 11 moon landing, the account gave a lot of attention to dubious conspiracy theories that the landing was faked.

"In the United States, more than anywhere else, they are sure of the believability of the steps on the moon," the report said, adding that Armstrong keeps a very low profile. "This also seems strange to many people."

For a dozen years before the July 20, 1969, moon landing, Moscow racked up an extraordinary array of superlatives. It was the first to send a craft into orbit, with the Sputnik satellite in 1957. The first human to go into outer space was Russian Yuri Gagarin in 1961. Moscow sent the woman into space, Valentina Tereshkova in 1963; and Alexei Leonov was the first person to venture outside a spacecraft into the endless cosmos, in 1965.

Russia even got to the moon first when the unmanned Luna 2 crashed in 1959. But the drama of the first human footprint on an extraterrestrial body eclipsed everything the Soviets had worked so hard to achieve.

"Beginning with the first flight with a primitive capsule, and then getting to the moon, it was a great achievement for humanity," Russian astronaut Sergei Krikalev said.

"Of course, we would have liked to see the first man on the moon be Soviet, Russian, but that's life ... Our own achievements were very many," he told Associated Press Television News.

In the 40 years since the Apollo 11 landing, the USSR and Russia, which inherited the Soviet legacy, shot ahead of the United States occasionally only to fall further behind.

The Soviet Union put the first space station into orbit with the Salyut 1 in 1971. However, the first crew couldn't get aboard because of docking problems. Another three-man crew later got aboard, but died when a valve failed on the capsule bringing them back to Earth.

Then there was the Mir -- the first space station fit for long-term habitation. It achieved early glory. But that quickly faded after 1991, when the Soviet collapse choked off funding for the space program and the Mir suffered a series of accidents, including a collision and fires that tuned it into a symbol of danger and decay.

Earthlings scanned the sky nervously on the day in 2001 when the 140-ton craft plunged to its fiery end. Luckily, it landed in the Pacific Ocean.

In recent years, Russia's space program has earned as a workhorse rather than a racehorse - reliable, cooperative, even stolid.

Its cramped Soyuz manned capsules and unmanned Progress cargo ships had already served as the lifeline to the International Space Station for more than two years when the United States grounded its space shuttles in 2003, after the Columbia disintegrated on re-entry. The Russian space program will once again be the gatekeepers to the orbiting laboratory in 2010, when the shuttle fleet is grounded for good.

That doesn't mean Russia has lost its ambitions for primacy in space.

The U.S. is busy planning to replace the shuttles. But last year, Russia awarded contracts for design of its own next-generation spaceship to replace the Soyuz. The competing efforts could trigger a new space race.

Russian space officials meanwhile still seem to be dreaming about winning the next stage of the space race.

They keep talk in tantalizing terms about mounting a manned mission to Mars, although they say that would take at least another 20 years to get off the ground.

"I think this is fine. It's like sports - at one stage one person wins, at another it's somebody else," said Krikalev.

#5

Old allies signal loyalty to Russia has its limits

By Denis Dyomkin and Oleg Shchedrov

Reuters, July 20, 2009

MOSCOW - The Kremlin will find it hard to ignore the absence of half the leaders of the former Soviet Union from an informal summit in Moscow last weekend, at a time when Europe is developing its interests in Russia's "back yard."

This year's Presidential Cup horse race, a traditional cue for an informal gathering of the 11-member Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), drew only five top guests: the leaders of Armenia, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Moldova and Tajikistan.

The presidents of Ukraine, Belarus, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan and Kyrgyzstan all failed to show up, citing personal reasons. Belarus President Alexander Lukashenko went instead to ride a Harley-Davidson at a local bikers' rally.

"The CIS leaders used the chance ... to show they are unhappy with the state of relations with Russia," said Alexei Mukhin, head of the Center of Political Information think tank.

Medvedev's predecessor Vladimir Putin had managed to stiffen the loyalty of the ex-Soviet states, helped by their economic dependence on Moscow and their fear of popular revolutions. But Russia's war with Georgia last year and a series of bilateral spats have strained this loyalty again.

"A race away from Russia is inevitable," analyst Leonid Radzikhovsky said on an opposition-minded web site, Yezhednyevny Zhurnal. (www.ej.ru)

NEW MOOD

Moscow's war with Georgia last year over the pro-Russian separatist region of South Ossetia marked the first time the Kremlin has deployed troops in anger outside its borders since the fall of the Soviet Union, and this alarmed its neighbors.

None have so far followed Moscow in recognizing the independence of South Ossetia and another Georgian rebel region, Abkhazia -- both of whose leaders did go to Moscow's hippodrome as Medvedev's guests. Georgia anyway quit the CIS after the war.

Kyrgyz President Kurmanbek Bakiyev is preparing for a presidential election on July 23, but the other absent CIS leaders all had bones to pick with Russia.

Ukraine, looking for closer integration with the West since its popular revolution in 2004, is at odds with Moscow over gas transit and the future of a Russian naval base.

Belarus, long Russia's closest ally, has clashed with Moscow over gas prices, ownership of gas networks and dairy exports.

Uzbekistan is angry about Russia's support of border hydropower projects in neighboring Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, which it sees as a threat to its national water supplies.

And Turkmenistan has stepped up efforts to diversify its gas supplies to China and Iran after an explosion in April on a pipeline linking it with Russia, its traditional partner. It has blamed the explosion on the Russian gas monopoly Gazprom.

WEST'S COURTSHIP

Such problems are not new for Russia. The new factor is the West's attempts to court some of its allies. Moscow has been alarmed to see the European Union lifting its ostracism of Lukashenko over his democracy record, and inviting Belarus to join the EU's Eastern Partnership.

Ukraine, Moldova, Georgia, Azerbaijan and Armenia have also joined the project, designed to expand their political and economic ties with Europe, and viewed by many in Russia as an instrument to prise them away from Moscow's orbit.

To the east, Russia sees Turkmenistan being courted by the West as a source of gas for the projected Nabucco pipeline, designed to ease Europe's reliance on Russian supplies.

Moscow has also been worried by increased U.S. military activity in Central Asia as U.S.-led coalition forces fight the Taliban in nearby Afghanistan.

Kyrgyzstan this year shut down a U.S. air base, but later allowed the Americans to re-establish a transit point there for their supplies to Afghanistan.

But Fyodor Lukyanov, editor of the magazine *Russia in Global Affairs*, warned against overdramatizing the exodus of Russian allies.

"Doing a balancing act has become a survival tool for these countries," he said. "But ... each time it turns out that when it comes to real problems, they have nowhere to go (but Russia)."

Trade with Russia remains the largest source of income for most of the CIS allies. Until Nabucco takes off, Russia also remains the key gateway for Central Asian gas to Europe.

Since the start of the global crisis, Russia has disbursed more than \$5 billion in rescue credits to Belarus, Armenia, Moldova and Kyrgyzstan and has pledged another \$7.5 billion to a special ad-hoc fund. Few others can match this largesse.

"Several years ago we faced a similar situation, and people were saying that was the end of the CIS," he said. "Later everyone flocked back."

#6

'Israel holding money that could save Jewish schools in FSU'

By Alex Sorin

Jerusalem Post, July 20, 2009

A network of some 42 Jewish schools in the former Soviet Union are in danger of closing, because the Israeli government hasn't paid money it had pledged to keep them afloat, according to the International Fellowship of Christians and Jews, which is trying to help save the schools.

Some of the schools also serve as orphanages and if closed may leave thousands of Jewish children on the streets. The issue was first raised by The Fundamentalist blog.

The Heftsiba network is a combination of the ORT, Or Avner (Chabad) and Shema Yisrael school systems. For more than 30 years Heftsiba has provided education to Jewish children in what is now the former Soviet Union. The network is in danger of closing its doors if it does not receive additional funds.

The Education Ministry managed Heftsiba for 20 years, but two years ago the government passed the job on to the Jewish Agency - a move that has drawn fire from Rabbi Yechiel Eckstein, the president of the International Fellowship of Christians and Jews (IFCJ), who is heading the effort to save the schools.

"This symbolically meant that the government of Israel was passing on the responsibility to care for the Jewish identity of the youth in the former Soviet Union, and it became a world Jewry issue," Eckstein told The Jerusalem Post late last week.

In February, the economic crisis dealt a heavy blow to the Jewish Agency, which then lacked the wherewithal to pay the \$2 million needed to support the Heftsiba schools through the summer, and the various schools were going to shut their doors.

At that point, Eckstein and the IFCJ stepped in and made a deal with then-prime minister Ehud Olmert to match up to \$2.5m. in government funds for a total of \$5m., in order to keep the schools afloat until June, but the government only authorized \$1m.

"We matched the government's \$1m., but it's now July and the government money has still not been distributed. They claim all kinds of bureaucratic problems, and meanwhile these schools are not getting their funding and are in danger of closing," Eckstein said.

At a meeting of the Knesset's Immigrant Absorption Committee in January attended by Eckstein, government representatives said the state would contribute a total of \$2m. to be matched by the fellowship, but Eckstein remains skeptical.

"I don't believe them, I can't trust the government to pay the entire \$2m. when it hasn't even paid the \$1m. since it made its commitment six months ago," Eckstein said on Thursday.

At the meeting, then-cabinet secretary Oved Yehezkel expressed the government's desire to help the schools, but noted financial obstacles.

"The idea at the moment is for the government to guarantee a sum of NIS 3.5m.," said Yehezkel.

"It is very difficult for the government these days to guarantee such a sum, we are in need of a bailout, and no one will let Heftsiba close down."

Despite the pledge, Avi Widerman, a former adviser to Olmert who is authorized to speak for Yehezkel, says that because a new government is now in place, nothing is guaranteed.

"When we pledged we really wanted them to get the money, and we had the money," Widerman said. "But now it's another [state] budget and another government and we can't guarantee everything, but when we did it was very sincere."

The Chabad and Shema Yisrael school systems have received funding from the government of Israel and the Jewish Agency in the past, but have also been supported by major philanthropists.

Because of the financial crisis, these schools have not been receiving the funding usually appropriated to them, and IFCJ stepped in to support them through the summer.

One possible scenario would be that the fellowship would end up supporting all three networks come September - Heftsiba and the remaining Chabad and Shema Yisrael schools not incorporated into Heftsiba.

Eckstein considers this a task for world Jewry, not the fellowship.

"I imagine that come September we will support all three networks, but this shouldn't be the responsibility of Christian Americans. We are glad to do our part and help, but we need partners, including the government of Israel, which is the embodiment of world Jewry," he said.

If the schools do not receive the appropriate funding, than an entire generation of children in the former Soviet Union would lose not only their Jewish identity, but also a means of survival, he said.

"The danger is that everything that has been built in the past 30 years is now in jeopardy and is imploding, it's all in jeopardy. If we lose it, that's it for that generation and that means the future of the Jewish world in the former Soviet Union," said Eckstein.

#7

Biden: US supports Ukraine's NATO bid

By Maria Danilova

AP, July 21, 2009

KIEV, Ukraine - Washington supports Ukraine's bid to join NATO and the former Soviet republic is free to choose its own foreign policy alliances regardless of what other nations want, U.S. Vice President Joe Biden told Ukraine's president on Tuesday.

Both assertions were a shot at Russia, which vehemently opposes having its neighbors join the Western military alliance and is uncomfortable with their desire for greater economic and political integration with West.

Biden met with President Viktor Yushchenko in Kiev, then said in a speech later that if Ukraine chooses to join NATO, "which i believe you have, we strongly support that."

Polls have shown a majority of Ukrainians to be against NATO membership.

Ukrainian officials, meanwhile, were looking for signals that Washington's effort to improve ties with Moscow would not hurt its Western integration, and also for support as Russia tries to reassert some control over its former Soviet satellite states.

"We don't recognize, and I want to reiterate this, any spheres of influence. We do not recognize anyone else's right to dictate to any other country what alliance it should seek to belong to, or what relationships, bilateral relationships, you have," Biden said.

Biden's comments echoed the stance of President Barack Obama, who stressed at a Moscow summit earlier this month that "NATO seeks collaboration with Russia, not confrontation."

Obama's speech was part of a White House effort to produce a more productive relationship with Russia, after ties approached Cold War lows last year during the Russian-Georgian war.

But better ties with Moscow "will not come at Ukraine's expense," Biden said. "To the contrary, I believe it can actually benefit Ukraine. The more substantive relationship we have with Moscow, the more we can defuse the zero-sum thinking about our relations with Russia's neighbors."

Earlier Tuesday, Yushchenko welcomed Biden to Ukraine, calling it a "European country where democracy rules" a not-so-veiled dig at Russia.

"We are going forward, we have chosen a European path," Yushchenko told Biden at the start of their meeting. "There is a lot of homework to do, because sometimes it is very difficult."

Biden was to meet Prime Minister Yulia Tymoshenko later Tuesday as well as key opposition leaders who plan to participate in January's presidential election.

Yushchenko and Tymoshenko - allies in the 2004 Orange Revolution that brought Yushchenko to power - are now bitter foes after falling out over a number of issues. Their rivalry has prevented an effective response to the global economic crisis.

That has allowed Viktor Yanukovich, the Moscow-backed presidential candidate who lost the 2004 election yet who is very popular in Ukraine's Russian-dominated east, to come back into the running for the January vote.

Biden is also set to meet with Arseniy Yatsenyuk, the reformist former parliament speaker, who also plans to run for president.

Russia is watching Biden's visit to its former Soviet backyard with keen interest, suspicious that Washington is out to block any moves in Ukraine and Georgia back toward dependence on Moscow, their former Soviet provider.

But the U.S. has repeatedly denied that it seeks to dictate who should rule in any democratic country.

Biden on Wednesday visits Georgia, where President Mikhail Saakashvili has vowed to see through his term, which ends in 2013. The opposition has demanded his resignation, accusing him of launching an unwinnable war against Russia in August.

The Russian army quickly crushed the Georgian army last August after Georgia attacked its own breakaway province of South Ossetia to try to bring it back under control.

Thousands of Russian troops now remain in South Ossetia and another separatist-held Georgian enclave, Abkhazia, and Russia has recognized both regions as independent nations.

Washington said it did not support Georgia's attempt to retake South Ossetia by force.

Saakashvili, who had committed thousands of troops for U.S.-led missions in Iraq and Afghanistan, pleaded for military support from Washington during the fighting, but the U.S. did not intervene.

#8

Kyrgyz leader - Russia wants anti-terror hub in C. Asia

By Maria Golovnina, editing by Ralph Boulton

Reuters, July 20, 2009

ALA-ARCHA, Kyrgyzstan, - Russia may open a new military facility in the Central Asian nation of Kyrgyzstan to help stem the rising tide of insurgency spilling over from Afghanistan, Kyrgyzstan's president told Reuters on Monday.

Instability has been on the rise in Central Asia in past months as ripples from increased fighting in Afghanistan and Pakistan appear to have reached the ex-Soviet Muslim region.

President Kurmanbek Bakiyev, who looks certain to win a presidential vote on Thursday, said the idea was to set up a hub designed to train forces in Kyrgyzstan's restive south.

"Talks on that are now being held with Russia but not to set up a new base but ... a new training centre," he said at his Ala-Archa residence in the rocky hills near the capital Bishkek.

"Southern Kyrgyzstan poses the biggest threat, and that involves our neighbours there, Tajikistan and Afghanistan. ... This training centre is where forces will be trained everything they might need in case of a terrorist insurgency."

Kyrgyzstan is a small impoverished nation at the heart of Russian-U.S. rivalry in Central Asia. It has become important due to its proximity to Afghanistan and both Moscow and Washington now operate military bases on its mountainous territory.

Bakiyev denied earlier statements by Kyrgyz sources that he could allow Russia to open another base on Kyrgyz soil to counter growing U.S. military clout.

"It will definitely not be considered a base, it will have a slightly different status," Bakiyev said. He added the facility could be located near Osh or Batken in south Kyrgyzstan.

"But so far it's just talks, discussions," he said. Both Russian and Kyrgyz forces could be trained there, he added.

Russian President Dmitry Medvedev declined to comment on the matter when asked about a possible new Kyrgyz base last week.

MILITANTS

Bakiyev said groups of militants operated in Central Asia aiming to control the vast potentially conflict prone region sitting on a key conduit for Afghan heroin smuggling.

"The Afghanistan situation is affecting not only Kyrgyzstan but Central Asia as a whole and, frankly, the entire world," he said. "People have come here to carry out acts of terror."

Some analysts say Taliban rebels of Central Asia origin, stirred by heavy fighting and more U.S. troops in the south, are now streaming back into their historic homeland -- a safe heaven for many due to its remote alpine passes and lax security.

A Kremlin sources said last week that Russia would hold a security summit in Kyrgyzstan late this month with Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, Belarus, Uzbekistan and Armenia.

Bakiyev said the situation in Kyrgyzstan was under control. "I would not say it is getting worse," he said. "But I also should not be too relaxed and say things are really good here either."

Military forces in Kyrgyzstan as well as in neighbouring Tajikistan and Uzbekistan have engaged in gun battles in past months with unidentified assailants who have staged attacks on security posts in Central Asia.

Officials remain at loss over who is behind these attacks and some critics have suggested Central Asia governments, concerned with growing public discontent due to a tough economic environment, are using it as an excuse to crack down on dissent.

"There are still forces out there that we do not know about, who are here and who are ready to carry out illegal actions," Bakiyev said. "They have one aim: to destabilise Central Asia and cause panic among the people."

#9 Biden's Big Chance: Kyiv Visit Offers Opportunity to Combat Racist Violence in Ukraine By Charles Asante-Yeboah, President, African Center of Kyiv Human Rights First, July 20, 2009

In January 2008, I was returning home from a meeting with a Nigerian man who had been a victim of a violent racist attack a few days earlier. Standing at the bus stop near Shuliavska metro station, I was suddenly attacked by a group of young men. One of the attackers first hit me with a metal bar in the back of the head, as others--up to 15 persons--joined in kicking and beating me with a variety of objects. I was also stabbed in several places, including one deep wound in the back of my head. The attackers shouted "let's slit his throat" and "no, let's cut his head in two." I kept struggling for my life until a minivan approached, causing them to flee. I am yet to recover fully from the wounds that I suffered, and the memory of that evening still makes me cautious as I walk down even busy city streets. Furthermore, I am still waiting for the perpetrators to be brought to justice. Like in most other cases of racist violence in Ukraine, there is a general climate of impunity for those who commit these brazen acts of discrimination.

After arriving in Ukraine from my native Ghana a decade ago, I quickly came to see the many problems faced by foreigners, especially Africans, in Ukraine. In order to address those grievances, I spearheaded the establishment of the African Center. My colleagues and I advise and provide legal assistance to people of African origin living in Ukraine; help to improve their living standards; facilitate their return home if necessary; and promote discussions on African culture and politics, among other subjects. Regrettably, dealing with problems related to racially motivated attacks on members of our community in Ukraine has taken a bulk of our time and resources, particularly over the past several years. In this effort, we have worked closely in the framework of the "Diversity Initiative" -- a coalition of international and domestic organizations based in Ukraine, spearheaded by the International Organization for Migration (IOM) and the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR).

Since 2005, nongovernmental monitors in Ukraine have documented a dramatic rise in violent crimes with a suspected bias motivation. Violence against foreigners and other visible minorities is taking place throughout the country, although incidents occurring in Kyiv have been relatively better reported. This violence has been largely committed against people of African and Asian origin, Jews and Roma, as well as people from the Caucasus and the Middle East. Asylum seekers, refugees, and labor migrants are among the victims. Foreign students, of which there are some forty thousand and who bring substantial funds to Ukrainian universities, have been among the principal victims of hate crimes.

Immigrants like myself are vulnerable targets of racism and xenophobia because we are highly visible in society. Although relatively few people of African origin reside in Ukraine, the rate of violence against this group has been extraordinary. The attacks are rampant and unpredictable, and could happen anywhere: on subway and buses, in downtown and outskirts, in front of many witnesses or in dark alleys, and even near student hostels.

I was lucky enough to survive the brutal attack described above. However, Julius Igbofonu Azike's Ukrainian wife and three kids are still mourning the death of their father, a Nigerian national who was shot outside their home in Kyiv on June 26, 2009. The latest murder has renewed--or rather increased--the sense of fear and desperation among foreigners, especially African migrants.

Last year, a 19-year-old Congolese asylum seeker Joseph Bunta was found with seventeen knife wounds to his head, chest, and back. Another victim's funeral turned into a march against racism, as antiracism activists joined the friends and family of Gbenda-Charles Victor, a 39-year-old refugee from Sierra Leone, who was stabbed some ten times and died in front of his wife. The list goes on.

We are still seeking justice for the murders of Julius, Joseph, Charles, and others, who perished in these hateful attacks. Although there have been some improvements, police and prosecutors have been largely ineffective in investigating these incidents, recognizing the racist motives, and in bring the perpetrators to justice.

The Ukrainian government needs to step up efforts to combat hate crimes. The international community can support those efforts by reminding the government of its international commitments in this area. The visit to Kyiv of U.S. Vice President Joseph Biden represents one such opportunity. We recognize that his meetings with Ukrainian officials will likely focus on important economic and security matters. However, Mr. Biden should also use the opportunity to encourage the Ukrainian government to take practical and concrete steps - like those outlined by Human Rights First - to strengthen its response to hate crime. The best way to ensure Ukraine's European integration is by strengthening the government's commitment to advancing human rights and the rule of law. A strong response to racist violence is one important barometer of that commitment.

Recognition of this problem at the highest levels of government is ever so important. After the U.S. Holocaust Museum in Washington, DC was attacked in June, President Obama came forth to make a strong statement, unequivocally reaffirming that "we must remain vigilant against antisemitism and prejudice in all its forms." President Yushchenko could take a page out of Mr. Obama's book and react to violence in Ukraine in a similar fashion, sending strong messages to law enforcement and criminal justice authorities that impunity for bias-motivated violence is inexcusable.

#10

Russian pupils to have choice of religion, ethics

By Mansur Mirovalev

AP, July 21, 2009

BARVIKHA, Russia — Russian President Dmitry Medvedev announced a pilot project Tuesday that will require schoolchildren to take classes in religion or secular ethics.

The proposal is part of a Kremlin effort to teach young Russians morals in the wake of a turbulent period of uncertainty following the collapse of the officially atheist Soviet Union.

Medvedev said preteen students at about 12,000 schools in 18 Russian regions would take the classes. They will be offered the choice of studying the dominant Russian Orthodox religion, Islam, Buddhism or Judaism, or of taking an overview of all four faiths, or a course in secular ethics.

Students and their parents must be allowed to choose freely, Medvedev said in addressing top clerics and officials at his residence outside Moscow. "Any coercion, pressure will be absolutely unacceptable and counterproductive," he said.

By 2012, the classes might be expanded nationwide, Medvedev said. The pilot project includes about 20 percent of Russia's schools.

The offer of a choice appeared aimed to ease concerns that Russian Orthodoxy will be forced on schoolchildren as the church gains influence and tightens ties with the state.

Mandatory classes in Orthodox culture were introduced in a few Russian regions three years ago, but they alarmed adherents of other confessions who said religion has no place in schools in a secular state. The classes also were criticized as being reminiscent of the forced study of communism or scientific atheism during Soviet times, with one mandatory ideology being substituted with another.

Russian Orthodox Patriarch Kirill has long pushed for the introduction of Orthodox classes in schools, but he was careful not to criticize the president's initiative. "The free choice and alternatives could serve as the basis for a system" of religious classes, he said.

Medvedev emphasized that the classes will include only "the largest of Russia's traditional religions" — Orthodox Christianity, Islam, Judaism and Buddhism. He omitted other faiths, such as Roman Catholicism or Protestantism, which the Orthodox Church accuses of proselytizing.

Some nonreligious Russians complain that the church has tailored its doctrine to suit the government, which has justified Russia's retreat from Western-style democracy by saying the country has a unique history and culture.

Church and state are officially separate under the post-Soviet constitution, but Orthodox leaders seek a more muscular role for the church, which has served the state for much of its 1,000-year history.

The Russian Orthodox Church counts in its congregation more than 100 million people in Russia and tens of millions elsewhere. But polls show that only about 5 percent of Russians are observant believers.

#11

Lithuania to stick to compensation plan

By Liudas Dapkus

AP, July 21, 2009

VILNIUS, Lithuania — Lithuania will not amend a plan to compensate the loss of Jewish property seized during World War II, despite criticism from Jewish organizations that it fails to repay the properties' full value, the Baltic state's justice minister said Tuesday.

"It is very hard, if not impossible, to restore all property rights after more than half a century, a war and two occupations," the minister, Remigijus Simasius, told The Associated Press.

"Most of the Jewish population was killed, their ancestors scattered around the world, and many properties do not have legitimate owners," he said, referring to buildings that were once owned by Jews but were not inherited by relatives because of the war.

According to the ministry's plan, which still needs parliamentary approval, Lithuania will pay 128 million litas (euro37 million, \$53 million) to Lithuania's 5,000-strong Jewish community. Part of the payment will include the return of two buildings, though most of compensation will comprise cash payments.

Negotiations on the compensation package lasted nearly a decade. Payments are expected to begin in 2011 with 3 million litas (\$1.2 million) to be paid to Holocaust survivors, and compensation for stolen property to begin in 2012. A non-governmental organization will be established to distribute the funds over several years.

The local Jewish community has rejected the proposal as too small, saying it represents a "mere fraction" of the value of Jewish property seized in World War II.

"Jewish communal property has to be returned, just like this was done with property of other communities, including the Catholic Church," said Simon Gurevichius, executive director of the Jewish Community of Lithuania. "The present plan is insufficient and unacceptable."

The minister emphasized that the offer would not be reconsidered. He said Lithuania completed its program of property restitution in 2000, and that the government would not reopen it. "There will be no additional restitution process," he said.

Parliament is expected to review the proposal this fall.

Some 95 percent of Lithuania's prewar Jewish population of 220,000 people was killed by the Nazis and their collaborators during World War II. Jewish properties were seized and never returned.

After it was taken over by the Soviet Union in 1940, Lithuania was invaded by Nazi Germany in 1941, and then again by the Soviets in 1944. The Baltic state remained under Soviet occupation until 1991.

#12

Who is really running Russia?

President Medvedev is likened to a general without an army, with most top posts held by Putin's people. But there are signs he's pushing back.

By Fred Weir

Christian Science Monitor, July 19, 2009

Moscow - On his recent visit here, President Obama mistakenly referred to Russia's No. 2 as "President Putin."

He brushed it off, noting that Prime Minister Vladimir Putin formerly held the country's top post - which he did, before paving the way for protege Dmitry Medvedev's election in March last year.

If Putin's title trips up a world leader here and there, pinpointing his exact role confounds nearly everyone.

Amid the worst economic bad news in over a decade, the question of just how Russia is being led - and where - has become the subject of heated debate among the country's political class.

Some experts say it's a stage-managed Kremlin theater production, a "good cop, bad cop" act designed to keep the opposition off-guard and the public guessing.

Others suggest that President Medvedev, a savvy lawyer fond of Led Zeppelin, may be breaking away from the tutelage of his predecessor and challenging the harsher aspects of the Putin era.

A May poll by the independent Levada Center in Moscow found that 19 percent of Russians believe that Medvedev "pursues an independent policy," while 68 percent think he acts entirely "under the control of Putin and [his] entourage."

That street wisdom reflects the past thousand years of Russian history, in which the country has always been ruled by a single strong leader. Rare moments of divided authority have usually been times of threatened civil war, most recently in 1993 when gridlock between President Boris Yeltsin and his elected parliament culminated in gunfire and the subsequent restoration of near-total Kremlin power.

Hence the widespread skepticism last year when Medvedev was vaulted into the Kremlin in a controlled election and Putin moved offices but kept the spotlight he had previously enjoyed.

'Medvedev is a general with no army'

Under Russia's 1993 Constitution, the prime minister is an appointed technocrat who serves at the president's pleasure. In the past, most have toiled in the Kremlin's shadow. But Putin's daily activities have been covered by Russian state TV as fully as Medvedev's. At times of emergency - such as the recent war with neighboring Georgia - Putin has taken center stage.

Both men have repeatedly insisted that their "tandem" is working well. So far, events have borne out that claim.

Olga Kryshtanovskaya, one of Russia's top experts on its political elite, says that if one ignores the terms of Russia's Constitution and looks at who actually holds the levers of power, the apparently peaceful relationship makes sense.

"Medvedev has no resources and no team to lead; 85 percent of all key posts are held by Putin's people. Medvedev's a general with no army," she says. "The plenary powers of the leaders have been distributed without any reference to the Constitution. Medvedev might chair sessions of the Security Council, but Putin actually controls the siloviki," meaning the military and security services.

In a burst of assertive activity recently, Medvedev has reached out to Russia's liberals, who were squeezed out of parliament, virtually banned from mainstream media, and shoved to society's margins under Putin.

In April, Medvedev gave a major interview to the Kremlin's longtime nemesis in journalism, the crusading weekly Novaya Gazeta. He introduced a presidential blog and ordered experts to draw up revisions to the Putin-era law on nongovernmental organizations, which civic leaders have decried as a straitjacket on political activity. He also met with leaders of small parties unable to win representation in the Duma in recent elections, and pledged to ease Putin-era restrictions.

Why Putin is throwing pens on national TV

Critics deride these moves as symbolic, but some say they may be an attempt to consolidate support as Medvedev prepares to assert himself as Russia's legitimate leader.

"Putin still believes that he is the No. 1 person in the country, but the problem is that Medvedev is beginning to think much the same of himself," Dmitry Oreshkin, head of the Mercator Group think tank in Moscow, told Ekho Moskvi radio recently. "Putin is more and more obviously taking up a tough, authoritarian position, as if he knows he is being pushed from power and is showing that he will mount fierce resistance."

Earlier this month, Putin rushed to the scene of a workers' strike in western Russia, where he angrily threw a pen at a wealthy tycoon - on national TV - and ordered all the workers' demands to be met. In another odd piece of political theater, Putin angrily upbraided the entire cabinet in a televised July government meeting.

Experts say the truth will probably not be revealed before presidential elections in 2012. Late last year, Medvedev pushed through controversial amendments to Russia's Constitution that extend presidential terms to six years.

"Of course this division of power cannot work as an institution in Russia; this is just a unique situation," says Alexei Pushkov, a member of the Kremlin's Council on Human Rights. "We'll know what's really going on when we see which of them will be running for president next time. Then it will totally become clear," he says.

#13

Ukraine freedom hinges on energy independence: Biden

By Anya Tsukanova

AFP, July 22, 2009

KIEV - Vice President Joe Biden told Ukraine Wednesday that its economic future depended in large measure on freeing itself from dependence on Russian energy and pledged US help in finding solutions.

"Your economic freedom depends more on your energy freedom than on any other factor," Biden said in a speech as he wrapped up a two-day visit aimed at assuring Ukraine of continued US support despite plans to fix ties with Russia.

He described Ukraine as "one of the most free and democratic countries" in eastern Europe but underlined the direct link between its management of energy and its room to manoeuvre on broader issues of state policy.

Ukraine still relies almost exclusively on Russia for natural gas supplies crucial to its own industry and is also the primary transit country for Russian gas shipments to European countries further downstream.

That reality, a result of a unified energy infrastructure built when Ukraine and Russia were part of one country, the Soviet Union, is at the root of energy crises in recent years which have had broad international implications.

Biden also took aim at the notorious waste of energy in Ukraine, where dwellers in many homes are forced to fling windows wide open in the winter since they cannot reduce the heat from centralised sources being pumped in.

"It's time for action," Biden said.

"We can look together for a solution" to Ukraine's glaring energy problems, Biden said, which had to be resolved both to boost the country's economy and, by extension, diminish Russia's ability to leverage energy for political ends.

Biden was due later Wednesday to arrive in Tbilisi for dinner with Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili ahead of formal talks, and an address to parliament, on Thursday.

Biden's boss, President Barack Obama, has placed efforts to repair damaged US relations with Russia at the centre of his foreign policy agenda. Obama visited Moscow earlier this month to emphasise that priority.

Biden was expected to offer assurances of continued support for Georgia, where US and Russian strategic interests have clashed with growing intensity in recent years, igniting tensions reminiscent of the Cold War.

Those tensions spiked a year ago when Russian forces stormed into Georgia, a key US ally in the Caucasus, ostensibly to repel a drive by Georgian forces to re-take control of a rebel region supported by Russia.

The intense, five-day war that ensued was strongly condemned by the United States, which dispatched warships to the Black Sea saying they were delivering humanitarian aid to Georgia but drawing Russia's wrath.

Biden's mission to Ukraine and Georgia, coming on the tails of Obama's trip to Moscow, was characterised as a "balancing trip" to reassure those countries that US efforts to "reset" ties with Russia will not occur at their expense.

In an interview with the Wall Street Journal published on Monday, the Georgian leader, Saakashvili, admitted that his country's drive to join NATO was "almost dead."

He said that if the Kremlin succeeded in its efforts to "kill" Georgia's NATO membership bid -- many analysts say it already has -- this would prove that Russia "fought for the right reasons" last summer in Georgia.

#14

NATO, Russia consider ways to boost cooperation

By Slobodan Lekic

AP, July 22, 2009

BRUSSELS -- Diplomats from NATO and Russia met on Wednesday to discuss ways of cooperating in the battle against pirates off Somalia and supplying alliance forces fighting in Afghanistan.

Russian ambassador to NATO Dmitry Rogozin said Russia wanted to set up an international criminal court to try captured Somali pirates, rather than prosecuting them in local courts in countries such as Kenya.

He said he also proposed setting up coordinated patrols by Russian and NATO warships in the Gulf of Aden, improving liaisons between them and instituting joint training for crews involved in the effort to stamp out pirate attacks on merchant shipping.

Pirate attacks worldwide more than doubled in the first half of 2009 amid a surge of raids on vessels in the Gulf of Aden and off the coast of Somalia, an international maritime watchdog said last week.

Wednesday's one-day meeting in Brussels was the latest sign of improving relations between the West and Russia.

Ties between NATO and the Russian military were frozen after the five-day Georgian war last August. But last month, foreign ministers from NATO's 28 nations and Russia agreed to normalize ties and resume military cooperation.

On Wednesday, the NATO-Russia Council - a panel set up in 2002 to improve ties between the former Cold War rivals - also discussed combatting drug smuggling from Afghanistan into Central Asia, NATO spokesman James Appathurai said.

"There was a shared desire to strengthen the NATO-Russia Council by focusing on practical issues," Appathurai said.

The issue of overland transit for NATO's military supplies to Afghanistan through Russia and the Central Asian states also was discussed, he said. NATO recently reached agreements with Russia and Uzbekistan for the transport by rail of equipment and supplies, but has yet to do the same with Kazakhstan before regular deliveries can begin.

NATO commanders have been pushing for transshipments of military supplies to the rapidly expanding international force in Afghanistan because the normal supply route to the landlocked nation through Pakistan has come under repeated Taliban attack.

Vladimir Nazarov, the deputy head of Russia's Security Council, briefed the 28 NATO ambassadors about Russia's new national security strategy, which is sharply critical of the alliance's eastward expansion.

"We were asked by our partners to explain why we see the approach of NATO's military infrastructure to our borders as a threat," Nazarov said.

The U.S. has pledged to support NATO membership countries such as Georgia and Ukraine, but Germany and other European member states are skeptical.

#15

Stop infighting, Biden tells Ukraine's leaders

By Sabina Zawadzki

Reuters, July 22, 2009

KIEV - U.S. Vice President Joe Biden chided Ukraine's political leaders on Wednesday, telling them they had to stop "posturing" if the country was to seal its post-Soviet independence and economic development.

In a speech marked by a sharper tone that contrasted with previous expressions of unflinching support from Washington, Biden said Ukraine stood at a historic moment in building on the gains of the 2004 pro-Western "Orange Revolution."

"Literally, you are standing in a moment in history that you have never stood at before, literally," Biden said. "Frankly, your success will bear on the successes or failures of many people in this part of the world."

Infighting has pitched Ukraine into non-stop political turmoil since a heady week of street protests in 2004 against electoral fraud swept President Viktor Yushchenko to office.

The protests -- and a re-run of a rigged election -- caught the world by surprise and opened the way for Yushchenko to move Ukraine away from its former Soviet master, Russia.

Initial euphoria and pledges to secure membership of the European Union and NATO, staunchly supported by the administration of former U.S. president George W. Bush, gave way to bickering and stalled reforms as Ukraine plunged into recession.

"Ukraine, in my humble opinion, must heed the lesson of history. Effective, accountable government is the only way to provide a stable, predictable and transparent environment that attracts investments ... the economic engine of development," he said.

Biden suggested 19th century poet Taras Shevchenko, a national hero who opposed centuries of Russian dominance, would be critical of rows pitting Yushchenko against Prime Minister Yulia Tymoshenko, his estranged ally from the revolution.

"I think he would also be wondering why the government is not exhibiting the same political maturity as the people," he told the gathering of prominent Ukrainians.

"Why communications among leaders have broken down to such an extent that political posturing appears to prevent progress, especially now, especially in difficult economic times.

COMPROMISE TO REFORM

Biden's sharper tone is part of a changed U.S. policy since President Barack Obama took over from Bush, who aggravated ties with Russia by his push for NATO expansion to Russian borders.

Biden said Washington would support any decision Ukraine might make on membership of NATO, which is vehemently opposed by Moscow. Most Ukrainians remain opposed to joining NATO, despite Yushchenko's drive to seek membership.

Biden encouraged Yushchenko, Tymoshenko and other leaders to resolve differences ahead of a January 17 presidential election. "In a democracy, compromise is not a sign of weakness, it is evidence of strength," he said.

Disputes have exasperated the IMF, which has delayed the release of some of the \$16.4 billion it has agreed to loan Ukraine to withstand the economic crisis.

"The path to renewed prosperity runs through the International Monetary Fund which is offering a way out of the current crisis," Biden said. A senior U.S. official said late on Tuesday that Washington would not offer Ukraine any extra loans.

The IMF wants authorities to raise domestic gas prices to right the finances of state energy firm Naftogaz, often at the center of rows with Russia, including a three-week New Year cutoff of flows. But that would be unpopular before an election.

Many analysts say Russia has used its vast gas resources to keep control over its Western-leaning ex-Soviet neighbors.

But Biden suggested Ukraine could cut Russia out of national security concerns by moving to reduce energy consumption, now three times less efficient than in European countries.

"If you lift Ukraine to the European standards, your need for energy imports will dramatically decline, dramatically," he said. "That would be a boom to the economy and an immeasurable benefit, I respectfully suggest, to your national security."

#16

U.S. Overlooks Kyrgyzstan Rights Abuses

By Clifford J. Levy

New York Times, July 22, 2009

BISHKEK, Kyrgyzstan — "You know what this is for," Emilbek Kaptagaev recalled being told by the police officers who snatched him off the street. No other words, just blows to the head, then all went black. Mr.

Kaptagaev, an opponent of Kyrgyzstan's president, who is a vital American ally in the war in nearby Afghanistan, was found later in a field with a concussion, broken ribs and a face swollen into a mosaic of bruises.

Mr. Kaptagaev said that the beating last month was a warning to stop campaigning against the president, but that he would not. And so he received an anonymous call only a few days ago. "Have you forgotten?" the voice growled. "Want it to happen again?"

Mr. Kaptagaev's story is not unusual in this poor former Soviet republic in the mountains of Central Asia. Many opposition politicians and independent journalists have been arrested, prosecuted, attacked and even killed over the last year as the Kyrgyz president, Kurmanbek Bakiyev, has consolidated control in advance of elections on Thursday, which he is all but certain to win.

"This is how the authorities rule in Kyrgyzstan," said Mr. Kaptagaev, 52. "They use criminal methods to keep power."

The United States has remained largely silent in response to this wave of violence, apparently wary of jeopardizing the status of its sprawling air base, on the outskirts of this capital, which supports the mission in Afghanistan. Indeed, the Obama administration has sought to woo the Kyrgyz president since he said in February that he would close the Manas base.

In June, President Obama sent a letter to Mr. Bakiyev praising his role in Afghanistan and the campaign against terrorism. Mr. Bakiyev allowed the base to stay, after the United States agreed to pay higher rent and other minor changes.

The lack of criticism of Mr. Bakiyev underscores how the Obama administration has emphasized pragmatic concerns over human rights in dealings with autocratic leaders in Central Asia. Under pressure in Afghanistan, the administration has feared alienating nearby countries whose support is increasingly important.

How to react to crackdowns like Mr. Bakiyev's is a longstanding challenge for American diplomacy, here and around the world. Some American officials stress that rebuking governments over human rights is often ineffective because they lash back, and tighten things further.

The administration is mindful that a neighboring former Soviet republic, Uzbekistan, closed an American military facility there after American officials condemned an attack by the security forces in 2005 that killed hundreds of people. The Obama administration is trying to repair that relationship.

In the Kyrgyz elections on Thursday, opposition parties have rallied around the candidacy of a former prime minister, Almazbek Atambaev, but he is given little chance. Mr. Atambaev's campaign manager, Bakyt Beshimov, said the Kyrgyz president drew strength from the American reluctance to speak out.

"This regime clearly understand that for the United States, democracy is not a priority, freedom of speech is not a priority," Mr. Beshimov said. "They want peace, stability, air bases and regional security connected with Afghanistan."

The Obama administration's attempt to improve ties with Central Asia was underscored by a visit to the region this month by a senior diplomat, William J. Burns.

In Kyrgyzstan, Mr. Burns said at a news conference that the United States hoped for "fair and credible elections," but he did not mention the treatment of the opposition or journalists.

Interviewed about the political situation, another State Department official, George A. Krol, said reports of violence "greatly disturb the department."

"The United States doesn't shy away from raising these issues with the Kyrgyz authorities," he said.

The Kyrgyz president, Mr. Bakiyev, took office in 2005 after the Tulip Revolution — the third in what was seen at the time as a series of so-called color revolutions that offered hope of more democratic governments in the former Soviet Union.

Today, widespread disillusionment has set in, as in Ukraine and Georgia, which also had such upheavals.

Kyrgyzstan, with five million people, continues to have a more open political system and more open media than its hard-line neighbors in Central Asia. It is not a police state, and in general, only those who overtly challenge the government are hounded by the security services.

Even so, human rights groups have been taken aback.

“President Bakiyev has become infamous for even greater levels of corruption, authoritarianism and ineffective economic policies than his predecessor,” Freedom House, a human rights group, said in a new report.

In an interview at the presidential residence, Mr. Bakiyev dismissed such criticism. He said the security services were in no way persecuting the opposition.

He said he would be easily re-elected because the country was faring well despite the financial crisis, adding that opposition leaders were complaining that balloting would be falsified because they needed excuses for their lack of support.

“A strong opposition would not behave in that way,” Mr. Bakiyev said.

He said he was so confident that the elections would be honest that he had invited the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe to monitor them. In a report in May, the organization, which has 56 member states, described concerns in Kyrgyzstan about “a criminalization of the political process.”

Mr. Bakiyev, asked about repeated attacks on journalists, said he doubted that the attacks were related to their jobs. He said the government would never try to silence the media.

“The only authorities that would take that step are ones who are afraid — afraid of journalists, afraid of openness, afraid of something that they want to hide,” he said. “I, as president, and the government of Kyrgyzstan fear absolutely nothing. There is no motive, there is no reason to hunt down journalists.”

Still, the bloodshed continues. This month, a journalist named Almaz Tashiyev died after being beaten by police officers, prosecutors said.

Syrgak Abdylbaev says he barely escaped that fate. In March, Mr. Abdylbaev, 47, a well-known journalist who has scrutinized the president’s political activities, was lured to a meeting by an anonymous caller who promised confidential information, and was attacked.

He was stabbed 29 times in the thigh, apparently in an effort to cause him to bleed to death. He survived after passers-by came to his aid.

“They wanted to make an example of me,” Mr. Abdylbaev said. “They wanted me to die in front of everybody. And then nobody — not a journalist, not anybody with a brain in his head — would dare write anything in the press.”

While he was hospitalized, his newspaper, The Bishkek Reporter, dismissed him. He was told it was too risky to keep publishing his work.

#17

Biden Hears Georgia’s Plea for Western Protection

By Ellen Barry

New York Times, July 22, 2009

TBILISI, Georgia — Tbilisi greeted Vice President Joseph R. Biden Jr. as a hero on Wednesday, and President Mikheil Saakashvili made a passionate plea to the West to help defend his country against Russian forces in its separatist territories, at one point comparing Georgia’s refugee crisis to Darfur’s.

As Georgian and American dignitaries gathered at elegantly set tables in a glassy new presidential palace, Mr. Saakashvili warned them that “the occupier’s artillery is pointed on this new dome, this palace, this city right now as we speak, just 25 miles from here.”

He fondly recalled Mr. Biden’s visit to Georgia after last year’s war with Russia, and repeated a promise the vice president made then when he was chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee: “I will never, ever abandon you.” He then hung a gold medal of honor on Mr. Biden, whom he greeted as “Joe, my dear friend.”

It was the second day of Mr. Biden’s tour of Georgia and Ukraine, a trip conceived to assure both countries that they would not be forgotten in Washington’s effort to improve relations with Russia.

If Mr. Biden’s meetings in Kiev had the formal, deliberate feel of a tea dance, his reception in Georgia was downright operatic. Appeals for American help began as Mr. Biden’s motorcade drove in from the airport, with crowds along the way waving signs that read “We count on you,” “Don’t forget us,” “You are our only hope” and “Punished for loving freedom.”

Mr. Biden’s task here and in Ukraine has been to thread a needle: to reassure post-Soviet allies of Washington’s unchanging loyalty without stoking a confrontation with Russia. In a morning speech in Kiev, Mr. Biden wove together his themes subtly, combining soaring praise of Ukraine’s young democracy with a note of serious rebuke over its leaders’ infighting. He was expected to do the same in Tbilisi on Thursday.

But Wednesday night belonged to Mr. Saakashvili. In recent days, he and other officials have outlined concrete steps that the United States could take to help Georgia in its standoff with Russian forces in South Ossetia and Abkhazia. They have urged an American role in the European Union’s monitoring mission, which patrols the enclaves’ boundaries, and have sought military assistance to reconstitute the country’s battered army.

United States officials have given no indication of how far they are willing to go, but their choices will resonate in Moscow, still furious at Mr. Saakashvili over last August’s conflict. In his response to the Georgian president, Mr. Biden was far less personal — but he was emphatic in his support for the country. He had returned to Georgia, he said, “to send an unequivocal, clear, simple message to all who will listen, that America stands with you at this moment and will continue to stand with you.”

In a speech in Kiev on Wednesday morning, Mr. Biden acknowledged Ukrainians’ ambivalence about the prospect of joining NATO, an initiative championed under the Bush administration. Instead, he recommended that Ukraine pursue independence — implicitly, from Russia — by reforming its energy sector.

Ukraine’s leaders, who are headed into a presidential election in January, greeted Mr. Biden with polite interest. But in Georgia, leaders both in and out of power have been waiting eagerly for Mr. Biden. No one was more eager than Mr. Saakashvili, who had a warm personal relationship with President George W. Bush.

At the banquet, Mr. Saakashvili made it clear that he saw Mr. Biden as an equally strong advocate. “Joe, you know in America,” Mr. Saakashvili said, “as anywhere on the earth you can find lots of cynics and realpolitik followers.” But, he said, “in America, idealists ultimately run the show.”

After the two parted, the Georgian president went to an exhibit called “Open Iron Curtain,” which juxtaposed photographs from the August war with imagery from the Berlin Wall — a metaphor Georgian leaders use to depict Russia’s ambitions.

As he walked in, Mr. Saakashvili heard a group of young people chanting his name, and he sat down on the ground next to them, drinking wine and discussing Mr. Biden’s visit and its impact on Russia.

“Their plan to have a big war and take over Tbilisi has been spoiled by Biden’s visit,” he said. To the emphatic agreement of his young companions, Mr. Saakashvili said Russia would never prevail in Georgia. “There is an irreversible sense of freedom here,” he said.

“Georgia forever!” shouted a young girl in the group.

“Georgia forever!” said Mr. Saakashvili, taking a swig of wine from the bottle.

#18

Wishful Thinking Won't Solve the Crisis

By Boris Kagarlitsky

Moscow Times, July 23, 2009

After the drop in oil prices in the fall and the subsequent devaluation of the ruble, government officials, business leaders and economic analysts were thrown into a panic. Even Finance Minister Alexei Kudrin, whose job requires that he try to calm people's fears, began issuing one gloomy statement after another.

Nonetheless, it seemed that the economy started to stabilize in the second quarter as oil prices crept upward again and the ruble gained. The general panic gave way to renewed optimism, and the authorities reverted to their typical overly confident statements about the economy.

As could have been expected, however, that confidence turned out to be premature. During this period of seeming stability, manufacturing continued to fall, unemployment grew and demand dwindled. Moreover, in early July the price of oil fell once again and brought the stock market and the value of the ruble tumbling down with it. The hard-won gains of the first half of 2009 were lost in only a few days. Once again we heard doomsday predictions that the economy would soon crash.

Russia has experienced a roller-coaster ride of dramatic mood shifts. Periods of panic are followed by self-assuring statements about having "hit bottom already." This testifies to how little the country's leaders understand about what is happening and why each new turn of events - whether negative or positive - is so unexpected for them.

The economy has avoided a complete crash thanks to the billions of rubles and dollars the government has thrown at it, creating at times a sense of illusory stability. Rather than using the occasional lulls in the economic storm to understand what is happening and to prepare for the next wave of difficulties, the authorities use the respites to continue a propaganda campaign to convince the people that the economy will soon recover. The more successful their PR efforts are, the less prepared the people are when the next wave hits - and the greater their feelings of shock and confusion.

Salary arrears were already growing rapidly by midsummer, and news reports of massive layoffs had become common. But the escalating social crisis does not necessarily threaten the stability of the political system. Protesters are not calling for a change in leadership - or even for a change in the country's economic course - but only for back pay and basic civil rights protection.

From an ideological point of view, there is no reason to consider these as challenges to the existing order. But one fact could change everything: As the crisis deepens, the ability of the authorities to meet the people's demands is rapidly decreasing.

Even if courts rule that companies must pay back wages to workers, employers often do not have the funds to pay employees. Layoffs continue, despite appeals by governors and ministers that employers preserve jobs. And the more the authorities refuse to change the system, preferring stop-gap measures for putting out the fires that are growing daily in number and intensity, the more they will be caught in a downward spiral and the more they will lose control of their policies - and the economy as well.

#19

Nixon and Khrushchev, the End of an Unscripted Era

By Serge Schmemmann

New York Times, July 23, 2009

Friday is the 50th anniversary of one of the more bizarre clashes of the cold war: the "kitchen debate" between Richard Nixon, then 46 and Dwight D. Eisenhower's vice president, and Nikita Khrushchev, the cunning peasant who at 65 had just finished consolidating his position at the pinnacle of Soviet power.

Unscripted and often raw, it was one of the few times Soviet and American leaders publicly vented at each other. After the brash and mercurial Khrushchev was ousted, summit meetings became choreographed shows.

Nixon, too, would fall from power, 10 years after Khrushchev, but both men relished recalling a debate that went to the very heart of the difference in their systems and beliefs.

It took place in an American exhibition at the Sokolniki Park in Moscow, featuring all sorts of labor-saving and recreational gadgets meant to showcase the American consumer market. Khrushchev was the last Soviet leader who really believed in the superiority of the Soviet system, and the exhibition seemed only to anger him. He was even angrier about a "Captive Nations Resolution" just passed by the United States Congress, to which he returned again and again, each time more crudely. Finally came the legendary exchange:

"This resolution stinks," Khrushchev exclaimed. "It stinks like fresh horse" manure and "nothing smells worse than that," he said, using a much earthier word than manure.

Nixon waited for the translation and fired back: "I am afraid that the chairman is mistaken." Pig manure smells worse, he explained, using the English version of Khrushchev's word.

In his memoirs, Nixon pictured his retort as a deliberate chess move. He had read that the Soviet premier had been a pig herder, and, he wrote, "Khrushchev would respect only those who stood up to him, who resisted him, and who believed as strongly in their own cause as he believed in his."

I believe it was more than that. Though he had risen in politics in part through Soviet-bashing, Nixon was an ardent student of Russia. After I wrote a series of articles about a dilapidated Russian village, he had sent me a handwritten letter recalling passages from Tolstoy's "Anna Karenina" in which Levin, the liberal landowner, finds his attempts at agricultural innovation stymied by immutable Russian peasants.

Tolstoy and other Russian writers, he told me later, shaped a lasting fascination with Russia, which played a major role in his relish to take on the Soviet leader and, I think, in the respect the Russians developed for Nixon.

When the Soviet Union began to unravel in the early 1990s, I had an opportunity to meet Nixon in Moscow. Then 78, with Watergate far enough removed for him to treat it almost casually in conversation, he was received by the Russians as a respected and historical figure, and accorded meetings with both Mikhail Gorbachev and Boris Yeltsin, then locked in mortal political combat.

Nixon's analysis of that struggle was spellbinding, especially when he transposed it onto the American scene. "Gorbachev is Wall Street, and Yeltsin is Main Street," he said. Or: "Gorbachev is Georgetown drawing room. Yeltsin is Newark factory gate."

It was a very personal view from a man familiar with that battlefield. He found an "animal magnetism" in Yeltsin, but his money was on Gorbachev, in whom he saw a man who had fought hard to get where he was and would not give it up lightly: "He likes power. He intends to keep it. He is a fighter." Perhaps it was because he saw something of himself in Gorbachev that he failed to see that the Russian, too, would fall painfully from power, 10 months later as it transpired, and take the Soviet Union down with him.

He also revealed something else about the kitchen debate: not only had he deliberately thrown his manure at Khrushchev's manure, but he armed himself for the confrontation. Nixon said he had realized that Khrushchev liked to use the shock value of crude farm talk and had lined up retorts from his own rural past.

After the Soviet Union collapsed, there was a brief time when Soviet-era archives were thrown open. Among the files I read was the original Soviet version of the horse vs. pig exchange. The earthy word Khrushchev used becomes "manure" (just as it did for this article).

N.S. KHRUSHCHEV: "Please forgive me, Mr. Nixon, but I would like to use a strong peasant's word to elucidate the situation. Fresh manure always smells more."

NIXON: I also grew up on a farm. They used to say that pig manure is worse than horse.

The transcript does not record the Kremlin's official assessment of the exchange, nor does history say whether it figured into the accusations of "voluntarism and subjectivism" for which Khrushchev was ousted. But Nixon's retort did achieve an immediate goal: Khrushchev changed the subject.

#20
Biden Delivers 'Tough Love' Message to Georgian Leaders
Vice President Says Conflict With Russia Won't Be Solved With Militarization, Encourages Nation to Pursue Democratic Reforms
By Philip P. Pan
Washington Post, July 23, 2009

TBILISI, Georgia, July 23 -- Vice President Biden put off a request from Georgia for new defensive weapons on Thursday and told the nation's leaders they would never be able to use military means to recover territories lost in last year's war with Russia, a senior administration official said.

Biden also urged Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili to do more to deepen democratic reforms in this former Soviet republic. He later held a long meeting with four opposition leaders who have condemned Saakashvili as a despot and argued that the Bush administration had coddled him.

As he prepared to address parliament at the end of a four-day trip to Ukraine and Georgia, Biden continued to deliver a mixed message of what an advisor called "tough love," emphasizing again that the United States would not sacrifice the two former Soviet republics as it seeks to improve relations with Russia, nor recognize the Kremlin's claim to a sphere of "privileged interests" in the region.

In a sign that Obama administration's balancing act was being scrutinized in Moscow, the Russian government issued a stern warning that it would not allow Georgia, which it says was the aggressor in last year's war, to re-arm itself.

"We will continue inhibiting rearmament of the Saakashvili regime and are taking concrete measures against this," Deputy Foreign Minister Grigory Karasin told the ITAR-Tass news agency.

"We have a deep worry regarding the activity of the Georgian leadership over remilitarizing its country, which several states are responding to in a surprisingly calm and positive way," he added, vowing that Russia would limit or suspend military and economic cooperation with countries that supply arms to Georgia.

Saakashvili had urged Biden to speed up delivery of anti-aircraft and anti-tank weapons that Georgian officials have argued would help deter and slow a Russian attack. In an interview on Tuesday, Saakashvili said a U.S. decision not to provide the weaponry would be a sign of weakness that would encourage the Russians to invade.

"We are a country under attack, under partial occupation," he told Biden at the start of their meeting.

But a senior administration official, briefing reporters after the meeting on condition of anonymity, said Biden refused to commit to arms deliveries and instead argued that the Georgian military needed further training and non-material help.

"A key for Georgia here is the modernization of its military, building its capacities, and at this stage, it's not so much a matter of weaponry or military hardware," he said. The Pentagon will continue working to train the Georgian military "to hypothetically use some of the weaponry they desire," the officials said.

Biden also postponed a decision on a Georgian suggestion that the United States join a European Union civilian monitoring mission along the border of South Ossetia and Abkhazia, the two breakaway regions that Russia recognized as independent from Georgia after the war.

In an interview with the BBC, Biden said the administration was open to the idea but had not received a request from the Europeans on the matter.

#21
EU agrees to extend Georgia monitoring mission: diplomat
AFP, July 23, 2009

BRUSSELS -European Union nations have agreed to extend the bloc's ceasefire monitoring mission in Georgia, an EU diplomat said Thursday, as Tbilisi sought to have US observers join the operation.

"There is an agreement on the prolongation" of the EU Georgia Monitoring Mission (EUGMM) for one year from mid-September, said the diplomat, on condition of anonymity.

The "in-principle" deal was sealed amongst ambassadors from the 27 EU nations just as US Vice President Joe Biden was visiting Georgia to pledge support, almost a year after Russia's war with the former Soviet state.

The move is expected to be endorsed by EU foreign ministers in Brussels on Monday.

"The prolongation of the mission is a very important signal both of continued commitment to the stability and to the implementation of the (peace) agreement of last year," Swedish Foreign Minister Carl Bildt, whose country holds the EU presidency, said Tuesday.

EU monitors carry out regular patrols along the de facto borders with breakaway Abkhazia and South Ossetia as part of the ceasefire accord brokered by the Union after the war in August but do not have a mandate to enter.

Russia designated the two rebel regions independent countries in the aftermath of the conflict, and the pro-Russian authorities there refuse to allow the observers in.

Moscow is blocking an extension to an Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) monitoring mission for Georgia, leaving the EU monitors as the sole observers to keep the ceasefire vigil.

Georgia wants US monitors to join the EU mission, and Bildt did not rule that possibility out, despite likely opposition from Russia.

"If there should be any changes, they could well be contemplated. I'm not against it, but I think that's a later issue. I know the discussion is ongoing but there is nothing on the table," he said.

EU diplomats warned it was anything but a done deal.

"It's not going to be easy to agree on that," said one, while another warned: "It's important not to provoke any new risks" for stability in the region.

The issue was due to be discussed by the foreign ministers in September.

#22

Another Example of a Winning Twinning Relationship World Union for Progressive Judaism, July 23, 2009

Congregation Beth Emeth of Wilmington, Delaware, recently sent the World Union a copy of a letter it received from members of Congregation Madregot of Tyumen, Russia. Beth Emeth has been twinned with the Tyumen group since 2001, when several of the Wilmington congregation's leaders met with leaders of the World Union at the Union for Reform Judaism's 2001 biennial in Boston.

At the time, the Siberian congregation was in severe financial straits and its members were being enticed by the local Chabad group. But the twinning arrangement reinvigorated it, enabling Madregot (which means "steps" in Hebrew) to pay part of its operating expenses, including a salary for its teacher and liturgical leader, the cost of holiday celebrations and enhanced security. There are also bar and bat mitzvah ceremonies, Torah study, musical and sporting events, youth and senior programs, and a tikkun olam project at the local cemetery.

Financial assistance from the Wilmington congregation has totaled \$5,000-\$6,500 a year, according to Beth Emeth's Jerry Arenson.

"When we initiated our twinning program with Congregation Madregot, we thought this would be just a three-year program," Arenson said. "Everyone is delighted that it has been so successful, and we hope to maintain our relationship for many years to come."

Beth Emeth, as well as its sisterhood, has provided the Tyumen congregation with Judaica items for lifecycle events. Several years ago, it funded a visit to Delaware by Madregot leader Igor Varkin, who used the opportunity to attend the URJ's mid-Atlantic region biennial. The Tyumen municipality gave Madregot a building that had been used as a synagogue prior to the Russian revolution. It was renovated by a local businessman.

The congregations' main means of communication is e-mail, and the following is excerpted from a recent message from Madregot:

"Dear Beth Emeth friends:

....Purim was a very exciting time as always. The children of the Sunday school prepared a carnival consisting of various costumes. The local circus actors performed, in addition to our playhouse.

We had several different events planned for Passover. A seminar was held for new members. They were told about the holiday, the traditions, the seder, and were also shown the movie The Prince of Egypt. The group was given candles and played a game in which they had to find the chametz. The traditional seder was held for the community and youth. The playhouse held a premier of three theatrical pieces....

Shavuot was a smaller holiday for the congregation because it fell in the middle of the week. Still, the preparation remained unchanged. The group bought and cooked various dairy dishes... We also baked challah and cookies in the shape of Hebrew letters. The Ten Commandments were read to the group. At the end of the celebration, everyone went out onto the lawn to wish each other the best.

A little bit more about our congregational life....

Kaballat Shabbat services are continuing as always and we are still welcoming new members. Every week, we come up with new events for the elderly members. These events include various trips, movie outings, board games and story telling. Today, the group took a boat ride down a nearby river.

We wish you a warm and happy summer and best wishes for the New Year!"

#23

Tajikistan Moves to Ban Russian Language

By Natalya Krainova

Moscow Times, July 24, 2009

Tajikistan is preparing to ban the use of Russian by state agencies and in official documents to boost the role of the local language, in what analysts see as either a move to win new financial support from Moscow or to demonstrate political independence.

But the move, criticized by a senior Russian lawmaker Thursday, could bring more damage than help to the impoverished country, where remittances sent back from Russia accounted for almost 50 percent of the economy last year, according to World Bank estimates.

Tajik President Emomali Rakhmon called on the government to speed up consideration of a bill that would require state agencies and companies to communicate with one another and issue official documents exclusively in Tajik, RIA-Novosti reported late Wednesday.

The bill would also make knowledge of the local language compulsory for every Tajik citizen, the report said.

"A speedy adoption of a new law about the [national] language is needed," Rakhmon said in a televised address to the nation, according to a transcript on his official web site in the Russian and Tajik languages. "A state language ... is an attribute of political independence," he said.

Rakhmon's televised address was dedicated to the anniversary of the law on the national language adopted on July 22, 1989. That law made Tajik the national language but gave every citizen the right to choose between Tajik and Russian when addressing state agencies, RIA-Novosti said.

The text of the bill was not available Thursday on the web sites of the president or the government. Repeated calls to the prime minister's office went unanswered Thursday afternoon.

Official Tajik web sites are published in Tajik, Russian and English. About 15 percent of the population is ethnic Uzbek, while Russians and Kyrgyz each comprise about 1 percent.

Meanwhile, Tajik First Deputy Foreign Minister Abdullo Yuldashev said Thursday at a news conference in Dushanbe that his country had "excellent relations" with Russia, Central Asian News reported.

Alexei Ostrovsky, chairman of the State Duma's CIS Affairs Committee, called the bill a "great mistake," Interfax reported. He predicted that Russia would be "forced" in the future to ban the employment of Tajik migrants who do not know Russian, which would "aggravate the difficult economic situation of the majority" of Tajiks and could lead to street protests there.

Tajikistan borders Afghanistan and fought a civil war with Islamist rebels in the 1990s. Dushanbe and Moscow have been wrangling over financing for a half-completed hydropower station intended to help solve Tajikistan's chronic power shortages.

Analysts said the language bill was a new chip in the political bargaining between Russia and Tajikistan.

Tajik authorities knew that the bill would be "painful" for the Russian leadership, which has been trying to maintain its influence in the CIS, said Andrei Grozin, an analyst with the Commonwealth of Independent States Institute, established and headed by United Russia Duma Deputy Konstantin Zatulin.

"The aim is to make Russia provide clearer support for Tajik leadership," Grozin said, referring to Russian investment sought by the Tajik authorities.

Alexander Rahr, a Russia expert with the German Council on Foreign Relations, said Tajikistan was trying to "show that it can do without Russia" and cooperate with countries such as China. But sidelining the Russian language would also impede "globalization processes" in Tajikistan, he said.

It would also harm millions of future Tajik migrant workers to Russia, who would "face big problems because they don't speak Russian," Grozin said.

Moscow, which wants Dushanbe to abandon its multilateral foreign policy and make relations with Russia its priority, would likely refuse further investment because of the bill, Grozin said.

Passage of the bill could result in another delay of a visit by President Dmitry Medvedev to Tajikistan, now scheduled for July 30, he said. The visit was initially planned for May. The Kremlin has provided no reason for the delay.

The proposed changes are not the first time Tajikistan's president has sought to strengthen the status of the national language. In March 2007, Rakhmon dropped the Slavic "ov" from his surname and ordered that all babies born to Tajik parents do the same.

Saparmurat Niyazov, the eccentric former leader of Turkmenistan, banned teaching Russian in schools and ordered that diplomas issued in Russian universities not be recognized in the republic. In December 2007, Ukraine's Constitutional Court banned the showing of movies in Russian and other foreign languages in Ukraine's movie theaters despite objections from the country's Russian-speaking eastern regions.

#24

Kyrgyz leader re-elected amid charges of widespread fraud

July 24, 2009, AFP

BISHKEK -The leader of Kyrgyzstan, a strategically important ex-Soviet state courted by both Moscow and Washington, kept his grip on power Friday in an election that observers said was marred by massive fraud.

President Kurmanbek Bakiyev won re-election with more than 85 percent of the vote, the Central Asian state's election commission announced, trouncing all challengers, as independent experts had predicted he would.

The official landslide victory by Bakiyev, 59, came a month after Kyrgyzstan secured more than 300 million dollars from the United States for the continued use of an airbase there crucial to supplying US troops in Afghanistan.

After vowing in February to close the US airbase at Manas, Bakiyev relented when Washington agreed to a huge increase in the rent it pays for the base.

Kyrgyzstan's battered opposition, which said it had waited in vain for help from the international community in a campaign season marked by violence and intimidation, said the connection between the base and the election was clear.

Opposition politicians said the United States was not likely to subject Bakiyev to the kind of withering criticism it has directed at other leaders after votes judged deeply flawed, because the Manas base was more vital.

"They made the rational decision that what was important to them was keeping the base," Bakyt Beshimov, an opposition member of parliament, told AFP.

"But when someone invites you to a certain system of values, and then abandons those values, it is of course disappointing."

The Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), whose 280 monitors closely observed conduct of the vote throughout Kyrgyzstan, concluded it was marred by widespread irregularities and the misuse of state resources.

"Election day was marred by many problems and irregularities, including evidence of ballot box stuffing, inaccuracies in the voter lists and some evidence of multiple voting," the OSCE said in a report issued Friday.

"The process further deteriorated during the counting and tabulation," it added.

The European democracy watchdog, echoing criticism from Bakiyev's opponents, affirmed that bias by the state media and the misuse of administrative resources had given the incumbent an "unfair advantage" in the race.

Radmilla Sekerinska, head of the OSCE long-term observer mission in the country, was visibly angered during a press conference in the capital Bishkek at which the report was presented.

While stopping short of declaring the election illegitimate, Sekerinska said she supported opposition attempts to contest the vote.

"We have been pleased to hear that some of the candidates have stated that they would pursue legal means," she said.

Supporters of main Bakiyev's main challenger, Almazbek Atambayev, alleged massive fraud and denounced the results as illegitimate.

But the government rebutted the opposition's charges and said the election results would stand.

"These regular presidential elections took place in an orderly fashion. They occurred in an environment of calmness and amicability from the side of each candidate," election commission spokesman Damir Lisovsky told reporters.

"Carrying out a re-run of the elections, as demanded by the opposition, is not possible."

About 2,000 opposition supporters gathered on Thursday night at Atambayev's campaign headquarters on the outskirts of the Kyrgyz capital Bishkek for a concert that had been expected to turn into a protest march.

Framed by floodlights, opposition supporters waved white flags and shouted "down with Bakiyev" -- but their planned march to the election commission headquarters largely fizzled out.