

WASHINGTON, D.C. August 7, 2009

TO: NCSJ Leadership and Interested Parties

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



In Brief

Dear Friend,

Below is the weekly update.

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. August 7, 2009

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#1a

Rabbis, Jewish mayors on Ukraine influential list JTA, August 5, 2009

KIEV, Ukraine -- Two rabbis join mayors and billionaires on a Kiev weekly's list of most influential people in two Ukrainian regions.

Eduard Gurvitz, the mayor of Odessa, was named the most influential figure in the Odessa region, according to the All-Ukrainian Kommentarii, or Comments, weekly. The Russian-language publication named a total of 666 people on two lists -- one each for the Odessa and Dnepropetrovsk regions.

Avraham Wolf, the chief rabbi of Odessa, is No. 15 on the Odessa list. Rabbi Shmuel Kaminetzky, the chief rabbi of Dnepropetrovsk, is No. 14 on the Dnepropetrovsk list.

Among other Jews featured are Vladimir Groisman, the mayor of Vinnitza; philanthropist Victor Pinchuk, the highest-ranking Jewish Ukrainian on the annual Forbes magazine billionaires list; and billionaire philanthropists and Jewish leaders Igor Kolomoysky, Gennady Bogolyubov and Aleksandr Feldman, who is also a member of parliament.

Jews comprise no more than one half of 1 percent of Ukraine's population of 46.5 million.

#1b

Vandals strike in Russia, Belarus JTA, August 5, 2009

NEW YORK -- Vandals struck a cemetery in Russia and a Holocaust memorial in Belarus.

Some 60 gravestones were vandalized in the Jewish section of a cemetery in the Russian city of Tver, according to a July 31 report by the regions.ru news agency. A cemetery employee had discovered the crime the previous day.

It marks the second time vandals had targeted that part of the cemetery. Suspects are awaiting trial in that case.

In Belarus, vandals painted a swastika and anti-Semitic slogans on a memorial to Jews murdered by the Nazis in Slutsk in 1943, according to a July 31 report by the AEN news agency.

It was the third time the memorial had been vandalized since it was erected in 2007, but police have yet to apprehend any suspects.

#1c

Odessa Jews seek stop to hate-filled publications JTA, August 5, 2009

KIEV, Ukraine -- Odessa Jewish community leaders are seeking the suspension of Ukrainian publications and Web sites that incite interethnic hatred.

In a letter Monday addressed to the Odessa regional prosecutor, the leaders cited the publications ZUBR, or For Ukraine, and the Belarus and Russia movement ZaZUBrina newspaper, and the Web sites zubr.in.ua and za.zubr.in.ua.

They said ZUBR helps encourage anti-Semitism by defaming Jews and blaming them for Ukraine's troubles, including plotting the Chernobyl disaster.

#1d

Ukrainian Jewish Committee holds steady amid financial crisis JTA, August 6, 2009

NEW YORK -- The Ukrainian Jewish Committee has not had to cut any of its programs due to financial difficulties.

The committee, which primarily lobbies the Ukrainian and other governments on issues of Jewish interest and concern, said a July 27 report by JTA saying that the group was cutting programs was erroneous.

"We did not cut any programs," said Eduard Dolinsky, director general of the committee.

The July 27 report also suggested that the group receives funding from the United Jewish Communities federation umbrella organization, but Dolinsky said it does not.

While Dolinsky noted that the Ukrainian Jewish Committee has seen its income drop slightly due to the economic crisis, he said it has not had to curtail its activities.

(This report corrects a July 27 news item. JTA regrets the error.)

#2

Communists Defeated in Moldova Election By Pelin Turgut Newsweek, July 31, 2009

Ninety-two years after the Russian Revolution and 20 years on from the fall of the Berlin Wall, Europe's last Soviet-style government is finally on its way out. In Moldova this week, four months after popular upheaval, the Communist Party accepted defeat in a national election. Four pro-Western opposition parties must now scabble together a coalition which they say will distance the country from Moscow, more fully embrace democracy and integrate with Europe. "This is definitely the beginning of something new," says Viorel Ursu, Moldovan analyst with the Open Society Institute in Brussels. "The difference between the Communists and the incoming government is huge, even just in terms of mentality. They are Western-educated, a lot more open and more transparent."

Moldova rarely features on the world's radar. There is even a board game called Where is Moldova?, designed to teach geography. Locked between Ukraine and Romania, it has the sad distinction of being Europe's poorest country. About a sixth of its population works abroad, largely in menial jobs on the streets of Western Europe. But it made headlines in April when thousands of Moldovans, mostly young people, took to the street crying fraud after elections that returned the Communist Party to power. Protesters torched buildings and ransacked the presidential palace. (Read: "Ghosts of Kosovo.")

The ensuing crackdown was violent, with hundreds of opposition supporters jailed. In the aftermath, Moldovan leader and Communist strongman Vladimir Voronin, 68, turned inwards — and to Moscow. He accused neighboring European Union member Romania of provoking the riots in order to pave the way for a coup against him. In June, Russia rewarded Voronin with \$500 million in infrastructure loans. That was followed last week by good news from China, who announced \$1 billion in similar loans. To put that in context: Moldova's annual GDP is just \$4 billion.

The opposition managed to force snap elections held Wednesday in which voters, frustrated with worsening poverty and post-election violence, finally said enough. The Communists won 48 seats, short of the 61-seat majority needed to govern, although still a sizable 45% of the vote. But the opposition parties, as long as they can work together, will be able to control parliament and form a government. "The results will have a long lasting effect of sustaining democracy in Moldova and in other parts of the region," says Ursu. "It was the frustration of not being able to challenge a government no matter how undemocratically it behaves that led people to streets in April."

The future is by no means certain. Coalitions in the shaky former Soviet republics are rarely stable, as neighboring Ukraine has shown. Three of the four opposition parties are liberal and campaigned on a joint platform. But the fourth, the Democratic Party, is run by a former Communist who resigned in June and could yet change sides. (Read: "No Sex, Please: Ukraine Bans Bruno.")

The new government will also need to negotiate with the Communists in parliament to choose a new President as Voronin's successor. A likely solution, analysts say, would be to agree on a non-political figure, such as an academic, to do the job. A new government is also likely to negotiate a deal to get Voronin to leave politics entirely in exchange for immunity from any prosecution for his conduct over the past eight years. "We've seen this in Russia when Yeltsin stepped down or in Georgia, when Shevardnadze left, these previous authoritarian presidents got informal immunity. I imagine that will be the case in Moldova," says Ursu.

Cold-shouldering Moscow could also come at a cost. Moldova is dependent on Russia for gas, oil and electricity imports. The new government says it will pursue stronger relations with Europe and Romania, with whom it shares many cultural similarities. Moldova was part of Romania until World War II, when a chunk of the country was given to the Soviets by the Nazis. Fears of unification kept previous Moldovan governments from building bilateral ties. And then there is the problem of Transnistria, a tiny Russian-speaking province backed by Moscow that wants to secede. "At least we have a year," says Ursu, laughing. "Because constitutionally, you cannot hold elections again for another year. So that gives everyone a little time. I'm optimistic, as are most analysts, that this is the start of a new era."

#3

Russia Threatens Retaliation After Lithuania Bars Journalist RFE/RL, August 1, 2009

MOSCOW – The Russian Foreign Ministry has announced that it might take retaliatory measures against Lithuania for barring the editor-in-chief of Russia's Regnum Information Agency, Modest Kolerov, from entering Lithuania, RFE/RL's Russian Service reports.

Lithuanian border guards on July 30 asked Kolerov to step off the train from Moscow to Vilnius and told him that Lithuanian migration authorities consider him an undesirable alien.

Kolerov, who had a valid visa for travel in the Schengen zone, was on his way to the Lithuanian capital to take part in an international conference on Russian-Lithuanian relations.

Speaking to journalists after border guards refused to let him into the country, he said that the Lithuanian media falsely depicted him as an adversary of Lithuania.

Kolerov used to run a Kremlin department on ties with CIS countries.

#4

Azerbaijan's Steady Descent Into Authoritarianism by Elmar Chakhtakhtinski RFE/RL, July 30, 2009

Imagine you are sitting with your friends at an outdoor cafe on a pleasant summer afternoon. Suddenly, two men in jogging suits approach and start beating you and one of your pals.

Before the others drag you away from the assailants, you and your friend are badly injured -- his nose is broken, and the attackers, due to their superior muscle and fighting skills, have not sustained much damage.

When the two of you go to the nearest police station to file a report, you are initially denied access to a lawyer, then charged with hooliganism, and then, after a hearing closed to the public, remanded to detention for two months pending a trial that could result in a much longer sentence.

Meanwhile, those who assaulted you are set free without any charges.

This might sound unreal, but it is what reportedly happened on July 8 to Adnan Hajizada and Emin Milli, two young leaders of a pro-democracy movement in the former Soviet republic of Azerbaijan, with which the United States has vital energy and security ties and where a struggle is under way to preserve the last remaining elements of free speech and civil society.

Continuing Rights Violations

The attack itself and the manner in which the case was handled constitute a gross violation of basic human rights and of the protections guaranteed by Azerbaijani criminal-procedural law and the country's commitments to international conventions.

To the government's displeasure, the attack on Hajizada and Milli triggered strongly worded statements by the embassies in Baku of the United States and several European countries, Council of Europe and OSCE representatives, and major human rights groups calling for their release and an open and fair investigation of their case.

This is not the first time the authorities have detained and prosecuted independent journalists and political opponents of the government. There have been formal complaints of people being subjected to assault by individuals in civilian clothes. Pro-government mobs provoked and intimidated demonstrators who protested against fraud in Azerbaijani elections of 2003 and 2005.

Youth Leading The Way

As in Moldova and Iran, the opposition movement in Azerbaijan is increasingly led by the younger generation, which relies heavily on the Internet and online social networks -- which the authorities have difficulty controlling -- to spread its message and coordinate activities.

The organizations led by Hajizada and Milli, who studied at universities in the United States and Germany, respectively, represent the most pro-Western strain of the sociopolitical spectrum in Azerbaijan.

These youth networks have consistently promoted the principles of a free and open society, individual liberties, tolerance, and responsible governance, and have been openly critical of corruption within the Azerbaijani government and its authoritarian policies. They have also been strong advocates of maintaining friendly relations with the United States, Europe, and other democratic countries.

One possible explanation cited for the arrest of Hajizada and Milli is a satirical video they posted on YouTube, Facebook, and other social networks. That footage shows a person dressed as a donkey talking about emigrating from Germany to Azerbaijan. The donkey praises the opportunities and rights Azerbaijan offers donkeys, while the writing on the screen asks, "What about the people's rights?"

The video was posted in the wake of an official report that the Azerbaijani government spent hundreds of thousands of dollars importing a dozen donkeys in a deal that may have masked corruption or the theft of public funds.

Sending Dissent Underground

When it joined the Council of Europe in 2001, Azerbaijan undertook commitments regarding democracy and the respect of human rights. Its government enjoys friendly relations with the United States and other Western countries.

However, a comprehensive crackdown against all expressions of dissent and free speech has been gradually intensifying. Journalists have been murdered, beaten, jailed on bogus charges, and blackmailed. Peaceful protests have been violently dispersed by police and attacked by well organized pro-government groups. Elections continued to be rigged and free media suppressed.

Within the last seven months, the government has shut down all Western radio stations, which were the only remaining source of information it did not control, and conducted a constitutional referendum removing the limitations on incumbent President Ilham Aliyev serving more than two consecutive presidential terms. A draft bill introduced a few weeks ago that would have imposed severe restrictions on the activities of NGOs was amended only under pressure from Western governments.

While hopes for democracy and change are rapidly waning, the public is being largely deprived of the financial benefits from oil revenues. Economic opportunities for ordinary citizens are still very limited.

If these trends continue, and if the authorities succeed in destroying the secular democratic opposition, the frustrated population may turn to extremist ideologies to express its resentment. Over the past decade, there has been a dramatic rise in the number of followers of various radical religious sects. They stay away from open political discourse for now, but it may only be a matter of time before they organize and start filling the ideological vacuum that the government is creating.

Whether these religious groups can mount a real challenge and seize power or whether they too will be crushed and Azerbaijan will become as totalitarian as Belarus or Turkmenistan, it's hard to see how and why the country's leaders would maintain their mostly pro-Western orientation, rather than coordinating policies with Russia and Iran. That would be a sad turn of events for Azerbaijani democracy and a big loss for U.S. and European interests in the region.

Elmar Chakhtakhtinski heads the informal U.S.-based organization Azerbaijani-Americans for Democracy (AZAD).

#5

Russia Accused of Altering Border

By Ellen Barry

New York Times, August 3, 2009

MOSCOW — Georgia accused Russia of attempting to take a small wedge of additional territory on Sunday on the boundary of the breakaway region of South Ossetia, amid mounting tension days before the anniversary of last year's five-day war.

Shota Utiashvili, a spokesman for Georgia's Interior Ministry, said Russian reconnaissance teams entered the village of Kveshi in the disputed region in an attempt to move the boundary several hundred yards to a strategically better position. Though Russian border guards have been deployed on South Ossetia's boundary with Georgia since April 30, he said, they have been reinforcing it gradually. Press officers for the separatist government of South Ossetia could not be reached for comment.

Steve Bird, a spokesman for the European Union Monitoring Mission, said patrols in Kveshi found no evidence of any action there. He said there were perennial arguments about the exact location of the boundary of South Ossetia, and that "the overall picture is more tense as the anniversary approaches."

In recent days, South Ossetia has reported mortar fire from Georgian-controlled territory, leading to an announcement by Russia's Defense Ministry on Saturday that it was prepared to use military means to protect the enclave. The European Union mission released a statement late on Saturday saying its patrols "have seen no evidence to confirm that any firing has taken place toward Tskhinvali or its surroundings."

The boundary of South Ossetia was drawn in the 1920s, when the Soviet Union gave South Ossetia autonomous status within Georgia. Georgia revoked that status as the Soviet Union neared collapse, stoking the separatist conflict that flared up last year.

In an interview with the Ria Novosti press service last week, President Eduard Kokoity of South Ossetia said he hoped to expand the boundary to include a gorge that he described as "native Ossetian land, which for unclear reasons in the Soviet period" was included in Georgia.

#6

Kyrgyz president inaugurated for 2nd term AP, August 2, 2009

BISHKEK, Kyrgyzstan — Kyrgyz President Kurmanbek Bakiyev was inaugurated for his second term Sunday after winning an election that the opposition has dismissed as fraudulent.

Opposition activists accuse the government of rigging last month's vote, which Bakiyev won with 76 percent of the ballots. International monitors also said the election was marred by ballot-box stuffing and widespread irregularities in vote counting.

Still, despite sporadic opposition rallies earlier protesting the outcome of the vote, there were no demonstrations Sunday.

Kyrgyzstan's stability is of interest to both Russia and the United States. The Central Asian country hosts a U.S. air base crucial to operations in Afghanistan and has been the focus of competition between Washington and Moscow for regional influence.

In his inauguration speech, Bakiyev said he managed to ensure peace and stability in Kyrgyzstan over the course of his first term.

He also called for national unity and described his re-election as a "win for everybody." "Most importantly, the very principle of democracy and the ideals of tolerant society were victorious," he said.

The inauguration ceremony lasted around 40 minutes and was attended by Kyrgyz parliamentary deputies, diplomats and the president of neighboring Kazakhstan, Nursultan Nazarbayev.

Main opposition candidate, Almazbek Atambayev, has said he will refuse to acknowledge the results of the election and will not recognize Bakiyev as president.

#7

NATO Isn't Russia's Enemy, Says New Secretary General AFP, August 3, 2009

BRUSSELS -- The North Atlantic Treaty Organization must convince the Russian people that the military alliance isn't their enemy, the organisation's new secretary general, Anders Fogh Rasmussen, said Monday, adding that he didn't want disagreements to poison ties.

At a press conference on his first day as secretary general, the former Danish prime minister said he wanted to oversee the development of a "true strategic partnership" during his four-year term at the head of NATO after a period of turbulence.

"I believe that during my term, we should develop a true strategic partnership. We should enhance practical cooperation in areas where we share security interests," he added, citing counter-terrorism, Afghanistan, piracy, and nuclear non-proliferation.

He said he regarded it as "a very important challenge to convince the Russian people and the Russian political leadership that NATO is really not an enemy of Russia, that NATO is not directed against Russia."

Ties between Moscow and the alliance were badly damaged by a brief war between Russia and Georgia in August last year although the two sides agreed in June to resume political and military cooperation.

Rasmussen said that the war in Georgia had had "a very negative impact" and that "real differences" remained over the issue.

"Now, I'm not a dreamer, there will be fundamental issues on which we will disagree. We have to insist, for example, that Russia fully complies with its international obligations, including respecting the territorial integrity and political freedom of its neighbors," he said.

"But we cannot let our areas of dispute poison the whole relationship," he added.

#8

Urbane economist holds key to forming Moldova coalition

By Thomas Escritt

Financial Times, August 3, 2009

Chisinau – Marian Lupu has been tipped as Moldova's kingmaker ever since he quit the Communists in the wake of disputed elections in April.

Following last week's re-run of the parliamentary elections, neither the pro-Russian Communists nor the pro-western liberals hold the 61 seats needed to elect a replacement for Vladimir Voronin, the hardline president.

Mr Lupu, an urbane 43-year-old, now appears to hold the key to the formation of a broad coalition.

His ability to appeal to both Moldovan and Russian-speaking communities, and the boost he gave the Democrats, has made him indispensable to the opposition. The Democratic party, which failed to make it into parliament in April's poll, won 12.5 per cent of the vote last week, barely a month after he joined.

"We need a very broad political dialogue . . . since no party has enough votes to appoint a president," said Mr Lupu.

Together, the four opposition parties have a four-seat majority over the Communists in the 101-member legislature, but they are eight votes short of being able to appoint a head of state.

"The Communists will try to divide and rule," said Mr Lupu. "So first we have to reach a common position with the other three parties and then start talking with the Communists. We have to present Mr Voronin with a situation where he has no choice but to agree on a new president."

Until he fell out with the president two months ago, the former speaker of parliament was a high-flying Communist party moderniser. Unlike the Russian-speaking Mr Voronin and his closest aides, Mr Lupu is among the 70 per cent of the population whose first language is Moldovan.

An economist, whose career has included stints at the International Monetary Fund in Washington and the World Trade Organisation in Geneva, Mr Lupu is regarded with suspicion by many opposition activists for joining the Communist party in 2005.

Like the Communists, he wants to strengthen Moldova's statehood, keep it neutral and out of Nato, and boost a "strategic partnership" with Russia. But he is critical of Mr Voronin's authoritarian style which, together with a lack of rural investment, he blames for an exodus of young people.

"Are we building this state to be propped by bayonets, or are we building it on the principles of democratic society, economic development, freedoms and human rights?" he said.

With the economy forecast to shrink 9 per cent this year, and the government facing a €1bn (\$1.4bn, ?850m) budget shortfall, Mr Lupu admits the next government will face an "unpleasant" task.

He says this underlines the need for a "credible" government able to negotiate foreign support. The IMF is waiting in the wings, but without a government to talk to, it is unlikely to unveil a package before the end of the year. Loan deals have been signed with Russia and China, but the money has yet to arrive.

"No investment [means] no jobs. No jobs means people are leaving this country," he said. "We must open up the economy and lure investors."

#9

Obama walks Russia-Georgia tightrope

By Lachlan Carmichael

AFP, August 2 2009

WASHINGTON - One year after US-Russia ties hit a low over the war in Georgia, President Barack Obama's administration is walking a tightrope between resetting ties with Moscow and supporting ally Tbilisi.

The administration is searching for a basis to cooperate with Russia on key international topics, but could be thrown off balance if tension flares anew over Georgia's breakaway regions of South Ossetia and Abkhazia, analysts say.

Sparking a crisis with the administration of then US president George W. Bush, Russia smashed a Georgian military offensive to recapture South Ossetia in a brief war in August last year.

"The (Russia-Georgia) tensions are still very much there," warned James Collins, a former US ambassador to Moscow, who is now with the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.

"The inclinations on both sides to sort of score a point are far too easily brought into play, and that's dangerous," Collins told AFP. "Our challenge is going to be staying out of the fray."

Sobered by the war, however, both the Obama administration and Russian President Dmitry Medvedev, backed by powerful Prime Minister Vladimir Putin, appear determined to avert a new flare-up, he said.

The Obama administration has also signaled it wants to reset US-Russia ties that hit a nadir during the Bush era because of both the war in Georgia and other issues like missile defense, Kosovo's independence and NATO expansion.

He pointed out that the Obama administration has been cooler than the Bush team toward plans for a missile shield that Washington says is designed to check a future Iranian threat but Moscow sees as a threat to its own defenses.

Steven Pifer, a former US ambassador to Ukraine and expert on former Soviet republics, said Vice President Joseph Biden's trip to Ukraine and Georgia last month was designed to balance Obama's Moscow summit two weeks earlier.

In Tbilisi, Pifer said, Biden advised Georgian leaders against using military force to regain South Ossetia and Abkhazia, while seeking to reassure them that better US-Russia ties will not come at the expense of those with Georgia.

Both Pifer and Collins saw Biden as trying to distance the new administration from Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili, a lightning rod for criticism from both Russia and the Georgian opposition.

"So the approach to Georgia will be more balanced and not so personalized as what we saw in the Bush administration," Pifer said in an interview that appeared on the Council on Foreign Relations website.

Like Collins, Pifer believes the new administration will be cautious about how much military support to give Georgia, partly because there is "no conceivable" program big enough to help Georgia defend itself against Russia.

"I suspect that the administration is going to have a military-to-military relationship with Georgia, but I don't think providing weapons to Georgia is high on anybody's priority list in the United States," Pifer said.

He said the US focus is on stabilizing Georgia through promoting its economic and democratic political development.

Despite the new administration's more balanced and cautious approach, Biden nonetheless infuriated Russia when he took apart its pretensions to be a great power after the collapse of the Soviet Union.

In an interview with the Wall Street Journal at the end of his visit to Georgia and Ukraine, Biden described the Russian economy as "withering" and said its banking sector would unlikely be able to withstand the next 15 years.

Heather Conley, an analyst with the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), said Biden ironically undermined the very policy he laid out in his speech in Munich in February with a call to "reset" ties with Russia.

His "remarks may be a classic example of snatching defeat from the jaws of victory," Conley said on the CSIS site after Obama returned from Moscow with widely welcomed results.

#10

America Hears a Gaffe, Russia Sees a Plot

By Ellen Barry

New York Times, August 2, 2009

AFTER Vice President Joseph R. Biden Jr. gave an interview to The Wall Street Journal portraying Russia as a limping and humbled nation, many in Washington responded last week with a helpless shrug: There's crazy Joe, they said, the guy who once told a wheelchair-bound state senator to stand up for a round of applause.

But in Russia, they weren't shrugging. Within hours, a top Kremlin aide had released a barbed statement comparing Mr. Biden to Dick Cheney. Commentators announced Mr. Biden's emergence as Washington's new "gray cardinal" - the figure who, from the shadows, makes all the decisions that matter. Others said Washington's mask had been torn off, revealing Mr. Obama's "reset" as at best insubstantial and at worst duplicitous.

American officials spent several days trying to convince their Russian counterparts that Mr. Biden's words were, for lack of a better label, a gaffe. Russia's highest officials have kept silent on the matter, but their initial responses were skeptical.

"Biden has said this in such a way that the whole world heard it," said Alexei K. Pushkov, who is the anchor of the current events show "Post-Scriptum." "And then there are secret, furtive calls in the night, dragging Russian officials from their supper. They want to say this is not true. But somehow everybody still thinks it is."

Among the reasons for their skepticism: In today's Russia, politicians just don't run off at the mouth. Not so long ago, Russian public life was a symphony of embarrassing episodes. Remember when Boris Yeltsin confused Norway with Sweden, suggested that Germany and Japan had nuclear arsenals, and toppled over while saluting an honor guard in Uzbekistan?

That all ended with the presidency of Vladimir V. Putin. Mr. Putin, now Russia's prime minister, occasionally departs from statesmanlike language, as when he threatened to hang the Georgian president by his testicles or offered a French reporter an especially thorough circumcision. But coming from Mr. Putin, these statements are expressions of Russian might, something like a political philosophy - never, ever mistakes.

For anyone subordinate to the president to allow themselves that freedom is inconceivable, said Vladimir V. Pozner, the host of a talk show on state television.

"If it's not the No. 1 man or woman, clearly that person has been instructed to say what he or she said," Mr. Pozner said. "It's psychologically very difficult for a Russian to believe otherwise. If you write in The New York Times whatever you write, I'm sure Mr. Putin will say, 'Of course. It was ordered.'"

It will also be hard to convince the Kremlin that the comments don't indicate a deeper drama. Russians have spent months searching for clues to Mr. Obama's true intentions; when Mr. Obama killed a fly during a television interview shortly before traveling to Moscow, for example, several analysts here interpreted it as a message to Russia.

Mr. Biden has now supplied evidence for two plotlines - a deep rift within the administration, or a "sophisticated game," said Andrei V. Ryabov, a political analyst at Moscow's Carnegie Center. This ambiguity, he said, plays into the conviction of Mr. Putin and his team that real events take place far from view, among a handful of powerful individuals, and that public politics are "no more than puppetry, decoration in the theater."

"Nothing accidental can happen in this system," Mr. Ryabov said. "Everything has a hidden meaning." Even accidental words from officials are likely to be read closely; as a Russian proverb has it, "What a sober man has on his mind, a drunk puts on his tongue."

Mr. Pushkov was among those who put little credence in Mr. Obama's overtures, and to him, Mr. Biden's words offer a far more honest assessment of American policy. He says he reads in them a split in Washington between cold war heavyweights and a president too weak to bring them to heel.

"It's not just a question of schools of thought," he said, dryly, but something far more serious. Schools of thought, he added, are something to be "exercised on a veranda with a cup of coffee on a summer evening."

Of course, every warming of the relationship between Moscow and Washington has been a tenuous process, punctuated by false starts and furious backpedaling.

In 1974, after signing on to the idea of "peaceful coexistence," Leonid Brezhnev seems to have been called on the carpet by a Central Committee concerned about ceding ground to the United States; he went on to repudiate two key agreements with the Americans. Jimmy Carter, under a drumbeat of criticism for caving in to Russia, halted ratification of the second strategic arms limitation treaty after the Soviets invaded Afghanistan in 1979; he explained that the invasion had changed his view of Moscow's intentions.

This thaw seemed tentative, too, even before Mr. Biden's words. The coming months could bring renewed fighting in Georgia, or another gas crisis with Ukraine, or a deadlock on the renegotiation of the Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty.

"At this point these were just words - unfortunate words, reckless words, but still, it was just words, not of the president but of the vice president," said Dimitri K. Simes, the president of the Nixon Center. "The question is what is going to happen next."

#11

Not the Best Way to Reset Relations

By James F. Collins

Moscow Times, August 3, 2009

If there were any doubts as to how fragile relations remain between the United States and Russia, the donnybrook over U.S. Vice President Joe Biden's interview with The Wall Street Journal last week laid them to rest. When Biden suggested that Russian economic distress would give Washington a way to extract concessions from Moscow, the Russian reaction was as immediate as it was negative. President Dmitry Medvedev's foreign policy adviser Sergei Prikhodko said, "If some members of [U.S. President Barack] Obama's team and government ... disagree with the policy of their own president, we ought to know it." Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, meanwhile, interpreted Biden's words as an attempt to return to the cool - if not tense - relationship during the George W. Bush years and expressed hope that the White House would stand by the commitment to constructive partnership that Medvedev and Obama articulated during the July summit in Moscow.

The response from the Obama administration was also immediate. In an effort at damage control, the White House and State Department denied any suggestion that the administration was changing its carefully crafted approach toward Russia, even as spokesmen for the administration reaffirmed U.S. principles about the independence of Russia's neighbors. But the incident has demonstrated once again how easily U.S.-Russian relations can be derailed or diverted and how vulnerable they will remain until a firmer base is built for better ties.

Fortunately, the Moscow summit provided the road map to move bilateral relations forward. As Obama and Medvedev agreed in Moscow in early July, the United States and Russia will conduct their future business on a more structured basis. As past examples show, topics on our agenda - including cooperation on public health and climate change, the future of Afghanistan, nuclear nonproliferation and missile defense - are most usefully addressed in a sustained dialogue within a solid institutional framework.

The inability of the Bush and Putin administrations to develop an apparatus to conduct relations in a productive and predictable manner worked to the detriment of both countries. It meant that disagreements festered and potential opportunities for a new U.S.-Russian partnership withered in the absence of sustained dialogue.

The creation of a bilateral commission led by Obama and Medvedev has given the impetus for new machinery to address this problem. The commission will provide a framework for the two governments to carry out routine work effectively and prevent neglect of issues with the potential to cause trouble. As set out in their statements from

Moscow, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and Lavrov will lead and coordinate the work of the commission's working groups. Each of the groups is structured to address a major element of U.S.-Russian relations and will permit the governments to develop pragmatic, mutually beneficial programs to deepen and broaden dialogue at both the analytical and political levels. They can further develop mechanisms for ongoing consultation and cooperation - something that has been absent for so long.

The flare-up over Biden's remarks last week further underscores how far we have to go to realize the reset in relations agreed by the leaders of Russia and the United States.

Both Washington and Moscow must move with determination and persistence to capitalize on the new diplomatic openings produced at the summit, but none of these projects will be self-implementing. Negotiators have little time to complete a new strategic arms agreement to replace START before its expiration in early December, but indications suggest that they are advancing in their work. One can only hope that the urgency will prompt both sides to work actively even through August to deliver results. Similarly, the agreements include extended cooperation on Afghanistan and enhanced military exchanges, something that is highly valued in both capitals.

But arms reduction and control and this limited security agenda are not enough. If we learn anything from previous chapters in the history of U.S.-Russia relations, it is the requirement to give their conduct priority, structure and above all consistent attention. With nearly a month having passed since the summit, both capitals must keep up the pressure for elements of the new presidential commission to begin practical work. Only if both our countries move boldly to deal with the issues the commission is meant to address can we expect the reset to produce the results we so urgently desire.

As White House spokesman Robert Gibbs noted, "The president and vice president believe Russia will work with us not out of weakness but out of national interest." If both countries can proceed on that basis, there is a high likelihood that we can move beyond relations based on words and symbols to a more stable relationship based on concrete cooperation and tangible results.

James F. Collins, U.S. ambassador to Russia from 1997 to 2001, is director of the Russia and Eurasia Program at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.

#12

Questions Surround Gas Deal Brokered by E.U. for Ukraine

By James Kanter

New York Times, August 4, 2009

BRUSSELS — International banks have agreed to lend Ukraine about \$1.7 billion to pay its gas bills to Russia and, at the same time, to drastically overhaul the country's murky energy sector, the European Commission said Monday.

But it was unclear whether the agreement — full of caveats and politically sensitive conditions for Kiev — would hold together long enough to avert another natural gas crisis in Europe this winter.

As a consequence of the political agreement, Naftogaz, Ukraine's state-run energy company, probably will have to pass along steep increases in the cost of natural gas to its customers, perhaps beginning as soon as next month, so that it can afford to pay its own bills in the future. That could pose problems for Ukrainian leaders, particularly with a presidential election looming early next year.

The overall amount of loans also falls far short of the \$4 billion originally sought by Ukraine. Under the agreement, Ukraine would get up to \$300 million this year. Meanwhile, the debt-laden Naftogaz faces a deadline of Friday to make a payment of approximately \$600 million to Gazprom, the Russian natural gas giant, for its imports in July.

Jose Manuel Barroso, the president of the commission, noted that the agreement with international lenders, which was announced late Friday, was based on commitments made by the Ukrainian prime minister, Yulia V. Tymoshenko.

"I very much hope that the strict time frames set out in the reform agenda are fully respected," he said in a statement.

The agreement is intended to head off a crisis similar to what happened in January, when gas flows from Russia through Ukraine were halted. It was the biggest supply cut of its kind for the E.U.

Around 80 percent of Russian gas bound for Europe passes through Ukraine, which was formerly part of the Soviet Union.

Ukraine and Russia reached a settlement that brought an end to the stoppage, which was the second in three years. But by late spring, Gazprom was warning its E.U. customers about weak finances at Naftogaz, and said there was the prospect of a new dispute if Naftogaz fell behind on its payments and took natural gas that was meant for E.U. countries to meet its own needs.

Officials at the commission, the executive body of the E.U., oversaw delicate talks during the past few weeks aimed at resolving the dispute. On top of demanding that Naftogaz raise domestic prices, the lenders also asked Ukraine to take concrete steps to make the way that natural gas was sold and shipped much more transparent.

Under the plan, the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development would give Ukraine up to \$300 million loan for its "immediate gas storage requirements."

Naftogaz also could apply to the E.B.R.D. from 2010 for up to \$450 million for investments to upgrade Ukraine's natural gas transit system.

The World Bank offered up to \$500 million in loans for measures including helping vulnerable Ukrainians pay their heating bills, but only "upon satisfactory completion of all the reform measures," a statement from the lenders said.

The European Investment Bank could offer up to \$450 million in long-term loans for updating Ukraine's natural gas transit system. "Our aim is to improve the sustainability, accountability and above all, the transparency of the Ukrainian gas market to the benefit of both Ukraine and of energy security in all of Europe," Thomas Mirow, the E.B.R.D. president, said.

#13

Russian human rights veterans urge Medvedev to stop persecution of NGOs

August 3, 2009, Interfax

Moscow -- Human rights campaigners have urged the Russian leadership to change the atmosphere in which nongovernmental organizations are working in the country.

"We are forced to appeal because of the direct threat to the operation of human rights campaigners and organizations in Russia," says the rights activists' appeal to the Russian president.

The document, which was released in Moscow on Monday (3 August), was signed by the veterans of the human rights community: head of the Moscow Helsinki Group Lyudmila Alekseyeva, head of the Civic Assistance committee Svetlana Gannushkina, and leader of the movement For Human Rights Lev Ponomarev.

They said that instances of attacks on civil activists in Russia had become more frequent, that their safety was not guaranteed.

"It is obvious that there are circles which are extremely annoyed with human rights campaigners' commitment to the principle of universality of humanitarian and democratic values, with their unwillingness to hush up flagrant and systematic violations by officials and authorities of the basic human and civil rights and freedoms," the document points out.

The rights campaigners also complained about more frequent searches of the offices of NGOs carried out by law-enforcement bodies. They gave the examples of searches and seizure of office equipment at the Memorial society office in St Petersburg, the human rights centre and Agora human rights organization in Kazan, and at the office of the Samara-based NGO Golos (Voice).

"We can see that today law-enforcement bodies can carry out searches and seizures, under any pretext, brazenly and with impunity, at any NGO, paralyzing its work or even condemning it to the complete cessation of operations," the appeal says.

"Unfortunately, over the last six months the practice of persecution of human rights activists has been gathering momentum," the authors of the document said.

#14

Russia's Hired Lobbies in the West

By Roman Kupchinsky

Jamestown Foundation Eurasia Daily Monitor, August 3, 2009

Russia's attempts to promote a positive image of being a "reliable energy supplier" as well as a safe and profitable haven for foreign investments have played a significant role in Russian policy. To achieve this goal the Russian government and state-owned companies have hired Western public relations firms to tout the alleged benefits of working in partnership with Russia.

Records of this activity can be found on the Foreign Agents Registration Act (FARA) website of the U.S. Department of Justice (www.justice.gov/criminal/fara). The most lucrative contract to date was between the Russian government and Ketchum Inc. (N.Y) via its parent company Ketchum Limited in the U.K., to provide "communications support" for the Russian government during the 2006 G8 summit meeting until December 31, 2006. The amount allocated to finance Ketchum's activities in the U.S. was \$2 million (www.justice.gov/criminal/fara).

Ketchum is an arm of the U.S. PR giant Omnicom (www.ketchum.com). According to the filing document, Ketchum agreed to develop "briefing points for interviews; press releases, fact sheets...and facilitate meetings between representatives of Russia's G8 Presidency and persons who are frequently quoted as experts in stories about international relations such as authors and academics." Ketchum landed another lucrative two-month contract from the Russian government in January 2007 worth \$845,000 "for the purpose of promoting energy security." Ketchum wrote in its FARA statement that it would use its teams to focus on governments and media in WTO member countries such as the U.K., U.S., Germany, France, Japan and Canada to help them understand the goal of energy security, Russia's accession to the WTO and "Russia as a place favorable for foreign investments" (www.justice.gov/criminal/fara).

However, the most lucrative contracts have been awarded by Gazprom, the Russian state-owned gas company to Gavin Anderson and company. In March 2007, Gazprom began paying Gavin Anderson \$100,000 per month to "provide financial media relations" and to "improve understanding of Gazprom's basic business strategies. Strengthening the trust of investors in Gazprom" (www.justice.gov/criminal/fara). Gazprom apparently felt that negative information about its practices and opaque dealings were hurting the company and it was willing to pay a high price to remedy the situation.

GazpromExport, a fully owned subsidiary of Gazprom, also joined these PR activities in 2006-2007. However, GazpromExport chose Ketchum to do its PR - not Gavin Anderson. The reasons for this are unknown, but it might indicate that the CEO of GazpromExport Alexander Medvedev was more comfortable with Ketchum, a company which seemingly is favored by Prime Minister Vladimir Putin.

FARA was notified by Ketchum in August 2007 that GazpromExport would pay \$247,500 per month (\$147,500 more per month than its parent company, Gazprom, was paying Gavin Anderson) for their services. Ketchum's description of these services was brief: "Ketchum will pursue various activities, including arranging interviews between representatives of Gazprom and members of the media...monitoring media coverage."

GPlus Europe, a subsidiary of Ketchum, was hired by the Kremlin in 2007 to improve media relations. They signed a deal for media handling and government advocacy which included GPlus' work in Brussels and Paris as well as subcontracts with consultancies Dimap in Berlin and Reti in Rome. GPlus was also hired by GazpromExport to promote the concept that Gazprom and GazpromExport are fully transparent entities. The GPlus team working on the GazpromExport contract consists of fourteen individuals, with four members concentrating on PR within Germany alone.

The leader of the GazpromExport team at GPlus is allegedly Milina Moncekova who accompanies Alexander Medvedev on his trips throughout Europe. Other members of the team have responsibilities for PR within the rest of Europe. The head of the team in Germany is Peter Witt, formerly the German deputy permanent representative to the E.U. (EDM, May 26).

A leading member of the team working the account is Gregor Kreuzhuber who, according to the GPlus Europe website: "Spent over ten years in the European Commission as a spokesperson and political adviser to two different commissioners. Kreuzhuber's last post was with the Commission Vice-President in charge of Enterprise and Industry Gunter Verheugen" (www.gpluseurope.com). According to the European Observer: "No one takes a pay cut to join the PR sector. A mid-ranking E.U. official such as Kreuzhuber would take home at least 6,000 Euros per month in his previous job and an individual such as Witt 7,000 Euros per month" (www.euobserver.com, February 2).

Nonetheless, GPlus was not only whitewashing GazpromExport, according to PRWeek, in 2008. GPlus was criticized by Brussels-based PR firm Aspect Consulting, for promoting Russia's view of the war with Georgia and for being part of the Russian "propaganda" machine. Aspect Consulting, hired by the government of Georgia, told PRWeek: "There are agencies that work for Russia... but I do not know how they can be comfortable about that."

On January 25, at the height of the Ukrainian-Russian gas war, GPlus was suspended from the European Union's lobbying register for failing to disclose the identity of three clients. Peter Guilford, one of GPlus' founders, said the firm had informed the commission in December when it first joined the registry that it had pre-existing confidentiality agreements with three clients, who did not want their names disclosed. Two of those clients are no longer represented by GPlus. "We have been super-transparent," (sic) Guilford said, noting that the clients in question included two trade associations and one corporation." Ketchum's reputation might be further discredited as new information is revealed in the media about Gazprom's shady dealings in the gas trade (www.jamestown.org/blog, August 3).

#15

Central Asia's Northern Exposure

**By Andrew C. Kuchins and Thomas Sanderson
New York Times, August 5, 2009**

TASHKENT, UZBEKISTAN - Russian agreement to allow U.S. military over-flight rights to ferry lethal goods to Afghanistan was one of the signal achievements of the recent meetings in Moscow between Presidents Barack Obama and Dimtri Medvedev.

Last month in Moscow, Russian officials told us that Afghanistan was the area where American and Russian interests are most closely aligned, and cooperation on stabilizing Afghanistan may be the most promising area to "reset" our bilateral relationship.

Less publicized has been Moscow's agreement earlier this year to allow for overland transit of nonlethal goods through Russian territory and on to Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan (with Kazakh and Uzbek agreement, of course) where they cross into northern Afghanistan at Heraton. These goods are shipped on trains that originate in the Latvian capital of Riga, and since the transit corridor was established, at least 20 rail convoys have made the trip. The supply trains have been given preferential right-of-way to speed the trip to about nine days.

Perhaps even less well-known is that Russian commercial cargo carriers have been shipping non-lethal goods out of the Middle East aboard massive Antonov 124 "Ruslan" cargo planes to Afghanistan for more than a year. To the great relief of the Pentagon, whose own cargo fleet is under tremendous stress, this heavy lift service was one of the few areas of U.S.-Russian cooperation that did not fall victim to the breakdown in the relationship last year over the Georgia war.

It seems a little odd that aspects of this cooperation on Afghanistan - one of Washington's highest foreign and security policy challenges - are not better known. Perhaps that is because there remain questions about just how much Russia wants to see the United States succeed in Afghanistan. This issue was certainly raised earlier this

year when the government of Kyrgyzstan announced that it would close the U.S. base in Manas, a decision that was reversed shortly before the Obama-Medvedev meeting last month, presumably with Russian support.

In our recent discussions in Tashkent with very high-level Uzbek government officials, this question came up repeatedly, and the answers we got were not reassuring. Uzbekistan is the key country in the establishment of the northern supply route, what the U.S. military calls the Northern Distribution Network. The United States needs the NDN both because of its over-reliance on a single line of transit through volatile regions of Pakistan and because its growing military force in Afghanistan will require a threefold increase in supplies.

Uzbek officials are deeply skeptical of Moscow. They believe the Russians see their interests best served by continued instability in Afghanistan. Instability will increase both the terrorist threat to Central Asia as well as the flow of drugs, and serve to justify a heightened Russian military presence in the region.

Afghan instability also prevents opening or expanding southern transit corridors for Central Asian exports that could quickly reach global markets from ports in either Pakistan or Iran. Instead, the bulk of goods from Uzbekistan and its neighbors must be shipped northward, leaving them dependent on routes controlled by Moscow.

The Russians already have a major military presence in Tajikistan, as well as an air base in Kyrgyzstan at Kant, near the Manas airport outside the capital of Bishkek. Moscow hopes to finalize an agreement soon to establish a new base in Kyrgyzstan near the southern city of Osh in the volatile Fergana Valley that would house a newly established Rapid Reaction Force - mostly manned by Russian troops - of the Collective Security Treaty Organization.

Tashkent views the growing Russian military presence in the region as a security threat. The manner in which Russian "peace-keeping" forces were mobilized in the Georgia war last summer made a deep impact on Uzbek policymakers, heightening their sense of vulnerability. Uzbek skepticism about Russian goals is so deep that several key figures intimated that when it comes to Afghanistan, Iran would be a more reliable partner for Washington than Moscow.

The Uzbeks we spoke with were unanimous in the view that eventual success in stabilizing Afghanistan requires as much attention to social-economic development as it does to military goals. Any security gains will certainly be short-lived if Afghanistan remains impoverished and economically isolated. Building a transportation infrastructure linking Afghanistan to regional and global markets will be essential for this success and should be a key element of President Obama's regional strategy for Afghanistan.

For strategic and economic reasons, Uzbekistan wants to be a key partner for the United States and its allies in these efforts. Unfortunately, high levels of corruption and a highly complicated investment environment do not make it easy for American companies or U.S. institutions like the Export-Import Bank and the Overseas Private Investment Corporation to operate. Resolving these differences to enable greater U.S. economic engagement will be a critical and difficult step in strengthening U.S.-Uzbek relations.

Washington's potential for success in Afghanistan will also depend to some extent on how well the new NDN supply line operates. There are still political and logistical kinks in the route. U.S. policymakers have to contend with eliciting cooperation from Moscow without compromising the sovereignty and independence of other Central Asian partners. Uzbekistan is key to the success of the supply route as well as broader Afghan stabilization, but the Uzbeks remain very concerned about Moscow's announced doctrine of "privileged relations with its neighbors."

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#16
Kremlin Burning Bridges With Every Neighbor
By Vladimir Ryzhkov
Moscow Times, August 4, 2009

Russia's foreign policy failures are snowballing at such a rate that they threaten a second geopolitical collapse on a par with the disintegration of the Soviet Union 20 years ago.

What makes this tragedy so comic is that our leaders are essentially running backward into the future and calling it progress. At the same time, they shake their fists and foam at the mouth as they rant about Russia's greatness, claim that it is "getting up from its knees" and endlessly repeat myths about its "new successes" and "historical initiatives." By running backward, Russia inevitably stumbles and falls, while its clumsy foreign policy initiatives become the laughing stock of the world.

The Kremlin was not able to exploit its huge reserves that it accumulated after eight years of an oil boom by turning its economic power into political clout in the global arena. On the contrary, Russia's global standing has worsened across the board.

Russia's leaders have managed to alienate even its strongest allies. The alliance with Belarus is crumbling before our eyes as Kremlin leaders attempt to punish Minsk for years of foot-dragging over the sale of Belarus' largest enterprises to Russia's inefficient and nontransparent monopolies, for delaying plans to introduce a unified currency and establish other political and economic institutions intended to strengthen ties between the two states. Russia reacted with "milk and meat wars," and Minsk responded in kind by refusing to attend a Collective Security Treaty Organization summit even while it was supposed to hold the rotating chairmanship of the organization - an embarrassing, if not humiliating, snub to President Dmitry Medvedev. What's more, Belarus has joined the Eastern Partnership offered by the European Union and has actively diversified its foreign policy.

Armenia, which is hemmed in on all sides by closed borders with Azerbaijan and Turkey, suffered greatly during the days of the Russia-Georgia war last August. This quickly drove Yerevan to intensify its dialogue with Turkey over prospects for opening their common border that has been closed for decades, and, like Belarus, to join the EU's Eastern Partnership.

Russia has also burned bridges with Turkmenistan. Throughout the recent economic boom years, Turkmenistan pumped gas to Russia to compensate for its growing deficiency, thereby helping to save the reputation of Gazprom - and thus Russia - as a reliable supplier of gas to Europe. But Moscow's gas war with Kiev forced the EU to cut back sharply on purchases of Russian gas. This led to a drop in gas prices, and once that happened Moscow unceremoniously reneged on its contractual obligations to purchase gas from Turkmenistan. In early April, Russia shut the valve on the pipeline that imported Turkmen gas. This was the alleged cause of a major explosion in Turkmenistan - and a major explosion in Russian-Turkmen relations as well. The result is that Turkmenistan is now searching for more reliable commodity markets, has offered to join the Nabucco project as a gas supplier, is ready to discuss the Trans-Caspian pipeline project and has already given the Chinese access to its gas fields. A gas pipeline to China is also under construction.

Moscow was entirely alone in its decision to recognize the independence of South Ossetia and Abkhazia. Besides Nicaragua, not a single country followed Russia's example. Russia has even managed to sever ties with Georgia - a country with a Russian Orthodox population that has always enjoyed warm relations with Moscow - for the highly questionable goal of wanting to maintain two microscopic puppet-satellite states in one of the most explosive regions of the world. If the Kremlin's goals were to achieve international isolation and disdain and to increase the threat of a military conflict in the Caucasus, it was very successful.

Russia's unnecessarily antagonistic actions toward Ukraine have turned the otherwise "brotherly relationship" into a hostile one. In the 1990s, when Ukraine also had trouble paying for its imports of Russian gas, the shortfall was simply added to its external debt, which it later paid back. Today, Moscow's actions have helped consolidate Ukrainian society around an anti-Russia platform, prompting Kiev to seek membership in the EU and NATO. It also pushed Ukraine toward formulating a new national idea that is based on a rejection of the historical fraternity between our two nations.

The EU also drew its conclusions about Russia's unreliability after the latest battle in January of the endless succession of gas wars, which resulted in more than 20 European countries being left without heat in bitterly cold temperatures after Russia cut off gas shipments that had already been purchased. Consequently, the EU reduced its purchases of Russian gas, made headway on developing the Nabucco pipeline, including allocating increased funding for the project, and stepped up the development of projects to import gas from Africa and the Middle East. The EU also invited Ukraine to join an alliance for purchasing gas from countries other than Russia. Both South

Stream and Nord Stream have experienced setbacks that may complicate the future development of these pipeline projects. In short, this is the lowest point in the 16 years of EU-Russian relations.

Meanwhile, Russia's relationship with NATO is also becoming increasingly adversarial. Azerbaijan is distancing itself from Russia and aligning itself more with the West. Moscow gave financial aid to Kyrgyzstan to push Bishkek to close the U.S. military base at Manas. But in the end, the Americans were allowed to stay after they increased the rental payments and renamed the base as a "transit center." Despite U.S. President Barack Obama's visit to Moscow for the July summit, no "reset" in U.S.-Russian relations has taken place. In fact, they remain unchanged, as is evidenced by Vice President Joe Biden's recent visits to Kiev and Tbilisi and by the sharp comments toward Russia that he made in his interview with The Wall Street Journal a week ago.

Prime Minister Vladimir Putin's attempt to restore Russia's influence over the former Soviet republics has failed miserably. Moscow's standing in the region is weaker now than it was even eight years ago, when Putin took over the presidency from Boris Yeltsin. This is a direct result of Putin's failed policies during his two terms as president - the inability to modernize the economy, the systemic destruction of the country's democracy, the sharp rise in corruption and the increase in the monopoly control of key industries under his state capitalism model. If you add to all of this a countless string of inept foreign policy disasters, it is easy to understand why Russia's neighbors have turned their backs on Moscow and are looking to Western military, economic and political institutions for support and cooperation.

Vladimir Ryzhkov, a State Duma deputy from 1993 to 2007, hosts a political talk show on Ekho Moskvy.

#17

FACTBOX: Georgia's rebel regions one year after war Reuters, August 4, 2009

The Russian-backed rebel regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia were recognized by Moscow as independent states after a five-day war last August with Georgia. A year on, only Nicaragua has followed suit. The rest of the world still considers the regions part of Georgia.

Following are brief profiles of the two rebel territories, which threw off Georgian rule in wars in the early 1990s with the collapse of the Soviet Union.

ABKHAZIA:

* About 8,000 square km (3,088 square miles), Abkhazia is a lush strip of land on the Black Sea about half the size of Wales. Once the playground of the Soviet elite, the territory has ambitions to become a top tourist destination for Russians, who already account for 90 percent of holidaymakers.

* Abkhazia threw off Georgian rule in a 1992-93 war after Georgia's independence from the Soviet Union stoked fears among the Abkhaz that their influence in their homeland would be further diminished. After sporadic fighting, Georgia sent in the army and paramilitaries to stamp out calls for secession, only to be pushed back to the Inguri river -- today's de facto border -- by Abkhaz militias backed by Russian forces.

* The population of Abkhazia is around 200,000 people. Georgia says 200,000 ethnic Georgians and Mingrelians fled during the 1992-93 war. Around 60,000 have returned, mainly to the eastern Gali region adjacent to Georgia proper.

* As fighting raged last year in South Ossetia, Abkhazia seized the opportunity to take back the last corner of its territory, pushing Georgian police out of the Kodori gorge. Russia now controls its borders, and plans to build military bases, including a naval base at Ochamchire.

* A United Nations mission of some 130 monitors had observed the fragile peace since the 1992-93 war, but was forced to leave in July after Russia vetoed an extension to its mandate. Russia objected to a reference in a Western draft U.N. resolution which reaffirmed Georgia's territorial integrity.

* According to the Abkhaz authorities, 90 percent of foreign investment is Russian. Pensions are paid by Russia and the rouble is the currency. Tourism is Abkhazia's best hope of sustainable development.

SOUTH OSSETIA:

- * Just 50 km (30 miles) from the Georgian capital Tbilisi at its nearest point, South Ossetia covers 3,900 square km (1,505 square miles) on the southern slopes of the Caucasus mountains. It has a population of some 63,000.
- * South Ossetia broke away from Georgia in a 1991-92 war following Georgia's independence from the Soviet Union. It maintains close ties with the Russian region of North Ossetia on its northern border, with whose people it shares a common ethnicity and Farsi-related language. Self-styled president and former wrestler Eduard Kokoity told Reuters he hopes to unite South Ossetia with Russia.
- * In August last year, after months of escalating tensions between Moscow and Tbilisi, Georgia launched an assault on the South Ossetian capital Tskhinvali, prompting a massive counter-strike from Russia. As in Abkhazia, Russia now controls South Ossetia's de facto borders. Most people hold Russian passports and the rouble is the currency.
- * A small team of monitors of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) had operated on the ground since the 1991-92 war, but was denied access after last year's war and has since been forced to close down after Russia rejected a Western proposal to extend its mandate.
- * Tskhinvali was heavily shelled during last August's war, and reconstruction has been slow. Around 25,000 Georgians have been unable to return to their villages and thousands of Ossetians remain homeless.
- * The economy is heavily dependent on Russian subsidies. Kokoity said Russia has allocated 8.5 billion roubles (\$270 million) for this year, but local officials complain not all has made it to the region.

#18

Breakaway Georgian Region Ready to Wait for Global Recognition

By Helena Bedwell

Bloomberg, August 4, 2009

The separatist Georgian region of Abkhazia is prepared to wait "as long as it takes" for the international community to follow Russia in recognizing its independence, Abkhaz President Sergei Bagapsh said.

Russia routed Georgia's U.S.-trained army in a five-day war last August over another breakaway region, South Ossetia. In the aftermath of the conflict, Moscow recognized Abkhazia and South Ossetia as sovereign states, a move condemned by the U.S. and many European countries. Only Nicaragua has followed Russia in recognizing the two regions.

"We're not upset that the West hasn't recognized us to keep Georgia happy," Bagapsh said today by telephone from the Abkhaz capital Sukhumi. "I'm a politician. I know this is a long process and won't be easy. We're willing to wait as long as it takes."

The U.S. won't recognize South Ossetia and Abkhazia and urges the rest of the world to refrain from doing so, Vice President Joe Biden said during a visit to the Georgian capital Tbilisi last month. U.S. leaders have said repeatedly pledged support for Georgia's territorial integrity.

North Atlantic Treaty Organization Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen yesterday called for a "true strategic partnership" with Russia, while recognizing "real differences in our positions, regarding for instance Georgia." NATO declared Georgia eligible for membership in 2008, while laying out no timetable.

'In Limbo'

Georgian Prime Minister Nika Gilauri said on July 31 that Georgia had "strong" guarantees from the U.S. that the West would never recognize Abkhaz and South Ossetian statehood.

"The regions are in limbo because Russia has been shown to be an aggressor, not a peacemaker," Gilauri said.

Russia vowed to deploy about 3,700 soldiers in both Abkhazia and South Ossetia after the war. Last month, Russia agreed to defend both regions' borders for five years. Such arrangements have led Georgian officials to say the regions are becoming little more than Russian military outposts.

Bagapsh rejected this claim, saying the Abkhaz government asked Russia to deploy troops in the region because of continuing Georgian provocations. "There's no guarantee they won't attack again," he said.

Gilauri said Georgia has no plans to attack either region.

#19
Georgia's best defense against Russia: democracy
Moscow wants to make an example of its tiny neighbor in turmoil. If the Georgian president follows through on democratic reforms, he can prove Moscow wrong.
Christian Science Monitor, August 3, 2009

A year ago this Friday, Russian tanks penetrated deep into the former Soviet republic of Georgia, whose military was helpless to repel them. Only international pressure pushed them back.

Even now, the government of Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin has not lived up to the terms of a cease-fire agreement. And the two countries are trading accusations of aggression along the border in the days running up to the first anniversary.

Mikheil Saakashvili, the US-educated president of this tiny country to Russia's south, naturally rues his country's lack of membership in NATO. And his military certainly needs defensive weapons from the Obama administration in the face of Moscow's bullying ways.

But it is the chronic political turmoil in Georgia that helps encourage Russia to meddle in his country. Moscow wants to make an example of Georgia as a failed state aligned with the West in order to keep other former Soviet states in line.

Strengthening Georgia's democracy is one defense that Mr. Saakashvili can do something about.

The 2003 peaceful "Rose Revolution" that catapulted Saakashvili to power is still a wild thicket, bristling with thorns. Georgia is ranked as only "partly free" and slipping backward by the US-based democracy watchdog Freedom House.

National elections last year were flawed. In 2007, antigovernment protesters were violently dispersed. Georgia has made progress fighting corruption, but its courts are still far from independent.

Key supporters of Saakashvili have peeled off to join the opposition, which began daily street protests in April. Critics liken the president to a dictator and blame him for recklessness in last summer's conflict. They demand he step down and want early elections.

Yet the opposition is itself in disarray, with no leader or program. Its protests have fizzled and now demonstrators are taking a summer break from the street.

On July 20, Saakashvili announced reforms of the media, elections, and the judiciary - just before a visit by US Vice President Joseph Biden. The Georgian leader pledged a more effective system of checks and balances between the executive branch and the legislature - constitutional changes that will have to be worked out with the opposition.

But a huge chasm separates the Georgian president and his critics. Neither side seems to understand that democracy means give-and-take. Neither seems able to accept the possibility of losing, then coming back to win another day.

The onus is on both sides to break this stalemate, but as head of state, Saakashvili has a special responsibility. During his visit, Mr. Biden hinted as much when he referred to Saakashvili's promised reforms - "and we expect him to keep that commitment."

Indeed, the Georgian president must now follow through. Continued internal turmoil bolsters Russia. And as Biden admitted in a speech before the Georgian parliament, "there is no military option" to gain back the two separatist provinces now under Russian influence and that were the focus of last summer's five-day war.

"Only a peaceful and prosperous Georgia" can win over the people of these provinces, South Ossetia and Abkhazia, and gain their trust, he said. And only a significantly improved democracy can stabilize Georgia itself, bring back foreign investors, and lay the foundation for economic growth.

As tough as the last year has been for Saakashvili, the work of democracy-building will be tougher. Pruning, weeding, fertilizing, and watering of democratic reform is patient work that must be done if Georgia's "Rose Revolution" is to blossom.

#20

Faded Rose: Can Georgia's Democratic Dream Be Revived?

By Brian Whitmore

RFE/RL, August 3, 2009

TBILISI -- Nino Danelia has been doing her part to turn Georgia into a Western-style democracy for two decades.

As a 15-year-old high school student in April 1989, she joined pro-independence demonstrations in downtown Tbilisi and went on a hunger strike against Soviet rule. In November 2003, she was among the throngs of protesters who made up the backbone of the democratic Rose Revolution that swept current President Mikheil Saakashvili into power.

Now a 35-year-old mother of two with short dark hair and thoughtful eyes, Danelia teaches media management at the Caucasus School of Journalism in Tbilisi. And as Georgia prepares to mark the first anniversary of last summer's brief and bitter war with neighboring Russia, she says the political struggle that has consumed most of her adult life has reached a critical juncture.

"I don't want my children to fight for their lives. I want them to live, to have fun, to get their education," Danelia says. "I think that now is a very important time for Georgia. History is sort of repeating itself, but somehow we have learned some lessons from history as well."

The story of post-Soviet Georgia is usually framed as a geopolitical struggle between Russia and the United States, a battle for energy routes and spheres of influence in the Caucasus, and a clash between titanic political figures like Saakashvili and Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin.

But at a deeper level, it is also the story of millions of ordinary people like Danelia, who yearn for the kind of stable and predictable lives that citizens of Western countries take for granted.

Many thought they had reached the Promised Land in November 2003, only to be disappointed when the ideals of the Rose Revolution faded as its leaders descended into political squabbling and recriminations.

When Russian tanks rolled into Georgia one year ago this week, the elusive dream of living in an independent and democratic country seemed in mortal danger.

Danelia for one says that despite the ongoing threat from Moscow and her deep disappointment in Georgia's current leaders, the promise of the Rose Revolution "is not dead at all."

She adds, however, that one of the key lessons of the war with Russia and the political crisis that followed is that citizens now "need to push the dream forward" by holding their leaders more accountable than they have in the past.

"Now is exactly the time when we need to create the situation where people believe that there is no alternative to establishing democracy in the country," Danelia says. "I believe that people can do this, if not politicians."

Seeking Consensus

Saakashvili's government survived the war. But the political crisis that followed threatened to destabilize the country as the president stood accused of dragging Georgia into a war that critics say was poorly conceived and incompetently executed.

Official Tbilisi has been largely paralyzed since early April, when the opposition began round-the-clock street protests around government buildings to demand Saakashvili's resignation.

There have been signs in recent weeks, however, that the standoff could be easing, and on July 24 opposition leaders announced the end of their street protests.

Days earlier, on the eve of U.S. Vice President Joe Biden's visit to Georgia, Saakashvili announced a series of democratic reforms designed to address some of the opposition's concerns.

They included an offer of early local elections in May, reinstating the direct election of the Mayor of Tbilisi, reforming the electoral code to reduce the possibility of fraud, and allowing the opposition a say in the appointment of the head of the Central Electoral Commission.

Some opposition figures, like former parliamentary speaker Nino Burjanadze and former presidential candidate Levan Gachechiladze, still demand nothing short of Saakashvili's resignation.

Others, most prominently former Georgian UN ambassador Irakli Alasania, have been more willing to negotiate with the president and his team, saying the most important goal should be reforming the country's political institutions and not ousting the president.

In a recent interview with RFE/RL, Alasania said he was confident an accord could be reached that would make Georgia more stable and democratic.

"Despite our different approaches and disagreements about who is the best one to lead this country, we agree that we love this country and we are standing for this country's unity and independence," Alasania said. "This will be demonstrated in the near future when an agreement will be reached and we find political consensus."

Pointing Fingers

Georgian officials tend to blame the shortcomings of their rule on pressure from Russia, which has reacted with intense hostility to the pro-Western "colored revolutions" here and in Ukraine.

In an interview with RFE/RL, Georgian Deputy Foreign Minister Giga Bokeria stresses that Russia currently occupies 20 percent of his country's territory -- a reference to the breakaway regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia -- and that Russian troops are stationed just 30 kilometers from Tbilisi.

Bokeria adds that regime change in Georgia is official Kremlin policy and that Russia consistently tries to interfere in Tbilisi's internal affairs. Last summer's war, he suggests, was simply a continuation and escalation of that longstanding policy.

"Russian leaders have had a problem with every single Georgian leader when they tried to build an independent state," Bokeria says. "The fundamental problem here, throughout these years, is Russia's failure to accept the simple fact that Georgia is a sovereign country. That is the source of the trouble."

Critics of Georgia's rulers acknowledge that Russian meddling has been a big problem -- but they say it's not the only reason the Rose Revolution has failed to live up to its promise.

Lasha Bakradze, a Tbilisi-based historian and literary critic, says Saakashvili and his inner circle betrayed the ideals of the Rose Revolution by concentrating power in their own hands and abusing their authority.

He says the elusive dream of a stable and democratic Georgia is very much alive for him, but he adds that he doesn't trust Saakashvili's team to deliver it.

"Unfortunately a lot of the hopes which we had weren't fulfilled. But this was not mainly due to external pressure. It was because our government, the very small group of people who make all the decisions in this country, decided that they knew best," Bakradze says.

"They didn't assist the development of civil society; they didn't create institutions for people to have influence over what was happening. This is a very serious problem."

A Revolution Betrayed

In fact, critics say the tendency to sideline democratic institutions and abuse power began not long after Saakashvili was first elected president in January 2004 with more than 96 percent of the vote.

Rights groups accused Saakashvili and his long-serving interior minister and close ally, Vano Merabishvili, of using the country's law-enforcement bodies for political purposes.

Journalists also complained about political pressure. In July 2006, Eka Khoperia, the host of a popular political talk show on Rustavi-2 television, announced her resignation on the air and walked off the set during a live program.

Opposition figures complained bitterly about a 2006 decision to scrap direct elections of the country's mayors.

Opposition leaders also alleged fraud and voter intimidation in the 2006 local elections, the country's first electoral test after the Rose Revolution, in which Saakashvili's United National Movement won a large majority.

Tension between Saakashvili's government and the opposition climaxed in November 2007 when massive street demonstrations in downtown Tbilisi were violently dispersed by police and the antigovernment Imedi television station was stormed, temporarily shut down, and ownership transferred to a pro-government entity.

Charges of fraud and voter intimidation resurfaced in presidential and parliamentary elections in 2008.

Danelia says she and others who initially supported Saakashvili at first gave him the benefit of the doubt but have become disillusioned over time.

"Power spoils people and we know this," she says. "We gave him [Saakashvili] power and let him use this power how he and his friends and colleagues saw fit without any kind of criticism."

It is a mistake she says they will not make again.

"I think our society will be cleverer and won't let political leaders totally ruin the country," Danelia says.

"I think that the elections that will come will somehow be a test for that," she adds. "Can we survive and develop like a democratic country? Will we allow politicians to play with citizens as they want? Can we establish ourselves as a society?"

#21

How to Bring Criminal Masterminds to Justice

By John Beyrle

Moscow Times, August 5, 2009

The recent fifth anniversary of the murder of U.S. journalist Paul Klebnikov has appropriately focused attention on the investigation of his murder, the murder of Anna Politkovskaya and the unsolved murders of many other journalists. The discussion of these cases has included much speculation about why juries acquitted the accused killers of Klebnikov and Politkovskaya and why so many other contract murders remain unsolved. Some have alleged conspiracies to stifle the investigations and protect the killers. Others have alleged conspiracies to intimidate or bribe jurors. These theories may or may not be accurate. It is impossible to know without seeing the evidence to support them.

Unfortunately, the conspiracy discussion has obscured a less dramatic but very important issue. Until this week, Russian prosecutors lacked a legal mechanism to reward defendants who testify against their co-defendants, an indispensable tool in prosecuting any criminal conspiracy. But a new law that took effect on July 14 will allow prosecutors to conclude formal cooperation agreements with defendants, cap sentences of cooperating defendants at half the statutory maximum (and 13 1/2 years in cases carrying life imprisonment) and entitle cooperating witnesses to state protection.

The importance of this law cannot be overstated. Prosecutorial experience from around the world has shown that rewarding criminals for testifying against their co-defendants, though unsavory, is the most effective way to bring organizers of criminal conspiracies to justice.

Italian prosecutors have for years used such techniques to obtain the testimony of co-defendants to convict previously untouchable Mafia bosses. Law enforcement in Britain has used so-called supergrasses to break a number of major criminal and terrorist organizations. In the last few months, U.S. prosecutors have used cooperating witnesses to bring charges against a California businessman for ordering the murder of a journalist to prevent the disclosure of financial improprieties and a New York Mafia boss for ordering the murder of a police officer.

It is not surprising that Russian prosecutors, deprived of the necessary legal tools, have had a hard time cracking the Klebnikov and Politkovskaya murders, not to mention so many other criminal conspiracies.

We congratulate Russia on the passage of this law and hope that it will be used to punish those who order contract murders and sit at the top of other criminal conspiracies.

John Beyrle is U.S. ambassador to the Russian Federation. This comment appeared in Vedomosti.

#22

Russian news agency carries fuller account of Medvedev-Obama phone conversation August 4, 2009, Interfax

The Russian and US presidents will issue additional directives to experts to step up work aimed at reaching decisions on a new START (Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty) by December.

The Kremlin press service reported this evening that this was discussed during a telephone conversation between Dmitry Medvedev and Barack Obama that took place on Tuesday (4 August) on the initiative of the Russian side.

"On the issue of the timescale for drawing up accords to replace START, D. Medvedev and B. Obama agreed to issue additional directives to experts to step up work in order to reach substantive decisions by December this year," the report says.

Medvedev wished Obama a happy birthday, the first one he is celebrating since taking office as US president. Obama thanked Medvedev for his wishes and "spoke highly of the new character of communication at the top level which had developed during previous contacts".

"Both sides stressed the need for trusting relations between the presidents and their teams to be maintained," the report says.

"It was noted that the practical consequence of such contacts was the constructive conduct of talks during the full-format Russian-American summit in Moscow and the results achieved during the summit making it possible to change the spirit and style of bilateral cooperation," the Russian president's press service stressed.

The heads of state exchanged views on the progress of implementation of the results of the Moscow summit. In particular, the need was stressed for the presidential commission to start practical work as soon as possible.

The conversation also touched on "some topical international issues: in particular, views were exchanged on the lessons of the Georgian crisis a year ago, the situation in the Middle East and over Iran."

"The presidents confirmed their mutual intention to continue a trusting and frank exchange of views and assessments on all problems that are of interest to the two sides," the report says.

Medvedev and Obama also discussed a plan of contacts at various levels in the short term and, in conclusion, exchanged warm greetings to each other's families.

#23

Georgia: uneasy peace a year after war with Russia

By Douglas Birch

AP, August 5, 2009

ERGNETHI, Georgia -- Along this de-facto border where Russia's war with Georgia broke out last year, homes still lie in rubble, apple orchards have been burned and residents who once traveled freely across the disputed territory face armed checkpoints.

There is a sense here that the war is not so much over as frozen in place with the potential for new hostilities to break out at any time.

"We are waiting for another war," said Dzhumber Basharuli, a 50-year-old farmer, whose home was reduced to a smoking shell by artillery during the conflict.

Both sides appear to have little to gain by relaunching hostilities that killed at least 390, drove tens of thousands from their homes and left Russia's relations with the West in tatters.

But ahead of the Aug. 7 anniversary of the outbreak of fighting, Russia and Georgia have been accusing one another of ratcheting up tensions.

Lawrence Scott Sheets of the International Crisis Group said Georgia has little incentive to start another war.

President Mikhail Saakashvili, blamed for provoking a conflict Georgia could not win, was the target of lengthy street protests this spring. Now, though, he "seems to be in a stronger position than he has been since the end of the war," Sheets said.

Russia, meanwhile, has already achieved many of its strategic goals in the war - including expanding its military presence in the South Caucasus, where it has historically been the dominant power.

But the peace here seems as fragile as ever.

The Russian Foreign Ministry Tuesday claimed Georgia has provoked skirmishes along the boundaries of its breakaway regions. In response, Russia put its 1 million-strong military on high alert.

Georgian soldiers and officials, meanwhile, say Moscow-backed separatists have launched sniper, grenade and mortar attacks against undisputed Georgian territory.

Eka Tkeshelashvili, Secretary of Georgia's National Security Council, told reporters Tuesday Russia may be seeking to destabilize the Georgian government. "This is a troubling factor," she said.

Steve Bird, a spokesman for the EU's monitoring mission in Georgia, on Wednesday noted that monitors are not allowed on the South Ossetian side of this tense boundary zone.

But he said so far observers have found no evidence to back up Russian and separatist claims that Georgian forces have fired into the breakaway region.

The war began not far from this village, about 15 miles (less than 25 kilometers) from the South Ossetian capital of Tskhinvali.

Georgia sent troops into South Ossetia in response to what it said was an invasion by Russian forces. Moscow said it had sent tanks and troops into Georgian territory to protect South Ossetian civilians and Russian peacekeepers from what it termed aggression.

Russia routed the Georgian military and drove deep into Georgia. A truce negotiated by the European Union ended five days of fierce fighting.

Moscow quickly exploited its victory by recognizing South Ossetia and Abkhazia as independent and permanently deploying thousands of troops there.

Russia's victory went beyond the battlefield. The conflict exposed the limits of U.S. and EU influence in the region, central to European plans to reduce dependence on Russian-controlled energy supplies.

But the war also damaged Russia's relations with some of its allies, who refused to join in recognizing the breakaway regions, while failing to dislodge Saakashvili, the Kremlin's arch foe.

The perceived threat of a renewed war may have helped strengthen the hand of the Georgian president. Even Saakashvili's critics say that Russia shares the blame for the war.

"We're not giving any kind of excuse to Russia," Nino Burdzhanadze, a leader of this spring's protests, told The Associated Press. "It was absolutely obvious that Russia was trying to provoke Georgia" into a military confrontation.

The war rattled the West, and the incoming Obama administration sought to reduce tensions by vowing to reset the relationship between Washington and Moscow.

Despite the cordial tone of July's U.S.-Russia summit in Moscow, Georgia remains a major source of tensions between the two former Cold War adversaries.

Russia considers the U.S. role in Georgia as meddling in its backyard. Many Georgians look to the U.S. to shield them from the wrath of Russia.

"Our one hope is the Americans," said Nino Gatenashvili, 28, who fled his home in South Ossetia and now lives in a community built for 2,800 displaced families. "We believe them, they are our friends."

Associated Press writers Misha Dzhindzhikashvili and Jim Heintz contributed to this report from Tbilisi.

#24

Russian Subs Patrolling Off East Coast of U.S.

By Mark Mazzetti and Thom Shanker

New York Times, August 5, 2009

WASHINGTON — A pair of nuclear-powered Russian attack submarines has been patrolling off the eastern seaboard of the United States in recent days, a rare mission that has raised concerns inside the Pentagon and intelligence agencies about a more assertive stance by the Russian military.

The episode has echoes of the cold war era, when the United States and the Soviet Union regularly parked submarines off each other's coasts to steal military secrets, track the movements of their underwater fleets — and be poised for war.

But the collapse of the Soviet Union all but eliminated the ability of the Russian Navy to operate far from home ports, making the current submarine patrols thousands of miles from Russia more surprising for military officials and defense policy experts.

"I don't think they've put two first-line nuclear subs off the U.S. coast in about 15 years," said Norman Polmar, a naval historian and submarine warfare expert.

The submarines are of the Akula class, a counterpart to the Los Angeles class attack subs of the United States Navy, and not one of the larger submarines that can launch intercontinental nuclear missiles.

According to Defense Department officials, one of the Russian submarines remained in international waters on Tuesday about 200 miles off the coast of the United States. The location of the second remained unclear. One senior official said the second submarine traveled south in recent days toward Cuba, while another senior official with access to reports on the surveillance mission said it had sailed away in a northerly direction.

The Pentagon and intelligence officials spoke anonymously to describe the effort to track the Russian submarines, which has not been publicly announced.

President Obama spoke by telephone with President Dmitri A. Medvedev of Russia on Tuesday, but it was not clear whether the subject of the submarines came up, although another source of friction between the two countries did. Mr. Medvedev called Mr. Obama to wish him a happy birthday and the White House said the president used the opportunity to urge Russia to work through diplomatic channels to resolve rising tensions with Georgia.

The submarine patrols come as Moscow tries to shake off the embarrassment of the latest failed test of the Bulava missile, a long-range weapon that was test fired from a submarine in the Arctic on July 15. The failed missile test was the sixth since 2005, and some experts see Russia's assertiveness elsewhere as a gambit by the military to prove its continued relevance.

"It's the military trying to demonstrate that they are still a player in Russian political and economic matters," Mr. Polmar said.

One of the submarines is the newer Akula II, officials said, which is quieter than the older variant and the most advanced in the Russian fleet. The Akula is capable of carrying torpedoes for attacking other submarines and surface vessels as well as missiles for striking targets on land and at sea.

Defense Department officials declined to speculate on which weapons might be aboard the two submarines.

While the submarines have not taken any provocative action beyond their presence outside territorial waters of the United States, officials expressed wariness over the Kremlin's motivation for ordering such an unusual mission.

"Anytime the Russian Navy does something so out of the ordinary it is cause for worry," said a senior Defense Department official who has been monitoring reports on the submarines' activities.

The official said the Navy was able to track the submarines as they made their way through international waters off the American coastline. This can be done from aircraft, ships, underwater sensors or other submarines.

"We've known where they were, and we're not concerned about our ability to track the subs," the official added. "We're concerned just because they are there."

Once among the world's most powerful forces, the Russian Navy now has very few ships regularly deployed on the open seas. Moscow has contributed warships to the international armada searching for Somali pirates. In addition, a flotilla of Russian warships participated in exercises with Venezuela last year.

#25

Russian Victory At The Polls

By Walter Ruby

NY Jewish Week, August 5, 2009

This is one political message that is not lost in translation: Brooklyn's Russian-speaking community has arrived in the big leagues in Albany.

The moment came last week when, against the odds, the community's representatives and legislative supporters convinced Gov. David Paterson to sign into law a bill requiring the city Board of Elections to translate all voting materials into Russian.

"This is a testament to the rise to power of a voting bloc to which politicians now need to pay special attention," says political consultant Hank Sheinkopf.

The long-sought bill was first proposed in the Assembly by Rep. Bill Colton (D-Bensonhurst) in 2004. But it has stalled ever since in the Senate. The Board of Elections argued (with the support of Mayor Michael Bloomberg) that adding Russian to the short list of languages in which election materials are printed would be expensive and violate the Federal Voting Rights Act, which mandated the printing of election materials in Spanish, Chinese and Korean only.

The effort to get the bill passed now — during a chaotic legislative year — is significant, says Sheinkopf. It says to politicians, “If they don’t support the Russian community’s legislative agenda, they risk having the community vote against them.”

Paterson’s signing means that all election materials, including information on voting procedures, candidates and referendums will now be translated into Russian. The Russian-speaking community, which includes many retirees who have relative lack of facility in English makes, had long pressed for this step.

According to Assemblyman Alec Brook-Krasny (D-Brighton Beach), the state’s first Russian-speaker elected to higher office, he, Colton and Sen. Carl Kruger (D-South Brooklyn) took advantage of a political “window of opportunity.” It opened during the brief period of Democratic control of the Senate (the bill died in the GOP-controlled Senate in 2007 and ‘08) to secure passage of the bill in both houses.

Also writing to Paterson in support of the bill was the mayor.

According to Bloomberg spokesman Stuart Loeser, the mayor’s previous opposition had not been to the use of Russian in voting materials per se, but rather to efforts to put Russian-language instruction onto the voting machines themselves.

Russian community sources told The Jewish Week that they informed City Hall in recent weeks that the mayor needed to come out in support of the bill if he wanted to secure the support of Russians in the November election against Democrat Bill Thompson.

#26
Russia's Putin strips for stardom, again
By Douglas Birch
AP, August 6, 2009

Eat your heart out, Sarkozy. Stand back, Barack.

Vladimir Putin proved this week that even a gimlet-eyed Russian politician can rise to the status of global celebrity in the multimedia age, as pictures of his bare chest and manly deeds on Siberian holiday caused tongues to wag worldwide.

Two state-owned Russian television channels launched the frenzy Tuesday night, broadcasting video of Putin's gym-toned arms chopping through the water in a butterfly stroke and others showing him riding bare-chested on horseback.

Within hours, everyone from the BBC to the tabloids seized on the story, apparently grateful for a bit of middle-aged beefcake in August, the slowest of news months.

Moscow invented the cult of personality, and Putin has long been touted as a kind of post-Soviet superman here.

But what did the rest of the world find so mesmerizing about pictures of a 56-year-old politician stripped to the waist, rowing a raft, fishing, snapping bits of wood and going for a swim?

After all, Putin is not nearly as buff as Barack Obama, who made headlines of his own in December when he was snapped shirtless in Hawaii.

Perhaps it was the notion that a former KGB lieutenant colonel regarded as the shadowy power behind President Dmitry Medvedev's throne would bare much, if not all, for the cameras.

"I know what Vladimir Putin did last summer," Canada's National Post crowed in its headline.

"Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin sure does love the spotlight," the Post declared. "... There are enough photos here that the former KGB agent could easily put out a calendar."

"Rootin' Tootin' Putin," the New York Post trumpeted, alluding to Putin's resemblance to the grizzled cowboys in Marlboro cigarette ads.

The Guardian in Britain edged toward psychoanalysis in an article headlined online: "Vladimir Putin's tough-guy swimming technique."

Putin's butterfly stroke, the Guardian scribe wrote, evoked the fragrant atmosphere of the locker room.

"It may have a fug of raw, sweating masculinity about it, but it's also the most irritating of all strokes. It's splashy and unsociable, an uncompromising stroke that pays no heed to the elderly gentleman choking on chlorinated backwash in the neighbouring municipal lane."

The photo extravaganza was only the latest stunt intended to keep Putin in the Russian public eye.

In recent years he has scolded skinflint oligarchs, rescued doomed factories, flown in a jet fighter, dived to the bottom of the world's deepest lake and shot a tiger with a tranquilizer dart.

It wasn't even Putin's first topless wilderness photo op: Similar pictures were produced during a 2007 summer fishing trip to Siberia with Prince Albert II of Monaco.

His feats play differently at home and abroad, drawing admiration from an adoring Russian public and scorn from skeptics here and abroad.

"These days, hardly a month goes by without Mr. Putin pulling such a stunt," Britain's The Independent harrumphed.

"But while these latest photographs were clearly once again designed to boost the prime minister's macho image, the cynical observer might wonder if the poses that he strikes aren't rather more Brokeback Mountain than Jason Bourne."

The Sydney Morning Herald, perhaps to brighten the Austral winter, focused high in its story on Putin's wardrobe. "The 56-year-old former president was kitted out in green military fatigues, impenetrable black sunglasses and a green slouch hat," the paper reported.

The celebrity gossip Web site TMZ went straight for the jugular, in a manner of speaking, commenting cattily on the prime minister's chest.

"The 56-year-old showed off his weapons of mass destruction - aka his moobs - by riding a horse shirtless while on vacation in Siberia."

In contrast, some of the coverage of Putin's trip by Russia's state-controlled media seemed straight-faced.

The official government newspaper Rossiiskaya Gazeta reported, without apparent irony: "The river was fast-flowing and full of rapids, but this didn't scare Vladimir Putin one little bit."

Coincidentally or not, the trip coincided with Putin's 10 years in the upper echelons of power.

He was first appointed prime minister by President Boris Yeltsin in August 1999, later elected president, and named prime minister last year by his successor, Medvedev.

#27

Fear of a Weak Russia

If Moscow's failures continue, the world may soon become a much more dangerous place.

BY Donald K. Bandler and Jakub Kulhanek

[Foreignpolicy.com](http://foreignpolicy.com), August 5, 2009

The reaction from the American defense establishment to news that Russian submarines have been operating off the U.S. coast has been fairly nonchalant, bordering on smug. The submarine operation is widely seen as a rather feeble show of strength by the Russian military after a series of embarrassments over botched missile tests and undistinguished conduct during last year's war with Georgia.

Russia's weakness -- military, political, and economic -- is fast becoming conventional wisdom in Washington. In a recent interview with the Wall Street Journal before his trip to Georgia and Ukraine, U.S. Vice President Joseph Biden even suggested that a weakened Russia might work to the advantage of the United States. His words, of course, were primarily meant to reassure the skittish leaders in Tblisi and Kiev, who fear that a thaw in U.S.-Russia relations might lead Washington to abandon them. Whether he was speaking for President Barack Obama or not, Biden also sent an unequivocal signal to the Kremlin that it should not take any "reset" for granted and that the White House will not be intimidated by Russian aggression.

But before the new administration gets too comfortable, it's worth examining whether a weakened Russia is really in anyone's interest. In fact, an unstable Russia might prove far more dangerous. For the sake of argument, we present the following not-so-unlikely scenario in which Russia undergoes a series of political and economic upheavals. Consider it less a prediction than a worst-case course of events for how Russian weakness could mean trouble.

It is 2011. The ongoing global financial crisis has proven far more damaging to the Russian economy than predicted, and the Russian ruling elite's once unshakeable optimism for a quick recovery is long gone. Russian companies are going bankrupt in droves, and there are massive layoffs. As a result, a rising number of protests are reported all over the country. Due to unpaid salaries and massive unemployment, ordinary people lose their inhibitions and openly challenge the government. Public outrage is mostly directed at President Dmitry Medvedev and liberal members of the government. In a desperate attempt to quell riots, troops are deployed to regions with the most unrest.

Things quickly get out of hand. In the city of Omsk, troops open fire on unarmed rioters, killing nine. The Omsk incident deals a decisive blow to Medvedev, who is forced out of office by powerful Kremlin clans that fear the imminent collapse of the Russian state. Appearing emotionally shaken, the president delivers a terse resignation speech in a televised address on Dec. 15, 2011.

Once again assuming the presidency, Vladimir Putin declares a national revitalization program involving a wide range of measures intended to prop up the ailing economy. Thanks to a massive spending spree, the state is able to generate new jobs and the welfare safety net is given a significant boost. Putin manages to temporarily placate the impoverished segments of the population. Yet, the state's coffers soon run dry, and it is widely assumed that the recent improvement in the Russian economy will be short-lived.

Meanwhile, civil wars rage in the North Caucasus republics of Dagestan and Ingushetia. A military buildup in the region does not resolve the situation, and attacks on government buildings and federal troops occur daily. In an attempt to rally people behind the regime and take their minds off the worsening economic malaise, a desperate Putin stokes aggressive nationalism, accusing unspecified foreign governments of instigating violence in the North Caucasus in order to dismember Russia. The Georgian government, still under the rule of President Mikheil Saakashvili, is accused of providing a staging ground for terrorists en route to the North Caucasus. Saakashvili vehemently rejects such accusations and blames massive social distress in Russia for the rising tide of violence.

In 2012, Putin faces reelection. Press freedoms are curtailed even further, and the right to protest is suspended temporarily. The Communist Party, until now the only significant opposition in the Russian parliament, is banned, and a number of opposition figures end up in prison. By now, the Kremlin and its spin doctors have managed to eradicate any semblance of free competition in the country, and the presidential elections are seen internationally as a farce. Putin faces two virtually unknown and uninspiring local politicians and is reelected by a landslide.

In early 2014, hostilities between Russia and Georgia reach a tipping point. A string of bombings at Russian military bases, including those in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, are attributed to the Georgian secret service by the Russian media. In a speech to the U.N. Security Council, the Russian foreign minister issues a 24-hour ultimatum for Saakashvili to leave the country and allow Russian peacekeepers to enter Georgia. The Georgian government refuses, prompting a full-scale Russian invasion of Georgia. Although Russian forces eventually prevail, the Western-trained and equipped Georgian army inflicts massive casualties on the invaders. Saakashvili flees to Turkey.

In response to the Russian invasion, Washington imposes partial economic sanctions on Moscow. Azerbaijan and Finland demand quick admission to NATO. At the same time, the United States and Poland deploy troops to the Baltic countries to face an increasingly belligerent Russia.

After an accident over Estonia in which a Russian fighter jet -- violating that country's airspace -- collides with a Polish F-16, NATO and Russia accept that it is time to negotiate -- or risk massive bloodshed. Knowing full well that its obsolete army is no match for NATO's conventional forces, Moscow is forced to sue for peace. With the promise of hefty economic aid from the European Union, the Kremlin decides to withdraw from Georgia.

The political fallout from the Georgian fiasco has tremendous political repercussions at home. The military and security forces, as well as Putin himself, are widely discredited. Russian business elites, including the oligarchs who not long ago stood firmly behind Putin, push for change.

In 2018, Putin decides not to run again. A rather dull technocrat, bankrolled by a group of powerful oligarchs, succeeds him. Nevertheless, the Russian economy is still reeling from its long roller-coaster ride. The central government has been shaken to its core and exercises little control over vast swaths of Russian territory, where personal fiefdoms have sprung up. The volatile situation in the violent Northern Caucasus, which remains a ticking time bomb, threatens the territorial integrity of the Russian state itself. There is no hope of an effective reset button, and the future for Russia remains anything but bright.

Russia's weakness has proved to be the world's crisis.

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#28

What Biden Should Have Said

By Stephen Sestanovich

Washington Post, August 6, 2009

Joe Biden has caught hell the past couple of weeks for making some fairly obvious observations to a reporter about Russia's internal problems and for implying that the interests of such a weakened country needn't worry the United States all that much. Moscow officialdom has responded in high dudgeon, and Russian commentators are insisting that the vice president has revealed the dark and irresponsible motives behind American policy. Administration spokesmen dismiss it as just another Biden gaffe.

It's no surprise that comments about Russia's demographic decline, its over-dependence on commodity exports, the shakiness of its banks and so on can be interpreted to mean that the United States intends to push the envelope at Moscow's expense -- and expects to get away with it. Yet it appears that what the reporter asked the vice president was not why America is doing so much to provoke Russia but, rather, why the United States thinks it can deter Russian power while doing so little. As a response to this question, Biden's answer sounded more like an attempt to change the subject, an uneasy way of saying that maybe the Russians, with all their problems at home, will end up deterring themselves. No need for the United States to push the envelope after all.

An uproar, in other words, about whether the United States is overreaching and disregarding Russia's interests should perhaps have been about whether America is trying to succeed on the cheap and is failing to uphold its own interests. But no matter which question the vice president was asked, the Obama administration needs a more convincing answer.

In explaining that the United States is not putting itself on a collision course with Russia, Biden could have claimed credit for what has already been accomplished. And to reassure those who think that U.S. policy is long on talk and short on action, he would have to be more candid about what it will take to strengthen the independence of Russia's neighbors.

Showing that the administration is serious about Russian-American relations is the easy part of dealing with the Biden flap. By now Russian policymakers have seen enough of U.S. policy to know that Washington's guiding thought is not how to bring Russia to its knees. The administration is not counting on Russia's backwardness to win its cooperation. It's counting on common interest.

In his visit to Moscow last month, President Obama accorded Russian leaders a degree of deference that even close allies have been denied. He went far toward building a relationship centered on the strategic nuclear balance -- the heart of Russia's claim to be a great power. He accepted a connection between arms reductions and missile defense that was probably President Dmitry Medvedev's top priority at the summit. And he went easy on an embarrassing recent example of shortsighted Russian decision-making -- Prime Minister Vladimir Putin's still-unexplained scuttling of 16 years of effort to get Russia into the World Trade Organization.

The administration has a good story to tell about the Russian-American relationship it is trying to build. Can it say as much about what it is doing to bolster Russia's neighbors? It's silly to suggest that Russia's weak banking system or declining population or any of its other internal problems might keep it from pummeling Georgia again if the opportunity arose. Yet there are forces at work of a very different kind that favor U.S. interests.

Almost all the states of the former Soviet Union are already working with Western governments, and with each other, to increase their independence from Moscow. When Kyrgyzstan lets the United States keep using its air base to reach Afghanistan despite Russian bribes; when Uzbekistan refuses to join a rapid-reaction military force that Russia wants to create; when Turkmenistan invites American and European companies to help break Gazprom's grip on its energy exports; when the president of Armenia invites the president of Georgia (who is still denounced by Moscow as a genocidal murderer) to receive an award -- all in the space of a few months, it's clear that the geopolitical tide is moving in the right direction.

This trend does not mean that American support for Russia's neighbors is unnecessary, only that it has a realistic chance to succeed. What Dean Acheson called "the added energy and power of America" will often be decisive. These states want military training and equipment so they can stand up to intimidation. They want the access to international markets that frees them from economic subordination. They want the diplomatic attention that allows them to resist interference in their internal affairs.

These are the practical problems on which the Obama administration needs to make progress if it wants to support the independence of Russia's neighbors. Only if it gets these problems right will reporters get a better answer the next time around.

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#29

Russian subs near US coast pose no threat: Pentagon

By Dan De Luce

AFP, August 5, 2009

WASHINGTON - Russian submarines patrolling off the US east coast are not cause for concern and pose no threat to the United States, the Pentagon said on Wednesday.

"So long as they are operating in international waters -- as, frankly, we do around the world -- and are behaving in a responsible way, they are certainly free to do so and it doesn't cause any alarm within this building," press secretary Geoff Morrell said at a Pentagon news conference.

US Northern Command issued a brief statement earlier that it was monitoring the submarines, which Morrell said were several hundred miles (kilometers) off the eastern coastline.

Morrell said he was unsure if Moscow gave Washington advance notice but the US military "had the means to derive where they were going."

Morrell played down the episode, saying: "While it is interesting and noteworthy that they are in this part of the world, it doesn't pose any threat and it doesn't cause any concern."

He acknowledged that US submarines have operated off the Russian coast "from time to time" as well, in international waters.

The New York Times first reported the presence of two Russian nuclear-powered, Akula class submarines off the American coast, the first such move in years that carried echoes of Cold War tensions.

The speedy Akula vessels, which can carry cruise missiles, are attack submarines used for spying, guarding warships and tracking nuclear bombers.

Russia neither confirmed or denied that its submarines were patrolling near US territory, but suggested there was undue "hysteria" in this case.

"Activities of Russian submarines in the world's oceans outside their own waters do not violate international maritime law and are within normal practice," a military-diplomatic source told ITAR-TASS news agency.

Russia regularly makes its position on international issues known through unnamed sources quoted by state media, and the country's three main news agencies ran nearly identical reactions to the report, quoting a military-diplomatic source.

"The Russian navy systematically pinpoints the location of NATO submarines, including US Navy submarines, in direct proximity to the territorial waters of the Russian Federation," Interfax news agency quoted the source as saying.

"This however has never been a reason to make a lot of noise in the press," the source said, adding: "Consequently, any hysteria in such a case is inappropriate."

During the Cold war, Moscow and Washington routinely sent submarines near each country's coastline to gather intelligence and track fleet movements.

The patrols near the US Atlantic coastline follow Moscow's symbolic shows of force in the past year, with Russian warships carrying out exercises with Venezuela and Russian bombers buzzing a US aircraft carrier in the Pacific.

President Barack Obama has sought to defuse tensions with Moscow over US plans for a missile defense system in Central Europe.

#30
Georgia, On the Rebound
By Mikheil Saakashvili
Washington Post, August 6, 2009

TBILISI, Georgia -- On the night of Aug. 7, 2008, Russia's 58th Army crossed over Georgia's internationally recognized borders. Thus began what the evidence shows was a long-planned invasion aimed at toppling my government and increasing Moscow's control over our region. A year later, the results are not what the Kremlin expected.

Tragically, 410 of our citizens, mostly civilians, were killed, and more than 1,700 were injured. Almost 130,000 people were forced to flee their homes, according to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, including tens of thousands ethnically cleansed from villages in the Georgian territories of South Ossetia and Abkhazia. Costs ran into the billions. And in violation of the cease-fire that Russian President Dmitry Medvedev signed Aug. 12, about 10,000 Russian troops remain in the two Georgian territories.

Russian provocations have not stopped; snipers in Russian-controlled areas have killed 28 Georgian policemen. In recent days, Moscow has engaged in a series of provocative acts and statements, echoing its prelude to last year's invasion. Even as the world watches, Moscow has vetoed monitoring missions from the United Nations and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe. In violation of the cease-fire, Russia also denies European Union monitors access to the occupied territories.

Despite all this, and contrary to some expectations, Georgia has rebounded. Our democratic institutions are growing. Foreign investors are returning. The world should recognize that the kind of behavior Russia exhibited last August threatens not only Georgia but our entire region.

Since the 2003 Rose Revolution, we have worked hard to replace a deeply corrupt, failing state with a modern, responsible state that is allied with the West; run by European standards; and committed to liberal democracy, free-market principles and peaceful relations with our neighbors. Twenty years after the fall of communism, that goal should be unremarkable. Indeed, Russia should have welcomed a prosperous, stable neighbor. Instead, Moscow feels threatened by our aspirations.

After the war, we faced a choice. Most countries confronting dire threats turn inward. We chose to reinforce our commitment to values we share with the West, such as personal and economic freedom. Such values provide our best protection and inspired our people to rebuild, even as we now sit within the range of Russian artillery.

I committed to even deeper democratic reforms. When domestic political protests emerged in April, my government pursued a policy of openness and restraint. We allowed protesters to illegally block the main avenue in Tbilisi for three months and then invited opposition leaders to begin a dialogue over reforms in our constitution, the handling of elections, the media and the judiciary.

Last month, I committed to specific reforms with firm deadlines, including the direct election of mayors next May; a new electoral code and a consensus chair for our Central Election Commission; less power for the president and more for parliament; stronger sanctions against officials trying to influence judges; and a public television broadcasting board with equal representation of the governing and opposition parties.

All along, we have appreciated the international response to what happened. More than \$4.5 billion was pledged to help us repair war damage and care for internally displaced Georgians. Foreign investment is flowing again. The international community has condemned Russia's serial violations of the cease-fire. In Moscow last month, President Obama firmly defended our territorial integrity and NATO aspirations.

Georgia faces a situation that is new and old. Just as a wall used to divide Germans, a barbed-wire border divides us from our two occupied territories. Within those territories, monitors have been expelled, media are muzzled and Georgian citizens are forbidden to return to their homes -- while Russia builds military bases.

These developments threaten all free nations that believe international borders must not be changed by force. If we do not stand up to tactics such as cross-border aggression, creating "frozen conflicts" that destabilize sovereign states or attempt to legalize ethnic cleansing, or cutting off energy supplies for political gain, none of us will enjoy lasting stability.

That is why we are responding in ways that mirror the steps that helped peacefully end the Cold War.

We have called for other countries to insist on Georgia's territorial integrity and not to recognize the occupied territories, and we are grateful that most nations have embraced this approach. We do not seek to retake the territories by force -- but we are resolute that we will never forget the rights of the displaced. And in pursuit of a greater good, we continue to build an open democracy and economy. As Vice President Biden said last month in Tbilisi: "Every progressive nation in the world has a stake in your success, particularly nations in this region."

Twenty years ago, the attraction of a free and prosperous West brought down the Berlin Wall. We believe the example of a free and prosperous Georgia ultimately will restore our sovereignty and reverse the wrongs caused by Russia's invasion. With the support of our friends in the United States and Europe -- support for which we are deeply grateful -- Georgia will continue to rebound and set an example for the region.

#31

Briefing: Jewish Property Restitution Remains European Challenge

By Rabbi Andrew Baker

American Jewish Committee, July 31, 2009

WASHINGTON – Twenty years ago a tumultuous summer in Central and Eastern Europe led to the emergence of Solidarity in Poland, the fall of the Berlin Wall, and the Velvet Revolution in Czechoslovakia. These revolutionary events brought democracy, open societies and unfettered media. While a genuinely brighter future was guaranteed for all in these new democracies, Jewish citizens were offered a more tentative promise.

Most European Jews were murdered in the Holocaust, and most survivors found a new future in Israel or in the West. Those who remained were small in number, beleaguered, and quickly became victims of state-sponsored anti-Semitism and the natural communist repression of all religious movements. In an era of democracy, they sought to rebuild Jewish life. But it was not easy.

The Czech Government recently invited over forty countries to participate in an international conference on Holocaust-Era Assets. It was an opportunity to take stock of progress in righting the material wrongs of the Holocaust, encompassing looted art, stolen archives and unreturned real estate. The restitution of property is a special concern for Jewish communities across Central and Eastern Europe, since their future depends on regaining at least some former communal holdings.

How easy it would have been twenty years ago, as properties were returned to other religious confessions, or privatized and sold off, to return the former Jewish communal property, or even a portion of it, so reviving Jewish communities would have had some basic support for their activities.

The first international conference on Holocaust-Era Assets, hosted by the U.S. Department of State a decade ago, identified the challenges of communal property restitution and the importance of including Jewish victims or their heirs among the claimants of private property, even if they no longer live in those countries.

Only a day before the Prague Conference last month, Lithuania introduced legislation to resolve Jewish communal property claims. Vilnius offered to pay a small percentage of the actual value of these properties in compensation spread over ten years. But political leaders said this would be difficult, considering the current economic climate and the unpopularity of the issue. Indeed, the government was attacked in the press for giving in to Jewish demands while average Lithuanians suffered financial woes.

Lithuania is not alone in experiencing a phenomenon that must be squarely addressed. When the subject of restitution is raised, anti-Semitism increases. Jewish communities seeking the return of their properties are frequently depicted as taking money away from the “real” population, as though Lithuanian Jews, or Latvian Jews, or Polish Jews are somehow strangers in their own countries.

Compensation proposals now tend to be so modest that officials concede they will have negligible impact on the overall budget even in difficult times. But media accounts or populist politicians make it sound as though the fiscal stability of the nation will stand or fall on helping these Jewish citizens.

In Poland proposed legislation to pay compensation for private claims will, by the Government’s own estimations, primarily address the claims of Poles living in Poland and the claims of non-Jewish Poles living abroad. Jewish claimants—Holocaust survivors or their heirs — are only a fraction of the total. Yet, to the general public this is considered a Jewish issue and opposes it.

How do Central and Eastern European governments and political leaders respond? Mostly they avoid it. If elections are pending, suspend negotiations. It will cost votes by even talking about the issue. If you are drafting legislation, keep writing but do not introduce it.

Consider the irony. Jews are seeking property restitution because of a genocidal anti-Semitism that swept across Europe seventy years ago. Two generations later, small communities, today a fraction of what they once were, are trying to reclaim some of the properties they once owned. And the price is another wave of anti-Semitism, maybe not life-threatening, but anti-Semitism all the same.

Two decades ago, expectations of open and democratic societies, and EU and NATO membership, were desires for the future. But powerful voices and brave leaders transformed hopes into reality. We need to hear today those voices again. The message they must deliver is simple. Restituting Jewish property is the right thing to do and anti-Semitism is totally unacceptable. No one should have to choose between them.

Rabbi Andrew Baker is the Personal Representative of the OSCE Chair-in-Office on Combating Anti-Semitism, and director of International Jewish Affairs of the American Jewish Committee.

#32

Kirill's Visit Exposes Dangers in Moscow-Kiev Ties

By Sophia Kishkovsky

New York Times, August 7, 2009

MOSCOW — Wittingly or not, a just-completed 10-day visit to Ukraine by Kirill I, the head of the Russian Orthodox Church, has exposed the dangers lurking in relations between Russia and Ukraine, the two most populous nations to emerge from the breakup of the Soviet Union.

It was Kirill's first trip to Ukraine since he was elected patriarch in January. The visit opened on July 27 with an affirmation of Russian-Ukrainian brotherhood in Kiev, regarded as the cradle of Russian Orthodoxy. Prince Vladimir adopted Orthodoxy from Byzantium for himself and his subjects, who were baptized en masse in the Dnieper River in 988.

"If you will, Kiev is our common Jerusalem, from which our Orthodox faith came," Kirill said after a service dedicated to the prince, St. Vladimir. "Praying here, we, the heirs of Vladimir's baptism, living in different states, inviolately preserve the spiritual unity bestowed by him upon us."

But if the call to unity was a constant theme, and Kirill even offered to take out Ukrainian citizenship, it was clouded both by demonstrators hostile to a visit they saw as an attempt to assert Russian domination, and by political, religious and military tensions that have festered and in some ways grown since the Soviet collapse in 1991.

Top church officials at a news conference in Moscow on Thursday depicted the trip as a triumph that strengthened the transnational character of the Russian Orthodox Church. Protesters represented marginal, isolated groups "that dislike the patriarch simply because of their anti-Russian sentiments," said Archbishop Hilarion of Volokolamsk. "There is no real opposition to the Russian church today," he said of Ukraine.

The Reverend Vsevolod Chaplin said that what he called Kirill's pilgrimage underscored that the church extended far beyond geopolitical borders or terminology. "We are not the church only of the Russian Federation, nor only, as sometimes said, of the Russian people," he said. "'Russian' in the name of the church refers not to the ethnic definition 'Russian,' but to the concept 'Rus,' which is not political but rather spiritual."

He said Russia and Ukraine were vital parts of Europe but should not compromise their values and identities to integrate into the modern European system.

By contrast, Mykola Tomenko, vice chairman of the Ukrainian Parliament, said in a statement Thursday that Kirill was hijacking the idea of Rus and that he had used his to "test out the idea of a new ideological doctrine of Russia."

Russia's president, Dmitri A. Medvedev, has yet to visit Ukraine since he took office 15 months ago. Most pointedly, Mr. Medvedev refused an invitation last year from Ukraine's president, Viktor A. Yushchenko, to the unveiling of a monument to the millions who died in mass famine under Stalin in the 1930s, which Ukrainians call Holodomor and often regard as genocide inflicted by Russia.

Mr. Medvedev railed against the use of distortions of history to cast Russia in a bad light. Kirill, however, visited the monument with Mr. Yushchenko, and used pastoral intonations and personal history — he told of his family's suffering under Stalin — to cast Stalin's crimes in a larger context, speaking of famine killing millions across the Soviet Union.

"This is the common tragedy of our entire people, who lived in that time in one country," Kirill said at the monument, according to the Patriarchate Web site. "That's why there's nothing surprising in the fact that we are praying for innocent victims, that we are remembering those who died."

Underscoring the importance of Kirill's trip, Mr. Medvedev received the patriarch Thursday to discuss it.

"We've had rather complicated relations recently, and we are not happy about this," Mr. Medvedev said of Ukraine. "That's why I'm interested in your evaluation."

Mr. Yushchenko has irked Russians by seeking support from the Patriarchate of Constantinople, with which the Russian church jockeys for power, for a unified Ukrainian Orthodox church free of Moscow's control.

Traditionally, religious conflict between Russia and Ukraine has centered on the Uniates in Ukraine, especially its western region, who observe the Byzantine rite but are loyal to Rome. Those tensions have abated but have flared between the rival Orthodox churches. During his tour, Kirill rejected demands for formal independence of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate, which accounts for over one third of the Russian Orthodox Church, noting it has near total autonomy.

The “Orange Revolution” in Ukraine in 2004 and its turn toward Europe have alarmed the Russian church and the Kremlin. Speaking at a monastery near the border with European Union member Poland, Kirill took care to address Europe, warning it against repeating the Soviet experiment of living without God.

His trip took him right across Ukraine, a country of some 46 million roughly the size of France, traveling from Kiev to Donetsk, a mining hub in the east, where many Russian speakers live, to Crimea and to western Ukraine.

Perhaps the greatest Russian-Ukrainian tension centers on Crimea, where Russia’s Black Sea fleet is based at Sevastopol. There, laying a wreath at a war memorial, Kirill struck a slightly more ominous tone.

Crimea was part of Russia until the Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev bestowed it on Ukraine in 1954. When the Soviet Union crumbled, this left Russia’s Black Sea fleet in a different country. Ukraine would like it out after its lease expires in 2017; just days before Kirill’s visit, Russia acknowledged that it had violated treaty stipulations by transporting cruise missiles near the base.

At the war monument, as Russian and Ukrainian naval officials listened, Kirill spoke of the potential for escalation and commonalities that might prevent it.

“As a result of historical events about which we know and remember, it turned out that there are two fleets here, and not one,” he said. “But in these two fleets serve brothers — brothers in faith, heirs of the Holy Equal-to-the Apostles Prince Vladimir. And today it is my fervent prayer that never and under no circumstances should brothers take aim at each other, because nothing divides brothers so much as spilled blood.”