

WASHINGTON, D.C. October 16, 2009



TO: NCSJ Leadership and Interested Parties

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

In Brief: Sec. Clinton in Russia; Turkey/Armenia; OSCE; more

Dear Friend,

Secretary of State Hillary Clinton visited Moscow earlier this week to meet with Russian government officials and non-government organizations. The visit follows July's Presidential Summit and meetings during the opening of the United Nations General Assembly last month. Issues under discussion included START negotiations, non-proliferation, a review of the bilateral commission working groups and, of course, Iran.

Secretary Clinton met with President Dmitry Medvedev and with her counterpart, Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov. Both the U.S. and Russian sides expressed satisfaction with the tone and tenor of the meetings. Unfortunately, it appears that the U.S. made no progress in getting Russian support for additional sanctions against Iran. Russia continued to voice support for ongoing diplomatic initiatives, questioning whether additional sanctions would force Iran to give up its pursuit of a nuclear weapon. (In meetings with Foreign Minister Lavrov and other Russian diplomats last month, NCSJ and a number of our member agencies heard these officials say there is no evidence that Iran is capable of producing a nuclear weapon. Our respective organizations voiced strong disagreement.)

During her visit, Secretary Clinton also met with human rights and religious activists. She reiterated American support for helping democratic values and ideals to take root in Russia. In this week's update, there are a number of articles and commentary about Secretary Clinton's trip.

Turkey and Armenia have signed an historic accord to end years of hostility. The agreement must be ratified by both countries' parliaments, not an easy prospect. The update includes several stories detailing the agreement and its significance.

Earlier this week, I had the opportunity to meet the three Special Representatives from the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe tasked with combating intolerance. The three representatives, including Special Representative on Anti-Semitism Rabbi Andrew Baker of the American Jewish Committee, held discussions with U.S. government officials, diplomats and non-government organizations. NCSJ strongly supports the work of the Special Representatives, particularly in light of the increasing problems on xenophobia, extremism and anti-Semitism in Europe.

This week, Moscow Hillel students who participated in NCSJ's Student Leadership Program over the last two years are visiting Washington, D.C. They have spent the week with their U.S. counterparts from American University and The George Washington University who were with them in Moscow. The Russian students are seeing firsthand how the American political system works, visiting Capitol Hill, the State Department, and the Russian and Israeli embassies. They are also visiting the American University and the University of Maryland Hillels, meeting lay and professional leaders from several national and local Jewish institutions, and soaking up the beauty of our nation's capital. The visit was made possible by the ongoing generous support of the Jewish Federation of Greater Washington. As many of you know, the Student Leadership Program is a unique partnership between NCSJ, local Federations, Hillel and its members, and various Russian Jewish organizations. NCSJ Community Services and Cultural Affairs Director Lesley Weiss coordinates the project and will share her impressions in an upcoming letter.

I am pleased to report that a new synagogue was dedicated in Moscow last week. The World Union of Progressive Judaism and its local members opened a brand new facility in time for Simchat Torah to meet the needs of its growing community in Moscow. NCSJ Board member Anne Molloy and her husband Henry Posner III have been long time supporters of this project. I look forward to visiting the synagogue on my next trip to Moscow.

Finally, I want to congratulate Ambassador John Tefft on his new assignment as U.S. Ambassador to Ukraine. Amb. Tefft is one of our most distinguished diplomats, having just completed a tour to Ambassador to Georgia, and before that, to Lithuania. I have been fortunate to work with John for many years, including when he was the Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Russian, Ukraine, Moldova and Belarus.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Mark B. Levin". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Mark" being particularly prominent.

Mark B. Levin
Executive Director



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

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Washington, D.C. October 16, 2009

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#1a

FM Liberman to visit Kazakhstan and Austria Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs, October 11, 2009

Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs Avigdor Liberman will leave today (11 October 2009) on an official visit to Kazakhstan and Austria.

During his visit to Kazakhstan, FM Liberman will meet with President Nursultan Nazarbayev, Prime Minister Karim Massimov, Secretary of State and Foreign Minister Kanat Bekmurzayevich Saudabayev and Chairman of the Senate Kasymzhomart Tokaev and other officials.

Beginning January 2010, Kazakhstan will hold the chairmanship of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, the OCSE. From January 2011, Kazakhstan will hold the chairmanship of the OIC, the Organisation of the Islamic Conference, which groups 57 Moslem countries, most of the Moslem countries in the world. During his meetings with the senior Kazakh officials, FM Liberman will discuss means of strengthening cooperation with regard to their chairmanship of these organizations, as well as within the framework of other organizations such as the CICA – the Conference on Interaction and Confidence Building Measures in Asia that was founded by President Nazarbayev.

During his visit to Vienna, FM Liberman will meet with Austrian Foreign Minister Michael Spindelegger. The two foreign ministers will discuss bilateral and other issues.

FM Liberman stated that it is extremely important for Israel to strengthen relations with moderate Moslem states such as Kazakhstan. These countries prove that a genuine dialogue can be established and significant cooperation can be achieved between Israel and Moslem states.

FM Liberman is due to return to Israel on Thursday, 15 October.

#1b

Israel welcomes peace agreement between Turkey and Armenia Jerusalem Post, October 12, 2009

Israel on Monday announced its endorsement of the historic peace agreement signed on Saturday between Turkey and Armenia.

A statement issued by the Foreign Ministry said that the agreement "proves once again that open, brave and direct dialogue is the only way to overcome controversies and past fears."

The statement indicated Israel's hope that the landmark announcement heralded "a better future" of peace and cooperation in the Middle East.

However, the Armenian leaders who signed the normalization agreement faced vocal protests by many in Armenia's capital Yerevan and in the Armenian diaspora, who see the newly-forged agreement as capitulation to the perpetrators of the "Armenian genocide."

#1c

Schools key in combating intolerance, U.S. monitoring group told JTA, October 14, 2009

WASHINGTON -- Experts on intolerance suggested to the U.S. Helsinki Commission that schools should adopt curricula that promote tolerance for minorities, including Jews.

The three experts, chosen to represent distinct aspects of intolerance, spoke Wednesday on the issues of anti-Semitism, Islamophobia, and discrimination of Christians and members of other religions.

Rabbi Andrew Baker, the director of international affairs for the American Jewish Committee, highlighted the prevalence of anti-Semitic discourse in many countries, even those without large Jewish populations. Baker cited Spain, home to 40,000 Jews, as a nation with considerably rampant anti-Semitism.

He said, however, that educational programs put in place there that stressed tolerance in the country's secondary schools elicited positive responses from teachers and administrators. Baker encouraged other countries to adopt similar programs.

Baker, along with Adil Akhmetov of Kazakhstan and Mario Mauro of Italy, stressed that better methods of reporting hate crimes were needed to adequately assess their prevalence and to determine how authorities should address them.

To combat intolerance, Akhmetov said, nations should embrace the similarities of groups rather than their differences.

"Common values should be broadcast widely and often," he stressed.

The commission, also known as the Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe, is an independent U.S. government agency that monitors compliance with the Helsinki Final Act and other commitments mandated by the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe.

#1d

Clinton Meets Russian Rights Activists, Criticizes Violations RFE/RL, October 14, 2009

MOSCOW -- U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton has met with Russian rights activists and independent journalists in Moscow, RFE/RL's Russian Service reports.

Tatyana Lokshina, the deputy director of Human Rights Watch's office in Russia, told RFE/RL that during the meeting, Clinton praised Russian President Dmitry Medvedev's statements regarding human rights, civil society, and the rule of law.

Lokshina said Clinton made it clear that Washington is aware of the "real" situation in Russia, in particular the fact that those who freely express their opinions can become the victims of brutal attacks.

Lokshina added that, in general, Clinton was very critical of the Russian authorities when talking about the problems faced by the country's nongovernmental organizations, rights activists, and independent journalists.

Clinton arrived in Russia on October 12 and is due to visit the Russian republic of Tatarstan.

#1e

Parties at Odds With Kremlin Stage Walkout By Clifford J. Levy New York Times, October 14, 2009

MOSCOW — Opposition parties in Russia's Parliament, which have long been relatively docile allies of the Kremlin, staged an unusual walkout on Wednesday to protest what they contended was pervasive fraud in local elections.

The lawmakers insisted that they would not return to Parliament until they had a meeting with President Dmitri A. Medvedev.

"This last election was the dirtiest that there has ever been," said Gennadi A. Zyuganov, head of the Communist Party.

United Russia, a political party led by Mr. Medvedev and Russia's paramount leader, Prime Minister Vladimir V. Putin, dominates Parliament, with 315 out of 450 spots. Three other parties have the remaining seats, but they rarely use them as a platform to attack the Kremlin.

Speaking to reporters during a visit to Beijing, Mr. Putin dismissed the complaints about the election. "Those who lose are always unhappy," he said.

Mr. Medvedev's aides said he had no plans to meet immediately with the opposition.

A nonpartisan monitoring organization said the local elections on Sunday, which occurred in Moscow and many other regions, were far from fair, with numerous reports of vote-rigging and other violations. United Russia swept most of the contests — for example, taking 32 of 35 seats in the Moscow city legislature.

Such malfeasance has marred many other recent elections in Russia, but opposition parties have typically done little more than file legal protests. It remains unclear whether they will try to press their case beyond the walkout.

Two of the parties, the nationalist Liberal Democrats and the left-wing Just Russia, have close ties to the Kremlin. The third, the Communist Party, has had a more ambivalent relationship.

#2

Turkey, Armenia Sign Historic Accord

By Matthew Lee

Associated Press, October 10, 2009

ZURICH -- Turkey and Armenia signed a landmark agreement Saturday to establish diplomatic relations and open their sealed border after a century of enmity, as U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton helped the two sides clear a last-minute snag.

The contentious issue of whether the killing of up to 1.5 million Armenians during the final days of the Ottoman Empire amounted to genocide is only hinted at in the agreement.

"There were several times when I said to all of the parties involved that this is too important," Clinton said. "This has to be seen through. We have come too far. All of the work that has gone into the protocols should not be walked away from."

The Turkish and Armenian foreign ministers signed the accord in the Swiss city of Zurich after a dispute over the final statements they would make. In the end, the signing took place about three hours later than scheduled and there were no spoken statements.

Clinton and mediators from Switzerland intervened to help broker a solution, U.S. officials said on condition of anonymity, in keeping with State Department regulations. Better ties between Turkey, a regional heavyweight, and poor, landlocked Armenia have been a priority for President Barack Obama, and Clinton had flown to Switzerland to witness the signing, not help close the deal.

Clinton told reporters traveling later on the plane with her to London that both sides had problems with the other's prepared statement and that the Armenian foreign minister had to call his president several times.

She said it became important just to approve the accord and not have the sides make speeches that could be interpreted as putting legal conditions on the document. She told each country that could be done later, "but let the protocols be the statement because that was what we were there to sign."

The accord is expected to win ratification from both nations' parliaments and could lead to a reopening of their border within two months. It has been closed for 16 years.

But nationalists on both sides are still seeking to derail implementation of the deal.

U.N. Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon called the signing a "historic decision" that "constitutes a milestone toward the establishment of good neighborly relations," spokeswoman Michele Montas said in New York.

American officials said Clinton; the top U.S. diplomat for Europe, Philip Gordon; and Swiss Foreign Minister Micheline Calmy-Rey were engaged in furious high-stakes shuttle diplomacy with the Turkish and Armenian delegations to resolve the differences.

Diplomats said the Armenians were concerned about wording in the Turkish statement that was to be made after the signing ceremony at University of Zurich and had expressed those concerns "at the last minute" before the scheduled signing ceremony.

Clinton had arrived at the ceremony venue after meeting separately with the Turks and Armenians at a hotel, but abruptly departed without leaving her car when the problem arose.

She returned to the hotel where she spoke by phone from the sedan in the parking lot, three times with the Armenians and four times with the Turks. At one point in the intervention, a Swiss police car, lights and siren blazing, brought a Turkish diplomat to the hotel from the university with a new draft of his country's statement.

After nearly two hours, Clinton and Armenian Foreign Minister Edward Nalbandian met in person at the hotel and drove back to the university where negotiations continued. It was not clear if there would be a resolution.

In the end, the Turks and Armenians signed an accord establishing diplomatic ties that could reduce tensions in the troubled Caucasus region and facilitate its growing role as a corridor for energy supplies bound for the West.

The agreement faces nationalist opposition, and protests have been particularly vociferous among the Armenian diaspora.

"The success of Turkey in pressuring Armenia into accepting these humiliating, one-sided protocols proves, sadly, that genocide pays," said Ken Hachikian, chairman of the Armenian National Committee of America.

Major countries, however, expressed their support for the accord, with the foreign ministers of the United States, Russia, France and the European Union in the room to watch the much-delayed signing.

"No problem, they signed," quipped French Foreign Minister Bernard Kouchner.

In Turkey, Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan said his country was showing "goodwill" to restore ties with Armenia. But he said Turkey was keen on seeing Armenian troops withdrawn from Nagorno-Karabakh, an Armenian-occupied enclave in Azerbaijan that has been a center of regional tensions.

"We are trying to boost our relations with Armenia in a way that will cause no hard feelings for Azerbaijan," Erdogan told reporters.

Armenian President Serge Sarkisian said his country was taking "responsible decisions" in normalizing relations with Turkey, despite what he called the unhealable wounds of genocide.

The agreement calls for a panel to discuss "the historical dimension" of the killing of an estimated 1.5 million Armenians during World War I. The discussion is to include "an impartial scientific examination of the historical records and archives to define existing problems and formulate recommendations."

That clause is viewed as a concession to Turkey, which denies genocide, contending the toll is inflated and that those killed were victims of civil war.

"There is no alternative to the establishment of the relations with Turkey without any precondition," said Sarkisian. "It is the dictate of the time."

Javier Solana, the EU's foreign policy chief, thanked Turkey, which is a candidate for European Union membership.

"This is an important cooperation, no doubt, of Turkey to solve one issue that pertains to a region which is in our neighborhood," Solana told AP Television News.

Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov also was present for the ceremony in Switzerland, whose diplomats mediated six weeks of talks between Turkey and Armenia to reach the accord. The signing took place in Zurich University's Churchill room, where Winston Churchill gave a speech in 1946.

Swiss Foreign Ministry spokesman Lars Knuchel declined to comment on the contentious issue of speeches but said the important thing was that the accord was signed. He said Switzerland stood ready for further mediation, if both Armenia and Turkey request it as both sides seek to implement the accord and build on them.

A Turkish official, who was not authorized to speak and demanded anonymity, said all sides were happy to dispense with the statements and that the important thing was the signatures means the process can continue.

But Turkey's Ahmet Davutoglu appeared the far happier top envoy as he smiled broadly while posing for photographs and greeting the other foreign ministers in attendance. Armenia's Nalbandian, by contrast, only grudgingly smirked as he shook Davutoglu's hand.

Yilmaz Ates of Turkey's main opposition Republican People's Party said the country should avoid any concessions.

"If Armenia wants to repair relations ... then it should end occupation of Nagorno-Karabakh. That's it," Ates said Saturday.

About 10,000 protesters rallied Friday in Armenia's capital to oppose the signing, and a tour of Armenian communities by Sarkisian sparked protests in Lebanon and France, with demonstrators in Paris shouting "Traitor!"

On the Nagorno-Karabakh issue, Turks have close cultural and linguistic ties with Azerbaijan, which is pressing Turkey for help in recovering its land. Turkey shut its border with Armenia to protest the Armenian invasion of Nagorno-Karabakh in 1993.

Turkey wants Armenia to withdraw some troops from the enclave area to show goodwill and speed the opening of their joint border, but Armenia has yet to agree, said Omer Taspinar, Turkey project director at the Brookings Institution in Washington.

"We may end up in a kind of awkward situation where there are diplomatic relations, but the border is still closed," Taspinar said.

Associated Press Writers Alexander G. Higgins and Bradley S. Klapper in Zurich, Avet Demourian in Yerevan, Armenia, and Christopher Torchia in Istanbul contributed to this report.

#3

Azerbaijan slams Armenia-Turkey deal

AFP, October 11, 2009

BAKU — Azerbaijan on Sunday slammed its ally Turkey for agreeing to normalise ties with Armenia and warned that the opening of the Armenian-Turkish border could cause instability in the volatile South Caucasus.

"The normalisation of relations between Turkey and Armenia before the withdrawal of Armenian forces from occupied Azerbaijani territory is in direct contradiction with the interests of Azerbaijan and casts a shadow over the spirit of brotherly relations between Azerbaijan and Turkey, built on deep historical roots," the Azerbaijani foreign ministry said in a statement.

"Azerbaijan believes that the unilateral opening of the Turkish-Armenian border calls into question the architecture of peace and stability in the region," it added.

Armenian Foreign Minister Eduard Nalbandian and his Turkish counterpart Ahmet Davutoglu on Saturday signed landmark pacts to normalise their two countries' relations and open their shared border.

The deals, which must still be ratified by the two countries' parliaments, are a first step to reconciliation after nearly a century of bitterness over World War I-era massacres of Armenians under Ottoman rule.

Azerbaijan has strongly objected to Turkey normalising ties with Armenia and opening the border before the resolution of Baku's conflict with Armenia over the disputed Nagorny Karabakh region.

Backed by Yerevan, ethnic Armenian separatists seized control of Nagorny Karabakh and seven surrounding districts from Azerbaijan in the early 1990s, in a war that claimed an estimated 30,000 lives.

Turkey closed its border with Armenia in 1993 in solidarity with Azerbaijan over the conflict.

Armenia has rejected any linkage between the conflict and its reconciliation efforts with Turkey.

Armenia and Azerbaijan have cut direct economic and transport links and failed to negotiate a settlement on the status of Nagorny Karabakh despite years of talks.

Armenian and Azerbaijani forces are spread across a ceasefire line in and around Nagorny Karabakh, often facing each other at close range, and shootings are common.

#4

Blood Brothers No More?

By Ariel Cohen

New York Times, October 9, 2009

WASHINGTON – Is President Dmitri Medvedev of Russia trying to come out from under the shadow of his long-time political mentor and former boss Prime Minister Vladimir Putin? So it would seem.

At a meeting last month with the Valdai Club of Russia experts at his suburban residence in Novo-Ogarevo, Putin – who had ceded the presidency to Medvedev and is now rumored to be planning to take it back – insisted that there had been no competition with Medvedev for the office and that there would be none when the next election is held in 2012.

“We will sit down and have a discussion,” he said. “We are people of the same blood.”

Putin may have been quoting from Rudyard Kipling’s “Jungle Book,” in which the hero convinces the jungle animals not to fight by appealing to their common blood.

A few days later, however, Medvedev didn’t sound enthusiastic about giving up the 2012 presidential prospects: “Maybe I will have to go and take a blood test to find out whether we do have the same blood type,” he deadpanned.

Just a few days before the Valdai meeting, Medvedev had published a manifesto, “Forward, Russia!” It read like an electoral platform for a second presidential term and included the first public disagreements with Putin.

The president wrote that Russia had been on the wrong path for the past eight years. The article diagnosed severe ills in Russia’s society and economy, including corruption, dependence on oil and gas exports, lack of economic innovation, lousy law enforcement and judicial and a demographic decline.

Medvedev disagreed with Putin on Russia’s approach to the much-delayed World Trade Organization membership; sanctions on Iran (Medvedev may support them; Putin opposes them); and the secrecy surrounding Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu’s visit to Moscow, apparently to discuss Iran (Medvedev would make it public).

The manifesto sounded like a liberal reformer’s political platform. (Someone quipped that Medvedev took his talking points from Vice President Joe Biden, who had blasted Russia’s social conditions at a press interview last summer.)

Some symbolic rifts have also surfaced. How one regards past reformers is a litmus test of political leanings in Russia. Medvedev has repeatedly criticized the reformer-czar Peter the Great as too heavy-handed, whereas Putin in the past has glorified the brutal autocrat, and has even had some good things to say about Stalin ("an efficient political manager who left Russia bigger than he received it").

Medvedev has also signaled his differences with Putin by giving interviews to liberal media, such as Novaya Gazeta (where the slain Anna Politkovskaya used to work) or Gazeta.ru, while Putin has preferred call-in marathons on the state-run TV channel. Medvedev also packed the Public Chamber, an advisory body created in 2005 to provide oversight of the government and legislature, with liberals.

The chamber, however, has no teeth. Nor do Medvedev's apparent supporters, most of them moderate economic reformers and lawyers. And he has been too close over the years to Putin to be fully trusted by committed democrats, who accuse him, for example, of failure to release Mikhail Khodorkovsky, the jailed founder of Yukos oil company. Khodorkovsky is currently facing a second trial on what many believe are trumped-up charges.

On the other side, Medvedev's opponents in an open election would include the rich and powerful oil lobby, some of the oligarchs, and the "siloviki" – the powerful law-enforcement and secret service heads who are close to Putin, and who like things just the way they are.

Reforms in Russia have traditionally succeeded only when Russia was militarily defeated, as in the Crimean War (1854-1855) or in Afghanistan (1979-1989). Reforms failed or were only partially successful when the reformers (Czar Pavel I, Nikita Khrushchev, Mikhail Gorbachev, Boris Yeltsin) were perceived as weak. For now, Medvedev is weak.

With all this in mind, Moscow political observers facetiously ask whether Medvedev should have focused his manifesto not on demographic decline, rampant alcoholism and an inefficient economy, but on "enemies of Russia" – external and internal. It worked for his predecessors. But this is not Medvedev's style.

Still, it is possible that reforms in Russia can succeed without fear. But they clearly cannot succeed without improving relations with the West. Russia needs tens of billions of dollars of investment and modern management skills and technology to catch up.

And they are sure to wither without clearly articulated support from the political elites and the broad public. Medvedev knows that. So do his political rivals, and that, hopefully, will shape their contest in the 2012 race, rather than blood.

Ariel Cohen is senior research fellow at the Davis Institute for International Studies at The Heritage Foundation.

#5

CIS has lost its relevance — Yushchenko RIA Novosti, October 11, 2009

MOSCOW -- Ukrainian President Viktor Yushchenko said the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) had lost its relevance, the presidential press service reported.

The two-day summit of the post-Soviet bloc, which started on Friday in Moldova's capital, Chisinau, was sparsely attended, with the presidents of the Central Asian states of Kazakhstan, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan not making the trip to Chisinau.

"I believe that the CIS as a format has lost its relevance a long time ago," Yushchenko told reporters after the summit.

However, he said CIS summits still give leaders of the member countries an opportunity to meet and discuss a number of problems.

The participants signed 22 agreements during the summit, in particular, on anti-crisis measures, humanitarian and security integration and optimization of CIS activities.

Russian President Dmitry Medvedev met Moldovan, Azerbaijain and Armenian leaders at the smmit but cited a tight schedule as a reason for being unable to hold talks with his Ukrainian counterpart.

Moldova's acting President and parliament speaker Mihai Gimpu also said on Saturday that the CIS had run its course.

"The CIS is like an old woman who is waiting for her death," he said.

But he said Moldova benefited from "its participation in CIS economic schemes," adding that financial aid from CIS donor states was vital.

The Russian Foreign Ministry announced on Thursday that the next CIS summit will take place in Moscow in December 2010.

The former Soviet states of Azerbaijan, Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Moldova, Russia, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan and Ukraine are members of the CIS. Georgia recently withdrew from the organization.

#6

Moldova hands over CIS presidency to Russia RIA Novosti, October 9, 2009

CHISINAU -- Moldova handed over its presidency of the Commonwealth of Independent States to Russia on Friday during the CIS summit in Chisinau.

The Russian Foreign Ministry announced on Thursday that the next CIS summit will take place in Moscow in December 2010.

This two-day summit in Moldova's capital was sparsely attended, with the presidents of the Central Asian states of Kazakhstan, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan not making the trip to Chisinau.

Russian President Dmitry Medvedev, who flew in for the summit on Friday, met with the presidents of Moldova, Azerbaijan and Armenia but cited a tight schedule as a reason for being unable to hold talks with his Ukrainian counterpart, Viktor Yushchenko.

"We have not spoken as I have my own work schedule and I am going home now," Medvedev told journalists after the summit.

The former Soviet states of Azerbaijan, Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Moldova, Russia, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan and Ukraine are members of the CIS. Georgia recently withdrew from the organization.

At a presentation of its vision for next year's CIS presidency, Moscow said its priority would be the promotion of research and innovation cooperation in the CIS.

#7

Where Does Russia Want To Take The CIS? By Irina Severin RFE/RL, October 13, 2009

The main intrigue surrounding the summit of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) in Chisinau last week was whether Russian President Dmitry Medvedev would attend.

The Kremlin only confirmed his participation in the October 9 event on October 5. The delay only intensified speculation that even the Kremlin has come to the conclusion that the CIS is a still-born organization.

The very existence of the CIS is a major part of Russia's pretence that it is a superpower locked in competition with the United States. But is Russia really leading the bloc? And, if so, where?

Observers were also speculating intensely about the summit's agenda. Initial press statements indicated the leaders would discuss measures for coping with the economic crisis. But the Russian Foreign Ministry's October 5 statement ignored this topic and listed only routine issues including "border-security cooperation, migration policy, and the humanitarian sphere."

'Great Patriotic War'

As it turned out, the main objective of the summit was pronounced the signing of a document obliging all CIS heads of state to participate in an informal summit in May 2010 to mark the 65th anniversary of the Soviet Union's victory in World War II and proclaiming 2010 to be "the year of CIS veterans of the Great Patriotic War" with the slogan "We Won Together."

It is worth noting that the CIS had previously planned to declare 2010 "the year of science and innovation in the CIS," but Russia pushed hard for looking backward rather than ahead by focusing on the war.

In combination with Moscow's active revival of the cult of Soviet dictator Josef Stalin, it would appear that Russia is pushing Soviet nostalgia/patriotism as a quasi-official ideology for the CIS, perhaps in a bid to save the floundering organization. CIS Executive Secretary Aleksandr Lebedev announced the war-anniversary commemorations would take place throughout the bloc in April and May 2010 and that all CIS countries would have to contribute to financing them.

Of course, this approach is highly controversial, since some parts of the CIS perceive the postwar period as an occupation of their lands by the Soviet Union and a national tragedy. Moscow's efforts to impose a Russian-centered view of recent history on Russia's neighbors is widely viewed as a brutal affront.

Moldova, which holds the organization's rotating presidency this year, fought hard to at least change the wording "Great Patriotic War" to "World War II," but failed -- under intense Russian diplomatic pressure. The final resolution raised eyebrows in Chisinau, but the new Moldovan government evidently opted to focus on fulfilling the obligations made by the previous government and on serving as a good host for the summit.

But the Russian side surely noticed that acting Moldovan President Mihai Ghimpu, who participated in the general talks and the "narrow-format" meeting, did not sign the final documents. He delegated this "honorable obligation" to a deputy prime minister.

Russia Throws Its Weight Around

For his part, Medvedev seemed pleased with his victory, noting wryly, "Not everybody was satisfied with some of the wording, but that's life...."

Also on October 5, Russia paved the way for the summit -- which originally was supposed to be an anticrisis summit -- with some tough announcements for Belarus and Ukraine. Deputy Prime Minister and Finance Minister Aleksei Kudrin told RIA Novosti that Belarus will not get the last, \$500 million tranche of a \$2 billion loan and that Ukraine would not be given the \$5 billion credit that Kyiv had been seeking.

During the narrow-format talks, Ukrainian President Viktor Yushchenko and Belarusian President Alyaksandr Lukashenka were adamant in their efforts to redirect the discussion to the anticrisis measures. They complained that trade barriers with Russia were increasing rather than easing.

Russia deflected this talk and instead offered CIS members access to a new \$7.5 billion Eurasian Economic Community fund (of which, Russia contributed \$5 billion). Kudrin also said that Moscow supports conducting business with CIS countries in "national currencies," which was seen as a bid to install the Russian ruble as a regional currency and to push out the dollar. Doing so would increase the dependence of CIS countries on Moscow considerably.

The unanswered questions from the Chisinau summit are: Why does Moscow hold onto the past and its dubious old symbols with an apparent death grip? Is it because the Kremlin lacks a palatable vision for the future or even that it lacks confidence in its ability to really lead the CIS forward?

And is this lack of vision a result of Russia's undemocratic, closed political system? Unable to serve as an attractive example, is Moscow forced to adopt a pushy, even bullying, posture? Does it lack the confidence to take the views of other CIS members into account?

These questions are hanging in the air as Moldova has handed over the CIS presidency to Moscow for 2010 -- "the year of CIS veterans of the Great Patriotic War." The next official CIS summit will be held in Moscow in December 2010.

Irina Severin is a political analyst and journalist based in Chisinau.

#8

Pro-Kremlin party sweeps Moscow elections

By Lynn Berry

AP, October 12, 2009

MOSCOW -- The pro-Kremlin party dominated an election for Moscow city council as well as other local elections across Russia, results released Monday showed.

With 99 percent of the Moscow vote counted, United Russia won 66 percent and the Communist Party 13 percent. They were the only two parties to pass the 7 percent threshold to win seats on the city council.

Opposition candidates claim they were hindered from campaigning for Sunday's elections and some were denied places on the ballot.

The liberal Yabloko party fell short of the threshold, with less than 5 percent, and will no longer be represented on the council, where it previously provided the only opposition to Moscow's powerful mayor, Yuri Luzhkov.

The Communists claimed there were mass electoral violations during the voting, particularly in Moscow.

More than 7,000 local elections - for mayors, district leaders, regional and local legislatures - were held in 75 of Russia's 83 regions, including in Chechnya and other republics in the North Caucasus where there has been an upsurge in violence.

Russian election commission head Vladimir Churov said the elections were held in accordance with the law. He acknowledged problems in the city of Derbent in the Dagestan region, where one third of the 36 polling places did not open, but he said they were resolved by the end of the day.

The newspaper Kommersant reported Monday that the incumbent Kremlin-backed mayor, Felix Kaziakhmedov, ordered police officers to block access to polling stations. Voters were also forced to give their passports to the officers, who then cast their ballots for Kaziakhmedov, the paper reported.

Kaziakhmedov won the election with 68 percent of the vote, Dagestani election official Benyamin Shartilov said. More than 55 percent of registered voters cast their ballots at 23 polling stations, he said.

His rival, former chief prosecutor Imam Yaraliyev, told Kommersant that thousands of people were prevented from voting.

In the southern Volgograd region, both candidates of African descent running for head of a rural district finished back in the pack.

Joaquim Crima, a Guinea-Bissau native, who attracted wide attention as "Russia's Obama," was joined late in the race by Filipp Kondratyev, the son of a Ghanaian father and a Russian mother. Crima, who became something of a local celebrity, accused the local authorities of putting forward a second black candidate to steal some of his votes.

With votes still being counted, Crima was running fourth out of seven candidates, with Kondratyev in last place. The United Russia candidate was leading, with the incumbent district head in second.

Associated Press Writer Arsen Mollayev in Dagestan contributed to this report.

#9

Debate rages over whether Ukraine presidential hopeful is Jewish

By Lily Galili

Haaretz, October 11, 2009

Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad apparently is not Jewish, but there's a chance the candidate for the presidency in Ukraine elections in January 2010, Arseny Petrovich Yatsenyuk, is a Jew after all. While he insists he isn't, he daily reads and hears that he is a Jew - with rivals and Jewish organizations making political hay from the situation.

It seems like blatant political manipulation. In a country with an anti-Semitic instinct like Ukraine, a vaguely Jewish grandmother does wonders for electoral rivals. Sometimes Jewishness is used as an insult, sometimes people actually intend to flatter him with it, sometimes they scold him for concealing it. People even say he is a direct descendant of a family who wrote the Talmud, no less. Ukraine's chief rabbi, Yaakov Dov Bleich, says Yatsenyuk is a very nice guy and a worthy candidate for the presidency, but definitely not a Jew. Meanwhile, a pair of Jewish researchers in Ukraine have just named him one of the 50 most important Jews in the country. A great honor or a great deception?

How do they know Yatsenyuk is Jewish? Because that's what the media say. And how do the media know? Because everyone says so.

Arseny Petrovich Yatsenyuk has enjoyed a fine career in his 35 years - chairman of his country's central bank, economics minister, foreign minister and speaker of the parliament. He announced in April he would run for the presidency at the head of the Front for Change. He is running against veteran political lions such as Viktor Yanukovich and Prime Minister Yulia Tymoshenko.

Tymoshenko also received a dose of Jewishness in the campaign; the nationalist right labeled her "the Jewish woman with the braid." Not a flattering nickname. While rumors about Tymoshenko's Jewishness died down, those regarding Yatsenyuk are multiplying. Commentators in Ukraine see that as proof of their accuracy.

When Yatsenyuk became a candidate to be foreign minister, rival parties began to take an interest in his origins. He pulled out his birth certificate and that of his mother, which contain no hint of any connection between him and Judaism. When, months later, he was elected speaker of the parliament, his hypothetical Jewishness became a multipurpose weapon.

In a parliamentary debate a member of a rival party wondered whether a Jew could be the speaker of Ukraine's parliament. A faction colleague, who looked upset, apologized for the very question and said she really doesn't care that Arseny Petrovich is a Jew. Since then, his Jewishness has ostensibly become an established fact, mostly yielding verbal unpleasantness, but here, a physical expression.

The most serious incident occurred in the city of Uzhgorod (formerly Ungvar), known as the Western gate of Ukraine. In August, Mayor Sergey Ratushnyak passed by a tent where young activists working for Yatsenyuk were distributing PR material. The mayor, from a rival party, was quite unenthusiastic about that. A slim, young activist claims the mayor attacked her; Ratushnyak, a large man, complains that she attacked him. The result was a bruised and beaten girl from an encounter with an elected official who was required to provide an explanation.

In interviews, Ratushnyak claimed the Jew Yatsenyuk was serving the interests of thieves who dominate Ukraine, and was using money from criminal activities to reach the presidency. On another occasion the mayor denied that Russian Chief Rabbi Berel Lazar had refused to accept a medal from him. "The only thing that I'm willing to give him is a one-way ticket," the mayor was quoted as replying. Ratushnyak was forced to resign, but announced he would run in future for the job of president of Ukraine.

About three weeks ago Yuri Dubinsky, wearing a black skullcap, appeared on TV, introducing himself as the chairman of the Jewish community of Kharkov. Apparently this is a matter of controversy, but Dubinsky declared he was speaking not only in the name of all the Jews of Kharkov, and not just in the name of all the Jews of Ukraine, but for the entire Jewish people. He does not belong to any party, he said, but will support Yatsenyuk because of his Jewish origin.

In the name of the Jewish people he demanded the candidate not be ashamed and declare himself a proud Jew. Not only is his mother a scion of the ancient family whose members "wrote the Talmud," but his wife, Tereza, is the scion of the glorious Gur dynasty, which includes Israel's foreign minister. Well, there were stormy reactions.

A few days later Yatsenyuk participated in a televised election debate with Nestor Shufrich, a minister in Yanukovich's government. Yatsenyuk wanted to discuss the situation in Ukraine and its complex relationship with Russia. Shufrich pulled out a letter from Chabad members in Ukraine, expressing recognition of Yatsenyuk's Judaism and regretting that he is concealing his origins.

Followers of the Lubavitcher Rebbe also published a long letter condemning Yatsenyuk for denying his Jewishness. It drew a reaction from the Federation of Jewish Communities of Ukraine (which officially represents Chabad as well). The federation said the letter in the name of the Lubavitcher community is nothing but a provocation and added: "We are opposed to any statement ostensibly made in the name of the Jewish communities."

Meanwhile, plans for a hotel on the site of Babi Yar have come up and been shelved. Yatsenyuk opposed the idea in a response to Ha'aretz before it was removed from the agenda. And Oleg Tyagnybok, presidential candidate of the nationalist Freedom party is shouting in front of the TV cameras that more than anything else, the younger generation in Ukraine should fear the Russian-Jewish mafia running the homeland. Were it not so serious, it could have been a very funny story.

#10

Why Russia is not afraid of an Iranian bomb

By Boris Morozov

Jerusalem Post, October 12, 2009

US President Barack Obama's recent decision to cancel the deployment of an anti-missile defense (AMD) system in Eastern Europe was met with approval by the Russian authorities. In exchange, speaking at the recent G-20 summit in Pittsburgh last month, Russian President Dmitry Medvedev changed his position regarding sanctions against Iran.

While Russia had, until recently, vetoed UN Security Council resolutions against the Iranian nuclear program, Medvedev suddenly hardened his rhetoric, mentioning sanctions as a possible course of action. Either way, it is quite clear that Russia, which borders Iran on the Caspian Sea, does not fear the emergence of its new nuclear neighbor and is even actively aiding the construction of the nuclear station in Iran. Why? The reasons are manifold.

RUSSIA HAS traditionally maintained good sources of information within Iran. Its specialists, who are closely involved in the construction of the nuclear site, probably have information that is unknown to the rest of the world. For example, these sources may indicate that Iran is still rather far from creating the bomb, or perhaps they believe they can control the process.

Similarly, Russia's strategic and tactical interests cannot be ignored. Russia is probably unhappy with nuclear weapons being positioned so close to its own territory, yet seems sure that these weapons won't pose a threat to its sovereignty. This is because Russia stands to benefit greatly from Iran's opposition vis-a-vis the United States and the United Nations Security Council, for two reasons: First, Iran is primarily a threat to Israel, Saudi Arabia and Turkey. This will increase regional tensions and strengthen Russia's position there. Good relations with Iran could position Russia as a mediator between these countries and the Islamic republic. For example, the recent cancellation of the deal to sell Iran anti-aircraft complexes was used to leverage Russia-Israel relations.

Second, Russia can use its relations with Iran as a bargaining chip in opposing the United States. The latest events demonstrate how, by changing its position toward sanctions, Russia achieved its goal: canceling the AMD program, despite its having been approved by the previous US administration.

Further, Russia isn't willing to forgo its economic relations with Iran. It benefits from the construction of a nuclear power station as it competes for supplying the necessary raw materials and supplies Iran with different types of weapons (including anti-aircraft), not to mention regular trade. This is probably one of the main reasons Russia is interested in preserving good relations with Iran.

Another factor worth mentioning is the issue of religion. Iran traditionally opposes radical Salafi Sunni Islamic movements such as that practiced by the Taliban and the Wahabiyya, which have become a serious threat in Russia's northern Caucasus area, especially Dagestan. These common enemies unite Russia and Iran.

Finally, Russia and Iran are both significant suppliers of oil to the world market. Every increase of political tension in the region influences oil prices, from which Russia can only gain. This is especially true during times of military conflict.

The fact of the matter remains that Russia does not believe in sanctions. For these reasons, Moscow benefits more than suffers from today's status quo. This set of Russian national interests further complicates the Iranian nuclear crisis - and illustrates that only a great level of creative diplomacy might resolve it.

The writer is an associate fellow at the Adelson Institute for Strategic Studies and a research fellow in the Cummings Center for Russian and East European Studies at Tel Aviv University.

#11
Russia Resists U.S. Position on Sanctions for Iran
By Mark Landler
New York Times, October 13, 2009

MOSCOW — Threatening Iran with harsh new sanctions to advance negotiations over its nuclear program would be “counterproductive,” Russia’s foreign minister said Tuesday, throwing cold water on the Obama administration’s hopes that Russia had been persuaded to cooperate with its effort to intensify the global pressure on Tehran.

The minister, Sergey V. Lavrov, said after meeting with Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton here that diplomacy should be given a chance to work, particularly after a meeting in Geneva this month in which the Iranian government said it would allow United Nations inspectors to visit a clandestine nuclear enrichment facility near the holy city of Qum.

“At the current stage, all forces should be thrown at supporting the negotiating process,” he said. “Threats, sanctions, and threats of pressure in the current situation, we are convinced, would be counterproductive.”

While Mr. Lavrov’s skepticism about sanctions is not new, his comments came just three weeks after President Obama canceled an antimissile defense system in Eastern Europe that Russia had strongly objected to, raising hopes of cooperation on Iran. Two weeks ago, President Dmitri A. Medvedev told President Obama that “in some cases, sanctions are inevitable.” Prime Minister Vladimir V. Putin, who was in China on a trade mission Tuesday and missed Mrs. Clinton, has spoken out against using punitive measures against Tehran.

At a minimum, the Russian government does not seem ready to contemplate additional sanctions as long as Iran and the West are still in active negotiations over its nuclear program.

The next milestone in that process is Sunday, when Iran and officials of the International Atomic Energy Agency are to meet to discuss the details of a plan to ship a majority of Iran’s stockpile of lightly-enriched uranium out of the country to be enriched in Russia to a higher grade.

Though Mrs. Clinton stressed the importance of diplomacy, too, she reiterated the administration’s view that it must be backed up by a credible threat of sanctions to keep the Iranians from dragging their feet.

“In the absence of any significant progress, we will be seeking to rally international opinion behind additional sanctions,” she said at a joint news conference with Mr. Lavrov.

Mrs. Clinton insisted the United States did not make any specific requests of Russia at the meeting. But a day earlier, a senior official traveling with her said the United States would be looking for “specific forms of pressure” that Russia would be prepared to back.

After the meeting, a senior State Department official said, “They said they were not ready in this context to talk specifically about what steps they were ready to take,” preferring to do so at the United Nations.

#12

**White House Official: Should Help Russian, U.S., Civil Societies Build Contacts
Interfax, October 13, 2009**

MOSCOW - A senior security assistant to U.S. President Barack Obama said he saw "facilitating contacts between American and Russian civil society leaders" as the main task of a U.S.-Russian working group on civil society issues.

Michael McFaul, who was speaking in an interview with Interfax on Monday, co-chairs the group, which is part of the Russian-American presidential commission set up under an agreement reached at the Russian-U.S. summit in Moscow in July.

The Russian co-chair is Vladislav Surkov, first deputy chief of the presidential staff.

McFaul, who is special assistant to the president for national security affairs and senior director of Russian and Eurasian affairs at the U.S. National Security Council, said the group's objectives reflect "a new idea," McFaul said.

"Rather than us telling the Russian government how to act and giving money to NGOs, and we'll continue to do those things, but a new idea is: let's put our societies together. And let the governments get out of the way of those connections, and so I see my job with Mr. Surkov is to facilitate that kind of activity. But not to dictate it, not to control it. That we want to get out of the way," he said.

Asked whether the United States would keep giving financial support to Russian civil society, McFaul answered in the affirmative. He said the sum the U.S. government has allocated for democratic development in Russia in 2009 was the same as the sum provided in 2008.

McFaul also said the U.S. speaks openly about violations of democratic principles and human rights. He mentioned that U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, who is visiting Russia currently, was due to have met with Russian civil society leaders on Tuesday.

McFaul said he was due to meet with Russian civil society activists on Monday evening and that he planned to meet with civil society leaders and opposition politicians on Tuesday as well. He said he had been friends with some of them for more than 30 years.

In comments on Monday's meeting of the working group, McFaul said the "first and most important issue was to try to figure out who are going to be members of this group."

"It is our view, and I think Mr. Surkov agreed that we're going to exchange papers on this, that we want the official working group to be government-to-government but that we would then interact with nongovernmental actors and meet with nongovernmental groups in the course of our interactions in this group. It is not going to be a mixed nongovernment-and-government group," McFaul said.

"That's the principle that we have for all the working groups in the bilateral commission, that they are government-to-government. So even like the business dialogue and the economics ones, those are all government-to-government but then in parallel we want to encourage nongovernmental groups to meet. Not unlike what happened in July, by the way, when President Obama was here in Moscow," McFaul said.

"In terms of topics and dates, I think we discussed a wide range of issues that we want to have discussed, I think we have some things we want to talk about, the Russian government have things they want to talk about. The key to making it successful will be to talk about topics that are (of) mutual interest," he said.

"We had a good discussion, very fruitful, very open," McFaul said. "I don't personally know Mr. Surkov well, I know lots of his colleagues very well, but we had a very free-flowing dialogue about difficult things and not difficult things, and that makes me optimistic about the future."

McFaul also said it had been the American idea that the group should be a governmental body.

"We think it's very important to draw the line between state functions and nongovernmental functions. We think it's improper for the government to decide who is a real nongovernmental leader and who is not. And that line in my country is a very important line, that we don't want the White House saying, You are a legitimate NGO leader and you are an illegitimate leader," he said.

"That would cause me personally a lot of problems back home because not everybody can be on this commission - right? - if you allowed that. Moreover, there's another reason. It seems like Mr. Surkov might have the same problem. I don't want to speak for him, but he might have the same problem, right? You got to be in, and you don't, and maybe that's a political decision," McFaul said.

He said the working group would deal with many sensitive issues, including corruption.

McFaul said the U.S. had developed new ways of fighting corruption. He argued it would be useful for Russia to find out about them.

McFaul said the group's membership might be definitively approved next week.

The group would start full-scale activities by the end of 2009, he said.

#13

U.S. Insists On Presence Of International Observers In Abkhazia, S.Ossetia Interfax, October 13, 2009

MOSCOW - The question of Georgian borders is currently the most poignant issue in the U.S.-Russian relations, that requires the presence of international observers in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, said U.S. Presidential Advisor on Russia and Eurasia Michael McFaul.

"I would say one of the most fundamental disagreements we have with the Russian government today is over the borders of the country of Georgia," McFaul said in an interview with Interfax when asked about the biggest problem in the U.S.-Russian relations at the moment.

"We just have a fundamental disagreement there. I don't see how we are going to resolve that anytime soon," McFaul said.

"The challenge therefore is to not allow that disagreement to escalate into tensions in the Caucasus again, and that I think this is a very difficult challenge," he said.

"It is our view as a government that it would be confidence-building to have more international monitors on the other side of the border in the region of Abkhazia and in the region of South Ossetia, which I consider, and we consider to be part of Georgia," the U.S. official said.

When asked whether the U.S. plans to continue to demand the presence of international observers in South Ossetia and Abkhazia, the presidential advisor said: "Every time we have had a senior level meeting, these issues come up."

"We have not succeeded in that, so I would say that is a central challenge," said the high-ranking White House official.

"I think the European monitors that are there are also doing a very good job, and I think the communication between the American government and the Russian government is allowing us to diffuse (tensions)," he said.

He cited as an example of such cooperation the incident that occurred in Zurich last Saturday when the Armenian and Turkish officials signed documents on resuming bilateral relations.

"Your foreign minister played a crucial role in making that happen and worked very closely with Secretary Clinton to make that happen," he said. This is an example of how the reset helps us "work together to solve this third-area problem," McFaul said.

#14

In The Killing Fields Of Skalat

By Susan J. Gordon

New York Jewish Week, October 13, 2009

‘We can’t go there,’ said my guide, as we sat in his van by an open field. It was late fall in Ukraine, and the air was piercingly raw. ‘The ground is too muddy to drive across.’

‘Can’t we walk?’ I asked.

‘No, I’m sorry. We would sink if we tried.’

We were on the outskirts of Skalat, one of my ancestral towns. In the distance, amid clumps of gray snow and the stubbled remains of harvested crops, was the memorial and site of the ‘Wailing Graves,’ where more than 750 Jews were murdered in April 1943.

The butchery went on all day. That night, a gasping 17-year-old girl named Rebeka was pulled from the blood-soaked abyss by another survivor, according to the memoir of a Skalat survivor named Lucy Baras. In later years, Rebeka would recall that three square-shaped pits had been dug weeks before by Jews who thought the trenches were for storing phosphates for spring planting, or gasoline for the war effort. Instead, on a sunny day shortly before Passover, most of the last Jews of Skalat had been force-marched or carted to the edges of the pits and shot, one by one, by Nazi soldiers.

At first, the victims were gunned down in groups of four, then groups of 10. Pistols were replaced by machine guns to speed up the process, and children were hurled alive into the pits. Finally, dirt was shoveled over the ‘heaving’ graves by other Jews, who then were shot, too.

Stories about the shootings of 1.5 million Jews in Ukraine between 1941-1944 had been suppressed by the Soviets for decades. But in 2002, nagging curiosity about his French grandfather’s incarceration in Rawa-Ruska, a German concentration camp in western Ukraine, compelled Catholic priest Patrick Desbois to search for and identify what have become, so far, 850 mass grave sites. Within two years, he and a small crew of photographers and interpreters had embarked on a mission with funding from organizations including Yad Vashem, the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum, and Yahad in Unum (which means ‘together’ in Hebrew and Latin), which Desbois established to search for the graves. So far, almost 1,000 aged Ukrainian witnesses have given testimony to atrocities they’ve remembered since childhood.

‘You’re looking to know about the shootings of the Jews?’ asked an old woman. ‘I was there.’ She and her neighbors had never spoken out before, even though their houses were barely a stone’s throw from the once-open pits.

Desbois has been recounting his experiences throughout the U.S. and Europe, and in his recent book, ‘The Holocaust by Bullets.’ I, myself, sensed the power of his dedication when I met and heard him speak at the Museum of Jewish Heritage here. In August, he was the keynote speaker at the International Conference on Jewish Genealogy in Philadelphia.

‘These people want absolutely to speak before they die,’ says Desbois. ‘They want to say the truth.’

In town after town, he asked them simple, straightforward questions: ‘Do you remember when the Germans came here?’ ‘Did you see this for yourself?’ ‘How many shootings did you see?’ ‘Where are the corpses?’ ‘Who killed them?’ ‘Where are the graves?’

Sometimes, the old Ukrainians said, they had watched furtively from their family’s attic windows as neighbors and childhood friends were hauled away at gunpoint and shot in nearby fields. Other times, the Nazis ‘requisitioned’ Ukrainian children to climb trees and toss down human body parts blown up with explosives, or serve food to the shooters at meal tables set beside open graves. In return, the soldiers gave them sweets and candies while they were shooting.

But images of bare-footed “requisitioned” girls stomping on bodies in the pits were almost beyond belief or understanding. Like winemakers crushing grapes in an upside-down, Bizarro world (which it was), they pushed down corpses with their feet so more bodies could be piled on top. Everyone didn’t die immediately, and “the ground moved for days.”

At first, what provoked Desbois were the same kinds of questions that egg on people who have grown up wondering about secrets in their families’ histories. “Rawa-Ruska echoed like a painful family mystery,” he explains. I know that kind of feeling well. It’s when our personal stories touch on historical events that we zero in to uncover the details. As Jews, we connect with every Holocaust story because every Jew lost was part of our family. At times, we can almost hear their words.

“Farewell life!” cried a doomed Jewish boy, making a faint gesture to Anna, his Ukrainian schoolmate. Within moments, he was shot to death. Sixty-one years later, Anna tearfully described that horrific day; it was the first time anyone had ever asked her about it.

In spring 1944, after the Soviets drove the Germans out of Skalat, several dozen survivors emerged from nearby forests or other hiding places, and observed Passover on April 7. That July, they circled the mass graves three times and asked forgiveness for surviving when so many had perished. Those with the gut-wrenching strength to relive their ordeals wrote down everything they remembered in memoirs and a Yizkor book.

Susan J. Gordon is a frequent contributor to the Back of the Book.

#15

Kasyanov: Russian Opposition Must Stand Up And Be Counted RFE/RL, October 13, 2009

Mikhail Kasyanov was finance minister under former Russian President Boris Yeltsin, and later prime minister under then-President Vladimir Putin until 2004. After his dismissal, he eventually went into opposition.

Kasyanov has now published a book, “Without Putin,” on that transition, in which he fiercely criticizes Putin. He discussed the book with RFE/RL Russian Service correspondent Mikhail Sokolov.

RFE/RL: Politicians usually write their memoirs at the end of their careers. Have you decided to withdraw from active politics?

Mikhail Kasyanov: You are correct to say that politicians write memoirs when they are winding up their activity, but you are wrong that this is what I have done.

This book is not a memoir. Rather, it is a political dialogue, a discussion of various events that took place in the recent past and are continuing now. It is a discussion between myself and Yevgeny Kiselyov, in a two-sided format. We started in the period of 1995-96 and walked up to the present day.

So I am certain that it will be interesting to many people who are following what is going on in the country and who are not indifferent to the matter of what kind of country we are living in and what kind of country our children will live in. So I think that people will find something interesting for themselves in our ruminations.

RFE/RL: And what about the title? It seems to be about the future – “Without Putin.”

Kasyanov: The book is called “Without Putin” and this means that we understand that the Russian Federation lived without Putin and created a democratic society. And then the Russian Federation -- that is, you and I -- lived together with Putin (I worked with him for five years) and now we don’t have such a society. And very soon, I am sure, the country will once again live without Putin. So the title is meant to generalize about that entire period.

For me, what is important is today. I think it is obvious that the country has entered a new stage of its existence, I would say a new stage of its development, but there is no development, so let’s just say existence.

Today it is important to look back, in this transition phase, to look back and draw some conclusions. I hope that our book will help those people who are interested in politics, who are interested in their own lives and are not indifferent to the future, to find something useful for themselves.

RFE/RL: It's called "Without Putin," but Putin is the main hero, or one of the main heroes, perhaps, together with Boris Yeltsin, of the book. I got the impression that Putin is not a very nice person and one with, if you'll excuse me, paranoid tendencies. When you talk about the point where you were removed as prime minister, there is a strange story involving denunciations and some sort of gossip and eavesdropping. I couldn't tell if you were trying to overthrow Putin or if this is just some gossip by one of his enemies.

Kasyanov: I don't want to retell episodes from the book, but I do want to say clearly that this book is not, of course, about Putin. Neither is it about Boris Yeltsin. The book is about the events that happened during this period.

Naturally, since Yeltsin and Putin both played key roles in what transpired in our country, a lot is said about them. Many political decisions are tied to them. As far as my removal goes, I have already explained that there was no reason for it. In the book, I repeat that no one has ever explained the reason for it to me or to the government or to the Russian people.

RFE/RL: Despite Putin's promise.

Kasyanov: Yes, that's right.

RFE/RL: He promised you that he would not dismiss you without a reason.

Kasyanov: He did.

Going Into Opposition

RFE/RL: You write that Yeltsin approved of your decision to take a role in the opposition. What do you think he understood by this?

Kasyanov: It is hard to say what Yeltsin saw since, unfortunately, fate did not give us the opportunity to work together further. But of course I think that I can say that Yeltsin -- who was once an opposition figure himself -- understood what we were talking about. He had in mind -- and he told me this -- that it didn't just mean getting the authorities to compromise, but it meant forcing the authorities against their will to do the things that are laid out in the constitution.

Today my party is doing just that. It is trying to convince the public that the current regime is unacceptable and to force the regime -- through the power of public opinion -- to change the situation, to give citizens the chance to use their constitutional right to free elections.

RFE/RL: And how can you force them? Look what is happening in the elections now. Opposition candidates in Moscow are not registered, including your own party. There is one party, Yabloko, that is considered more or less genuine opposition and I have even heard some of your colleagues saying people should vote for them. How are Muscovites to express their will in these elections? How would you advise them and what are you personally planning to do? What is your party's position?

Kasyanov: You are asking two things. One is about the current Moscow City Duma elections. The other is about what we can achieve.

As far as the concrete situation in the run-up to October 11, it is clear to me and my party colleagues and to other opposition organizations that these are not real elections. We used the opportunity to distribute our newspaper, "Another View." We informed Muscovites about what is happening in Moscow and in the country. We told them that the Moscow government is part of the vertical of power and does not exist in its own right. It is not a separate evil, but part of one big evil, the so-called power vertical.

As far as voting goes, our position is simple: these are not elections and any participation in them merely plays into the hands of the authorities.

Boycotting Elections

RFE/RL: Why does it help the authorities? Say people go and vote and as a result there are two or three people in the City Duma who will criticize the mayor.

Kasyanov: The election commissions are staffed with Muscovites who under a variety of threats, including the possible loss of their jobs (we are talking about teachers, doctors and other state-sector workers) are forced to falsify the vote. We need to stop these people.

If you go to the polls, you leave your real signature on the voter rolls. But you don't know what will happen to your ballot. You can't control that. You might make your mark anywhere, and they can easily make 10 more. But if you don't go to the polls, the place next to your name is blank.

RFE/RL: Or they sign for you.

Kasyanov: If they sign for you, that is a crime. You can carry out an analysis and so on. That is a much more serious act, a real crime. We shouldn't help people who have agreed to such manipulations and falsifications. We shouldn't help them avoid a criminal act.

RFE/RL: One opposition activist said we should spoil our ballots because if there are a large number of spoiled ballots, the authorities won't be able to hide that fact.

Kasyanov: It isn't difficult. I never worked in an election commission, but I don't think that would be hard to hide.

Now we are getting to your second question -- what should we do now? These people are not manipulating and falsifying the vote out of conviction but because they are being forced to. They are being threatened with the deprivation of their livelihood or, as in the last elections, people are being forced to vote and prove by taking photos with their mobile phones that they voted properly. This is what we have come to.

RFE/RL: Yes. I have heard that we should mark our ballots with a pencil, then photograph it, then erase it and vote again.

Kasyanov: See? Now, the question of the future is a matter connected with, so to speak, the elites. There is the technical intelligentsia, the creative intelligentsia, the business community, and those citizens who are active in political life. This is a huge portion of the Russian population.

Stand Up And Be Counted

If we are able to shape public opinion about what is happening, then this is very important. And at the same time, of course, we shouldn't help those who are working on election commissions to falsify. We shouldn't encourage them to participate in this sham, and we shouldn't give others the opportunity to do so. We don't want to see business financing Nashi or United Russia or A Just Russia. We don't want our singers and artists performing shows for Nashi.

RFE/RL: But they love the money.

Kasyanov: That's the point. We need to think a little about the future of our children. That is why -- with such small acts -- everyone who is active in the life of our country.... Athletes should not sign up to have their names on the candidates list for A Just Russia or any other kind of Russia of that sort.

RFE/RL: In that case, they won't be athletes, but former athletes.

Kasyanov: Those risks exist for all of us. But if that happens, it will also shape public opinion. The authorities will see that society is changing and it will understand that people might come out into the streets if expectations are formed that there will be normal elections in 2011 and 2012 and if those expectations are dashed.

If such a transformation of public opinion occurs, the authorities will see it immediately. They will understand that it won't be a matter of 5,000 people in a March of Dissent, but of 50,000 people in the center of Moscow. They will

understand that they could lose power in a single day. They know this from the example of the 1991 coup attempt, from the events of 1991.

That is why our political work now is the formation of public opinion. So that people -- the intelligentsia or the elites, including the bureaucracy -- stop thinking they can sit in the corner and not take any risks and that thousands of people will come out into the streets and sweep away the regime.

Of course that isn't right. We are against violent revolutions and for years we have said this. But we favor a velvet revolution achieved by a consolidation of public opinion capable of compelling the authorities to move forward with democratization and the restoration of constitutional norms.

#16

Russia Gas Pipeline Heightens East Europe's Fears

By Andrew E. Kramer

New York Times, October 13, 2009

MOSCOW — With an ambitious new pipeline planned to run along the bed of the Baltic Sea, the Russian natural gas giant Gazprom is driving a political wedge between Eastern and Western Europe.

While the Russian-German pipeline offers clear energy benefits to Western Europe, Central and Eastern European leaders fear it could lead to a new era of gas-leveraged Russian domination of the former Soviet bloc. With its gas wealth and eyebrow-raising network of personal ties, Russia has divided members of the European Union that have vowed to act collectively to protect their security.

Currently, Russian gas has to be piped through Eastern Europe to reach Western Europe. If Russia shuts off the gas to pressure a neighbor in the east, it is felt in the more powerful, wealthier countries to the west, where it touches off loud protests.

The new Nord Stream pipeline will change that equation. By traveling more than 750 miles underwater, from Vyborg, Russia, to Greifswald, Germany, bypassing the former Soviet and satellite states, it will give Russia a separate supply line to the west.

As a result, many security experts and Eastern European officials say, Russia will be more likely to play pipeline politics with its neighbors.

"Yesterday tanks, today oil," said Zbigniew Siemiatkowski, a former head of Poland's security service.

That is not the way the Russians present it. Gazprom, which supplies Europe with 28 percent of its natural gas, says the \$10.7 billion project is commercial, not strategic.

Matthias Warnig, Nord Stream's chief executive and a former East German, said Eastern Europe's fears were unfounded. "The wall broke down 20 years ago," he said. Europe needs additional natural gas to compensate for declining output from the North Sea, he said, and Russia is the best place to get it.

European officials have portrayed the project as one that helps unite Europe and enhance its collective energy security. The European Commission and European Parliament endorsed the pipeline as early as 2000 and both reconfirmed their commitments as recently as 2006.

"As far as common energy policy exists, we are part of it on the highest priority level," said Sebastian Sass, Nord Stream's main representative to the European Union.

But officials in Central and Eastern Europe fear that while profits from the pipeline, a joint venture between Gazprom and a trio of German and Dutch companies, will flow to Russian suppliers and German utilities, the long-trod-upon countries once under the Soviet umbrella will become more vulnerable to energy blackmail.

Such tactics are hardly without precedent. A Swedish Defense Ministry-affiliated research organization has identified 55 politically linked disruptions in the energy supply of Eastern Europe since the breakup of the Soviet Union.

Until now, Russia's use of natural gas as a foreign policy tool has been limited to short embargoes, at least in part, analysts say, because it is so blunt a club.

Last January, for example, Russia shut down a pipeline that crossed Ukraine, ostensibly over a dispute with Ukraine on pricing and tariff fees.

The shutoff left hundreds of thousands of homes in southeastern Europe without heat and shuttered hundreds of factories for three weeks.

What had been a bilateral dispute spilled across the Continent, angering influential Western governments and costing Russia money.

The new pipeline and a similar project in southern Europe called South Stream, to run under the Black Sea, will insulate Western Europe from such actions and limit the political and financial costs to Russia.

The ability to shut off one pipeline or the other "depending on whim" makes shutoffs to Eastern Europe more likely, said Zbigniew Brzezinski, the national security adviser in the Carter administration. He called the pipelines a grand Russian initiative to "separate Central Europe from Western Europe insofar as dependence on Russian energy is concerned."

"The Central Europeans, the former coerced members of the Soviet bloc, are the more worried," he said.

For Eastern Europeans, the pipeline issue evokes deep memories of a darker era of occupation and collaboration, and has become a proxy debate over Russia's intentions toward the lands it ruled from the end of World War II to the fall of the Berlin Wall.

In an open letter to President Obama last spring, 23 former Central European heads of state and intellectuals, including a former Czech president, Vaclav Havel, and a former Polish president, Lech Walesa, pointed out that after the war in Georgia last year Russia declared a "sphere of privileged interests" that could include their countries.

With the control of gas pipelines, they wrote, "Russia is back as a revisionist power pursuing a 19th-century agenda with 21st-century tactics."

Radek Sikorski, the Polish foreign minister, has compared the pipeline deal between Russia and Germany to the 1939 Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact that divided Central Europe into spheres of German and Soviet influence. "Taking the decision first and consulting us later is not our idea of solidarity," he said.

The din of alarm rising in the East has hardly been heard in the West, however, where Russia has pursued an effective policy of divide and conquer.

"Russia is one of the issues that divides the E.U. the most," said Angela E. Stent, director of the Center for Eurasian, Russian and East European Studies at Georgetown University in Washington. "Russia and Gazprom go and deal very well with individual countries."

A web of oil and gas interests in the West, as well as corporations and influential figures with ties to Russia, have greased the process of engagement with Russia.

Perhaps most visibly, a former German chancellor, Gerhard Schröder, has embraced commerce as a means to integrate Russia with Europe. Mr. Schröder was the deal's "power broker," says Zeyno Baran, an authority on Eurasian energy at the conservative Hudson Institute in New York. "Without him, it never would have gotten off the ground."

Mr. Schröder's government sealed the pipeline deal, including a \$1.46 billion German loan guarantee for the project, scant weeks before he lost the 2005 election.

A few weeks later, he took a job as the chairman of Nord Stream. He has said he decided to take the job after leaving office and that he had not known of the loan guarantee.

Mr. Warnig, the project's chief executive, served as a captain in the foreign intelligence directorate of the East German secret police, the Stasi, in the 1980s. At the time, Vladimir V. Putin, the future Russian president and prime minister, was a K.G.B. agent in Dresden, East Germany.

While his background has fueled speculation of murky cold-war-era ties underlying the project, Mr. Warnig said his spying career was irrelevant to the pipeline debate today.

Other links are more clear-cut. The former prime minister of Finland, Paavo Lipponen, was paid by Nord Stream to help secure permits. Mr. Sass, the Nord Stream liaison in Brussels, was an aide to Mr. Lipponen.

In 2008, Gazprom offered Romano Prodi, then the prime minister of Italy, the chairman's job at South Stream; Mr. Prodi declined.

Now, with the pipeline looking inevitable, the French have decided to jump on the bandwagon as well, seeking to join the consortium through Gaz de France. Otherwise, they might have to buy gas from a German broker.

The French-German competition, analysts say, illustrates how securing coveted business with Russia has accentuated their rivalry for economic and political preeminence in Europe.

Ultimately, considerations of European unity, like the fears of Eastern Europe, are secondary in the raw struggle over resources by national and corporate interests.

It is a free-market capitalism that post-Communist Russia has cannily exploited, says Pierre Noël, a professor at Cambridge University and a fellow at the European Council on Foreign Relations.

"It is an open, competitive, capitalist economy," he said. "People build the pipes they want to build."

#17

Russia's Putin warns against intimidating Iran

By Darya Korsunskaya

Reuters, October 14, 2009

BEIJING - Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin warned major powers on Wednesday against intimidating Iran and said talk of sanctions against the Islamic Republic over its nuclear programme was "premature".

Putin, who many diplomats, analysts, and Russian citizens believe is still Russia's paramount leader despite stepping down as president last year, was speaking after U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton visited Moscow for two days of talks.

"There is no need to frighten the Iranians," Putin told reporters in Beijing after a meeting of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation.

"We need to look for a compromise. If a compromise is not found, and the discussions end in a fiasco, then we will see."

"And if now, before making any steps (towards holding talks) we start announcing some sanctions, then we won't be creating favourable conditions for them (talks) to end positively. This is why it is premature to talk about this now."

Clinton failed to secure any specific assurances from Russia on Iran during her visit, leaving her open to criticism at home that she had not received anything from Moscow after earlier U.S. concessions on missile defence.

Iranian, Russian, French, U.S. and U.N. International Atomic Energy Agency officials will meet in Vienna on Oct. 19 to discuss how to implement a plan agreed in principle at talks in Geneva for low-grade Iranian uranium to be enriched overseas to a purity suitable for nuclear reactors but not weapons.

The Geneva talks on Oct. 1 also produced Iranian agreement for international inspectors to visit a second enrichment plant now under construction near Qom. Apparent Iranian concession reduced pressure for a widening of economic sanctions some analysts said could be extended to the oil and gas industry.

Clinton said she would have liked to have seen Putin but that their agendas did not coincide. Putin left for a trip to the Russian Far East and China before her arrival in Moscow.

On the contentious issue of missile defence, which has divided Russia and the United States in the past, Putin said he hoped the United States would not renege on its promise to scrap plans for an anti-missile system in central Europe.

"We are being guided by what the head of the American state is saying," Putin said. "He said there would be no anti-missile shield in Europe. We are satisfied by this statement, and to make assumptions what happens next is not quite right."

Moscow had opposed plans by previous U.S. President George W. Bush to deploy interceptor missiles in Poland and a radar in the Czech Republic, viewing this as a direct threat to Russia's national security.

Putin said however Moscow "feels no euphoria" about Bush's successor Barack Obama's promise to roll back the shield plans.

"We treated this decision with reserve, calmly," he said. "In any case, the country's leadership accepted it with understanding and gratitude. We believe this was Obama's right and courageous decision."

Writing by Guy Faulconbridge and Dmitry Solovyov, editing by Michael Stott and Janet McBride

#18

Clinton Urges Russia to Open Political System

By Mark Landler

New York Times, October 14, 2009

MOSCOW — Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton declared Wednesday that Russia would best fulfill its potential if it opened its political system and allowed more dissent.

In a town-hall meeting with almost 1,000 students at Moscow State University, Mrs. Clinton spoke forcefully about human rights abuses and the weaknesses in Russia's legal system.

"That's why attacks on journalists and human rights activists are such a great concern, because it is a threat to progress," Mrs. Clinton said. "The more open and dynamic political system you have, the more opinions that will flow in, and the more successful outcomes will flow out."

Asked by a student to name a book that had made an impact on her, Mrs. Clinton singled out "The Brothers Karamazov" by Fyodor Dostoevsky. She said the parable of the Grand Inquisitor in that novel spoke to dangers of certitude, and was a lesson she had carried with her for her adult life.

"One of the greatest threats we face is from people who believe they are absolutely, certainly right about everything," Mrs. Clinton said.

Mrs. Clinton's trip visit served to underscore the Obama administration's growing attachment to Dmitri A. Medvedev, the 44-year-old lawyer and businessman who was Vladimir V. Putin's choice to succeed him as president. The White House made much of a recent statement by Mr. Medvedev that "sometimes sanctions are inevitable," interpreting it as support for a tough stance on Iran. But his words have not been echoed by either Mr. Putin or the foreign minister, Sergey V. Lavrov. After Mr. Lavrov rejected the American call to threaten sanctions against Iran on Tuesday, Mrs. Clinton went to see Mr. Medvedev at his dacha outside Moscow. Her aides said he repeated the support he had expressed to Mr. Obama.

On Wednesday, when Mrs. Clinton was asked during a Moscow radio interview why she had gone to see the president, she pointedly reminded listeners of who directs Russia's foreign policy.

"The president sets the policy," Mrs. Clinton said. "I carry out President Obama's policy; Minister Lavrov carries out President Medvedev's policy. So making sure we are communicating is very important."

Later, at a town-hall meeting at Moscow State University, Mrs. Clinton praised the president's vision of a Russia that builds its economic prosperity on technology and innovation rather than mineral wealth.

Left unsaid was the role of Mr. Putin, who remains the power behind the throne in this country. He was off in Beijing during Mrs. Clinton's visit, signing trade deals worth several billion dollars with the Chinese.

But Mrs. Clinton's emphasis was on the new rather than the old. She told the students that they symbolized a new Russia, one that produces innovators like Sergey Brin, the Muscovite started the Internet search giant, Google. And she urged Russia to throw aside its old animosities.

I choose partnership, and I choose to put aside being a child of the cold war," Mrs. Clinton said. "I choose to move beyond the rhetoric and propaganda that came from my government and your's."

"I choose a different future, and that's a choice everyone of us can make every single day, and I look forward to sharing that future with you," she said.

#19

Hard Times For Russia's Crime Bosses

By Mark Galeotti

RFE/RL, October 14, 2009

On October 9, Russian gangster Vyacheslav Ivankov, better known as "Yaponchik" or "Little Jap," finally died of wounds from an unknown sniper attack in July. It is difficult to mourn Yaponchik's passing.

One of the highest-profile members of the traditional criminal fraternity of the "vory v zakone" (thieves within the code), Yaponchik was a violent, brutal man with a string of convictions in the Soviet Union, Russia, and the United States. His death highlights rising tensions within the Russian underworld, a product of both long-term divisions and the more immediate pressures of the economic slowdown.

The power of the "vory v zakone," a violent underworld culture that arose and spread within the gulag labor camps, has been in decline since the fall of the Soviet Union. The new economic opportunities gave rise to a generation of businessman-criminals known as "avtoritety" (authorities). Their empires blended wholly illegal activities such as drug dealing and human trafficking with essentially legitimate enterprise. The avtoritety could work with the vory, but the cultures of the smart-suited entrepreneurs and the tattooed career criminals were worlds apart.

Indeed, Yaponchik's career demonstrated that fact. In 1991, he was released after 11 years in prison and welcomed by fellow vory at a lavish party. However, even then, he was also seen as a potentially destabilizing new player in a city whose mob bosses were already looking to a post-Soviet future. As a result, an underworld summit hit on the solution of offering him an honorable role that also removed him from Moscow. He was charged with bringing emigre Russian organized crime in the United States into the wider networks of Russian crime.

He arrived in New York in 1992 and soon accomplished this -- establishing fruitful connections between Russian-based and emigre gangs that continue today. He was arrested in 1995, though, convicted for a \$3.5 million extortion plot, and then extradited to Russia in 2004 to face charges of murdering two Turks. However, he was controversially acquitted and walked free.

Awkward Fit

Meanwhile, Yaponchik had become even more of an anachronism. Although connected with Solntsevo, the largest and most powerful network within the Russian underworld, he did not fit well with the avtoritety. If anything, in terms of temperament and pedigree he was closer to the "bandity," the bandits or less-powerful and less-sophisticated gangs that cling to the old staples of organized crime -- drugs, protection racketeering, loan-sharking, and the like --

rather than the corruption, embezzlement, financial crimes, and other white-collar criminality favored by the avtoritety.

Yaponchik fell back on one of the classic roles of a vor v zakone: arbitrating mob disputes. As such, he would normally have been regarded to have had immunity from assassination so long as he observed the neutrality of his role. That he was murdered suggests that the codes and the balance of power that have governed the Russian underworld are coming under pressure.

Tensions between the avtoritety and the bandity mattered little while times were good. Rivalries between gangs are part of the daily ebb and flow of the Russian underworld. But in recent years they have been kept at a manageable level, both because the state under Putin made it clear it was unwilling to tolerate the overt gangsterism of the Yeltsin years and also because the booming Russian economy ensured there were new opportunities for all.

Simmering Tensions

However, the financial slowdown has had a serious impact on the underworld. It has hit the avtoritety hardest. Unwilling to abandon their prosperous lifestyles, many are seeking to move back into more overt gangsterism. After all, businesses such as drug dealing, prostitution, and organized robbery remain profitable. As a result, the avtoritety are intruding on the turfs of the bandits, and the balance of power is shifting. Gangs are beginning to clash over criminal resources at a time when they have abandoned the old customs that helped manage these rivalries in the past.

Not only are organized-crime rates on the rise, but tensions are rising as long-time bandity and returning avtoritety compete. Combined with Russia's growing role as both a market and conduit for Afghan heroin and the government's recent decision to criminalize most gambling, this means that lucrative new opportunities have opened up for criminals at the very time when their fingers are closest to their triggers and their need for new income is greatest. Yaponchik seems to have been embroiled in the tense and often violent dispute between two Georgian-born godfathers over the heroin trade, and his murder may have been to prevent him ruling in favor of one of them.

It is therefore possible to speculate that Yaponchik's murder highlights not just the decay of the old vor rules of behavior in Russia. Nor is it simply a product of a long-running dispute between two gangs. Instead, it may be a sign of growing pressures within the underworld that are driving it toward a new round of turf wars, perhaps one even to rival those of the "wild '90s."

Mark Galeotti is the academic chair of the Center for Global Affairs at New York University and author of "In Moscow's Shadows," a blog on security, crime and corruption in Russia.

#20

At Democracy Forum, Central, Eastern Europe Slam U.S. Engagement With Russia

By Claire Bigg

RFE/RL, October 14, 2009

Forum 2000 has never been a Kremlin-friendly affair.

Launched in 1997 by then-Czech President Vaclav Havel to discuss global challenges, the annual conference traditionally attracts policy-makers from former Soviet countries and rights campaigners critical of Moscow.

But participants at this year's two-day conference, which wrapped up October 13, were particularly vocal in denouncing Russia's increasingly assertive stance and poor human rights record -- two ills that some say are being aggravated by U.S. President Barack Obama's efforts to "reset" relations with Moscow.

Czech Senator Alexandr Vondra, while moderating a debate on Russia's role in global politics, put the same question to all participants: "Should we be afraid of Russia?"

The answers were not reassuring.

"Moscow is simply trying to pressure and interfere in new ways, using energy and other weapons of political pressure," said Sandra Kalniete, a European Parliament deputy from Latvia. "It seeks to marginalize countries of Eastern Europe and the Baltic States in NATO and in the European Union."

U.S. Letdown?

Kalniete went on to condemn Obama's shock decision last month to scrap previous plans for a missile-defense system partly based in Poland and the Czech Republic.

The proposed replacement system no longer provides for bases in those two countries, at least in the short term.

Kalniete voiced a feeling shared by a number of Central and Eastern Europeans -- that the United States is walking out on Central and Eastern Europe.

"We take the withdrawal of antimissile plans from the Czech Republic and Poland as a signal that Eastern Europeans and Poles are no longer as high on the U.S. agenda as they used to be during the Bush and Clinton eras," she said.

Obama's policy of engagement with Russia has angered many in Central and Eastern Europe, where resentment over decades of Soviet domination runs deep.

After last year's war between Russia and Georgia, many in the region believe Western nations should do more to protect them against potential Russian threats.

Kalniete, Vondra, and the conference's patron, Havel, were among the 22 policy makers and intellectuals from the former Communist bloc to sign an open letter this summer warning Obama against making concessions to Moscow -- which they described as a "revisionist power pursuing a 19th-century agenda."

The letter also urged Obama to press ahead with the missile-defense shield advanced by his predecessor, George W. Bush.

Havel himself used Forum 2000 to take issue with Obama's efforts to mend fences with Russia -- and engage China.

"I think that when, for example, the freshly awarded Nobel Peace Prize winner postpones a meeting with the Dalai Lama until after he visits continental China, he makes a small, inconspicuous, little-noticed compromise -- a compromise that has a certain logic," Havel said. "Nevertheless, the question is whether big, fatal compromises do not have their origins, their first roots, in these small, inconspicuous, and more or less 'logical' compromises."

The conference coincided with Hillary Clinton's first visit to Russia as U.S. secretary of state, during which she declared feeling "very good" about Obama's reset of relations with Moscow.

'Put Europe In Order'

Paradoxically, the most sympathetic comments at this year's Forum 2000 came from veteran Russian opposition politician Grigory Yavlinsky.

Yavlinsky deplored the lack of democracy in his country. But he also criticized the West's carrot-and-stick approach to Russia as "disastrous," calling instead for a clear, consistent stance on Russia.

Europe, he added, must clean up its act before helping put Russia on the path to democracy.

"How can you help? The answer is simple: by your example," Yavlinsky told the audience. "Please put the European Union in order, please show you can exercise the values and principles that you declare. Help the United States overcome the economic and political crisis, and we will look at your example and move much faster. All the rest we can do ourselves."

The Czech Republic is currently the only European Union member not to have ratified the EU Lisbon Treaty following Poland's signature last week, preventing the accord from coming into force.

The Czech Constitutional Court is currently studying a complaint against the treaty backed by Havel's successor, euroskeptic Czech President Vaclav Klaus.

Seemingly unconcerned by the furor over Lisbon and anti-Russian talk at Forum 2000, Klaus traveled to Moscow on October 14 for talks with Russian President Dmitry Medvedev on bilateral trade, energy cooperation, and European security.

#21

Murderers of Russian Journalists Must Face Justice, Clinton Says

By Stephen Kaufman

U.S. Dept. of State, October 14, 2009

Washington - Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton says those who have attacked Russian journalists and other human rights defenders must be brought to justice. She told Russian civil society leaders that democracy and a respect for human rights are integral to their country's future stability and prosperity.

Speaking to Russia's Ekho Moskvyy Radio October 14, Clinton said it is "hurtful" to see the imprisonments, detentions, beatings and killings of those who advocate for greater freedoms.

"Every country has criminal elements, [and] every country has people who try to abuse power," but in recent years "there have been too many of these incidents," she said.

The Obama administration is committed to supporting people who are struggling for universal human rights and advocating for democracy, she said.

"I think people want their government to stand up and say this is wrong, and they're going to try to prevent it and they're going to make sure the people are brought to justice who are engaged in such behavior," the secretary said. The killings are also "a very serious challenge to order and to the fair functioning of society." More must be done to ensure that "no one had impunity from prosecution who might have been involved in any such criminal acts," she added.

Journalist Anna Politkovskaya was killed in her Moscow apartment building October 7, 2006, and her killers remain unknown. At an October 13 reception in Moscow for civil society leaders, Clinton said Politkovskaya was one of 18 journalists who have been killed in Russia since 2000 in retaliation for their work, and "in only one case have the killers been convicted."

"A society cannot be truly open when those who stand up and speak out are murdered, and people cannot trust the rule of law when killers act with impunity," she said. "When violence like this goes unpunished in any society, it's undermining the rule of law, chills public discourse, which is, after all, the lifeblood of an open society, and it diminishes the public's confidence and trust in their own government."

Clinton told her audience that democracy and a respect for human rights are also essential to building a stable political system and creating a broader base of prosperity for the country.

"Innovation and entrepreneurship can only thrive in an open society where knowledge and ideas are exchanged as freely as goods and capital," she said. "Just as competition in the marketplace fuels growth and better products, political competition produces more accountable governance and better political solutions."

The secretary said she is encouraged by Russian President Dmitry Medvedev's statements against corruption and in support of a more open society and a stronger rule of law.

"He has also acknowledged that Russia's prosperity is dependent upon responsible governance, because stable economic development is impossible without accountable, transparent governance," she said.

The Obama administration will continue to express its support for the advancement of human rights in its discussions with the Russian government, she said. Applauding and thanking the civil society leaders, bloggers and

journalists in the audience, she said each group is playing a vital role in holding individuals accountable for abuses of power.

"You have seen friends and colleagues harassed, intimidated and even killed. And yet, you go on," Clinton said, adding that she had come "to underscore a very simple message: The United States stands firmly by your side."

Visit <http://www.america.gov/st/texttrans-english/2009/October/20091014154038xjsnommis0.7830709.html> for a full transcript of the Clinton interview.

#22

Back to Birobidjan

By Rebecca Baskin

Jerusalem Post, October 14, 2009

A sign in Yiddish at the entrance to the Russian city of Birobidjan, a main street named after Sholem Aleichem, a statue of the Fiddler on the Roof in front of the opera hall, a market called Shalom and kosher vodka called "Jewish Happiness" are all signs of a culture that has faded but not disappeared and may even be on its way to making a comeback, with the region's youth leading the way.

A Limmud conference in the city, from September 10-12, gave 300 members of the Jewish community in the region - the site of Stalin's proposed Jewish homeland in Russia's Far East - a chance to come together and learn about topics as varied as politics, feminism and biblical history, emerging as a group both engaged and strengthened.

The conference coincided with the 75th anniversary of Stalin's official establishment of the Independent Jewish Oblast, his attempt at a Jewish state, which proposed to give Jews the opportunity to pursue Yiddish culture in a socialist framework.

Jewish immigration to the remote region on the border with China began in 1928, when Jews came from around the Soviet Union and the world under the slogan "Forward to the State of the Jews." Birobidjan is the region's capital.

According to Victoria Romanova, a historian who specializes in the Jews of the Far East, the establishment of a Jewish homeland was both a strategic decision for Stalin, who thought that Jewish colonization in the area could avert the possibility of Japanese invasion, and an opportunity for Jews throughout the Soviet Union and the world.

"My grandparents lived in the Pale of Settlement," explained Romanova. "My grandmother lost her parents, and had a hard life... she saw in Birobidjan a chance for a new life, and she got it."

For many, Birobidjan seemed to be an escape from economic hardship and famine, and Romanova noted that it saved many Jews from the Holocaust, but life there was not without its own challenges.

"Many came, saw the reality and left," said Romanova. "It was a hard place to live, and they didn't know how to deal with agriculture. They didn't know the climate, they didn't know how to work the earth [and they were plagued by] swamps and mosquitoes."

Despite this, Romanova says that the Far East was a "good atmosphere" for common people. "There was no difference between Jews and Russians. There's no tradition of anti-Semitism in the Far East." In the 1930s, Yiddish was proclaimed an official language of the region, and all state institutions were obliged to write documents in Russian and Yiddish.

The rough conditions, as well as two Stalin-led purges and eventual aliya, have left the Russian Far East today with only a small Jewish community, one that is largely assimilated with the rest of the population. Birobidjan is home to some 70,000 residents, somewhere from 1 percent to 5% of them Jewish. Khabarovsk, a larger city some 240 km. away, has a few thousand Jewish residents.

Enter Limmud.

ESTABLISHED FIVE years ago, Limmud FSU has already run conferences in five countries, on three continents. The conferences are run based on a formula that has proven to be successful around the world. They are

volunteer-based, pluralistic events with lectures and workshops from community members and experts, which let each participant build his or her own experience.

Said Limmud FSU founder Chaim Chesler to the 300 participants in Birobidjan at the opening ceremony, "We don't tell you what to experience, we give you a platform to create your experience." He later said that Limmud exemplifies "power to the people. They control their own destiny."

Participants ranged from young children to the elderly, with students making up the largest contingent. All were full of incredible energy and enthusiasm to learn, teach and experience.

Chesler has wanted to bring a conference to Birobidjan since the first Limmud FSU event in Moscow. His enthusiasm and passion make up for his lack of Russian, and together with a group of dedicated young volunteers from Moscow, he came to the Far East to show that there is, and can be, more to Jewish life in Birobidjan than the remnants of Yiddish culture.

Even with modern transportation, there is still the same sense of remoteness that deterred many early settlers. Moscow is nearly 6,400 km. and seven time zones away. It's either a week's trip on the Trans-Siberian railway, or an eight-hour flight to Khabarovsk, followed by a three-hour trip by car or train through the countryside, past white birch forests and a former Jewish kolkhoz, collective farm.

Not surprisingly, many young people say that they feel disconnected from their capital and the rest of their country. However, they still feel a strong connection to the world Jewish community and Jewish culture. At the Limmud opening ceremonies, they sang along to Israeli Eurovision favorites from the '70s along with Yiddish classics and "Geshen Tzar Me'od." They joined together for Kabbalat Shabbat and havdala services, following along with Hebrew prayers transliterated into the Cyrillic alphabet.

It's clear that for many of them Judaism is an important part of their identity.

Valentina Nemirovskaya is the program director of Limmud Birobidjan, as well as Hillel of Khabarovsk, which she says is the biggest student organization in the Russian Far East. She believes that Limmud is important for the community.

She sees Limmud as a way for people, young and old, to search for and define their own identities. She said that the young people are the ones that are the most involved and active in the Jewish community, and that she believes this could lead to a change.

She was born into a traditional Jewish family, and knew her whole life that she was Jewish, placing her, she said, in the minority.

A young reporter for a Birobidjan radio station exemplified the other end of the spectrum, saying, "I am a Jew in my origin... but I have no time for this life."

He said that his grandparents came from Ukraine and Poland as a part of Stalin's 1934 campaign.

His friend Vika, a non-Jewish student, said that when her grandparents arrived in Birobidjan from Khabarovsk, the Jewish influence was immediately clear.

"The first time they came here, it was only Jews," she said. "They didn't get what they were saying, even in Russian."

The influence of Yiddish has since decreased significantly. "There's no Yiddish left," she said. One of the city's universities has a well-known program for Yiddish study, and the language appears on many signs throughout the city. However, it has disappeared from everyday use.

Vika said that the Jewish community has a "big influence" on the city. "We live everyday life, all in Russian... [but there are] lots of holidays and lots of places connected with Jews." She said that there is "no tension" between Jews and non-Jews.

ALISA ZILBERSHTEYN, 25, of Khabarovsk, was one of the organizers of Limmud. She describes herself as one of the few observant Jews in her city. She keeps kosher, wears skirts that cover her knees and shirts that cover her elbows, and walks the long distance to and from her synagogue on Shabbat instead of taking the bus.

Like many young people in the region, she studied Chinese in university, even going on to live for three years in nearby Harbin. "I left China because there was no Jewish community," said Zilbershteyn. "You see remnants of it in Harbin, but it's not there anymore."

Since her return from China, she has been involved in the Khabarovsk Jewish community and has a Jewish boyfriend. "My boyfriend wears a kippa, but it's risky," she said, referring to incidents of anti-Semitism that have occurred in Khabarovsk. Indeed, the city's synagogue was attacked with Molotov cocktails the day after the conclusion of the Limmud conference. But, she adds, "it's better to be a Jew here than elsewhere."

Like others in the community, Zilbershteyn has no aspirations toward aliya. Many made aliya from the region throughout the 1990s, and many who remained in Russia now have family in Israel. There are many, like Nemirovskaya, who even lived there for several years before returning home to the Far East.

"You don't need to make aliya to be Jewish," said Nemirovskaya. "In Birobidjan and Khabarovsk, there are many who came back, because this is home... It's hard to find a good job [in Israel] and learn Hebrew."

"I like Israel, it's the Holy Land but it's not home," explained Nemirovskaya.

Pavel, 20 and Yuriy, 19, are students in Birobidjan who participated in the conference. Both are proud Jews and proud Russians but differ when explaining which is the main part of their identity. Yuriy calls himself a "Russian Jew," while Pavel describes himself as a "Jewish Russian." He hopes to complete his mandatory army service in the air force.

Judaism is clearly important to both Pavel and Yuriy, but they are more concerned with finishing their studies and then finding work. They, like many other young people at Limmud, anticipate having to leaving the Far East to find jobs. This could pose a significant obstacle to the growth of the region's Jewish community.

In the meantime, however, the future of Jewish life in the region seems cautiously hopeful. Birobidjan has a synagogue and a Jewish community center with Sunday school classrooms, a library and a museum. A Jewish school is under construction. There are Chabad representatives in both Birobidjan and Khabarovsk, and a Jewish Agency emissary stationed in Khabarovsk.

That emissary knows better than anyone the challenges facing the region, but he also sees the situation improving. He says that the community recently had a kosher Jewish wedding, with a rabbi and huppa, for the first time in several years.

The Jewish community of the Russian Far East is one with a unique history and unquestionable tenacity. With initiatives like Limmud and the efforts and passion of its youth, though it may never be a Jewish homeland, it will be a community with a future.

Said Chesler, looking back at the conference, "[It was] an overwhelming success certainly. To have been in one of the most remote regions of Russia with the level of participation, enthusiasm, and excitement that we had indicated an intense hunger for Jewish engagement and learning and connection among those in the Russian Far East... These are young Jews who stepped forward to own this event, and they learned the skills and gained the confidence to be builders of Jewish community going forward.

"One young woman told me how privileged she felt to be part of this, and to use this experience as a building block for further involvement in building and sustaining Jewish community. She had tears in her eyes. How much more impact can you ask for?"

#23

Analysis: Russia uses ambiguity to boost its power

By Douglas Birch

AP, October 14, 2009

MOSCOW -- As Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton began her first visit to Moscow as the top U.S. diplomat, the Kremlin sent a message to Washington: Russia must still be wooed and won.

It's how post-Soviet Russia has managed to thrive as a world power, despite a shrinking population, a bloated and inefficient military, and an antiquated industrial base.

With its few major assets - energy resources, a seat on the U.N. Security Council and an aging nuclear arsenal - it has parlayed a weak hand into a position of expanding global influence.

Clinton is on a two-day visit to encourage Russia to talk tough on sanctions against Iran if Tehran fails to cooperate on limiting its nuclear program. President Dmitry Medvedev has spoken sympathetically about how sanctions might eventually be needed, saying last month, "in some cases they are inevitable."

But Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov apparently dimmed U.S. hopes Tuesday. "Threats, sanctions and threats of pressure in the current situation, we are convinced, would be counterproductive," Lavrov said.

Later, three senior American officials said Medvedev had reaffirmed his earlier support for the U.S. position in a private meeting with Clinton at his home outside Moscow. They said they were baffled by Lavrov's dismissive comment.

By keeping its positions ambiguous - and its options open until the last possible moment - Russia has achieved so much with so little.

And that could mean either more U.S. concessions, or less of what Washington hoped for, or both.

Meanwhile, Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin - by most reckoning Russia's most powerful political leader - was in China, where he said Moscow's cooperation with Beijing helps to "restrain" other powers, a not-so-veiled reference to the United States.

Again, he appeared to be playing the angles.

Russia desperately needs investment to find and develop new natural gas fields. But it has not rushed to cut deals: instead, it has carefully calculated how to use its resources to meet both economic and political goals.

While Clinton was in Moscow, Putin was in Beijing to sign a framework multi-billion-dollar energy trade pact. But the details of Tuesday's deal remain to be worked out, and China hasn't agreed to Russia's demand for premium prices for its gas and other resources.

Putin seemed to be suggesting to China's Communist rulers that a high-priced energy deal with Russia could pay political as well as economic benefits. And one of those benefits, it seems, would be a strengthened partnership opposing what Putin has called U.S. global hegemony.

Iran is another good example of how Russia has played a weak hand skillfully.

A nuclear-armed Iran could threaten Moscow. On the other hand, Russian support for sanctions might sour important trade deals, especially in armaments and nuclear technology. Worse, Iran might decide to lend clandestine aid to Muslim separatists in the Russian Caucasus.

So Moscow has walked a tightrope: joining Iran in scolding the West for its alleged imperial ambitions and blocking sanctions on the one hand, while warning Tehran it will not tolerate a nuclear-armed Iran on the other.

Russia has agreed to sell Tehran sophisticated missile defense technology, but has so far declined to deliver those weapons - without giving up the right at some point to do so.

By holding out the hope of sanctions to the U.S., Russia has won a lot of good will in Washington.

By keeping alive the possibility of missile sales and continuing opposition to sanctions, it insures it has friends in Tehran.

By delivering on neither, Russia has irked both would-be allies. But so far it has preserved its influence in a region where, otherwise, it might have little. Or none.

Meanwhile, Russia continues to make incremental progress, it seems, on its own foreign policy goals, including expanding its control of Europe's energy markets and limiting the influence of NATO on its borders.

Some U.S. officials suspect the mixed messages coming from Moscow are the product of a lack of coordination at the top. Others see them as mostly reflecting debate and disagreements within the Russian government, perhaps the result of rival factions that surround Putin and Medvedev.

Both may play some role. But Russia has been tacking like a sailboat, shifting from position to position to make the most of the prevailing winds, since Putin came to power in 1999.

Russia's maneuvering has become even more intense since Putin, after two terms as president, engineered Medvedev's election and became prime minister in 2008, in effect giving the country two leaders.

Today, Medvedev is often seen as the champion of Western hopes for reform and closer cooperation with leading democracies, while Putin typically plays the heavy.

When Clinton was in Moscow, she met with Medvedev. But Putin, the political heavyweight, was in China.

"I would have enjoyed meeting with Prime Minister Putin, certainly had intended to, but our schedules didn't work out," Clinton said Wednesday on Ekho Moskvyy radio.

So, it seems, it was up to Lavrov to play the bad cop role.

As in the case of Iran and the U.S., the result is that Russia's negotiating partners are whipsawed between their hopes and fears, uncertain about where exactly Russia stands - and perhaps ready to make concessions in order to test the waters and appeal to Russia's better nature.

So are Medvedev and Putin rivals battling for the soul of Russia? Or are they silent partners, each playing his role in a grand strategy? Or is the relationship more complex?

No one outside the Russian government knows for certain.

"This is a non-transparent system," said Masha Lipman of the Moscow Carnegie Center think tank. "We don't know how decisions are taken."

Whatever the reason behind Russia's seeming split personality, Moscow has in the last decade put itself in the center of some of the major foreign policy challenges facing the United States, including Iran, Afghanistan, North Korea and arms control. Russia has repeatedly sought concessions in exchange for these services.

And given Moscow's success, there seems to be little likelihood this pattern will change.

#24

Moscow Closes Jewish Emigration Centers in Two Cities

By Paul Goble

Window on Eurasia, October 15, 2009

Vienna – Moscow has closed the St. Petersburg and Novosibirsk offices of Israel's Nativ organization that helps arrange the return of Jews to Israel, an action that Israeli papers and human rights activists say will make it far more difficult for Jews in the Russian Federation who want to leave.

This action follows the departure at the end of September of Shmuel Polishchuk, the Israeli consul in Moscow who oversaw the work of Nativ, and according to a report in yesterday's "Ma'ariv, the closure of these two offices will make it difficult, if not impossible for more than 200 Russian Jews now seeking the documents they need to leave.

According to the Israeli paper, Russian officials in recent months have "repeatedly complained" that Nativ staffers have "exceeded" their authority as defined by the Russian government's agreement with Israel concerning the organization's role in realizing "the right of return" (www.newsru.co.il/world/14oct2009/nativ301.html).

The Russian government, according to "Ma'ariv" journalist Eli Bardenstein, avoided "a scandal" in the case of Polishchuk by not declaring him persona non grata but simply allowing Israel to recall him from his post. But this latest Russian move against the Nativ offices raises the stakes.

Nativ has a long history. An Israeli government institution directly subordinate to the prime minister's office, it was created in 1952 as the Bureau for Ties with Jews of the USSR and Eastern Europe. Since 1991, it has been known as the Bureau for Ties with Jews of the CIS and the Baltic Countries.

In Soviet times, the group sought to develop contacts with Jews in the Soviet bloc, but after the end of the USSR, it became more directly involved in promoting the right of return, an effort that brought it into conflict on occasion with the Israeli foreign ministry and non-governmental organizations like the Jewish Agency.

A decade ago, the Israeli government formally cut links between Nativ and the Israeli intelligence services, but Russian officials appear to have assumed that in one way or another those ties continue. In any case, now Moscow has moved against an organization that played a key role in helping Jews from the post-Soviet countries go to Israel.

This Russian action will be a test of just how effective will be the efforts of some countries to address problems with Moscow via diplomatic channels rather than by making publically explicit what should be Western concerns about the Russian government's increasing disregard for the rights of Jews and other groups there.

#25

Stuck Between 'Nyet' And A Hard Place

By Peter Feaver

National Public Radio, October 15, 2009

Secretary Clinton's recent visit to Moscow provides another opportunity to do a midcourse assessment of Iran policy. The assessment is bleak. Very bleak. The "mission accomplished" banners that Obamaphiles were unfurling when the Russians hinted at a greater openness to sanctions look a bit more faded and ironic today in light of reports that the Russians are back to their old script of opposing sanctions as an impediment to negotiations.

I argued earlier that the key intermediate objective of the negotiations with Iran was getting Russia (and China and the European in-laws) on side to impose tougher economic pressure on Iran. Without such leverage, negotiations were very unlikely to succeed.

Of course, the overall objective of those negotiations is to get the Iranian regime to abandon its nuclear weapons program. The Obama team, like the Bush team before it, believes that the only way the Islamic Republic will do so peacefully is if the United States can exert serious economic leverage over the regime so a compromise deal looks attractive - hence the urgency of the intermediate objective of establishing such leverage.

From the beginning, the diplomatic track has been stymied by two stubborn facts. Fact 1: The U.S. cannot unilaterally generate the sanctions leverage it needs to give diplomacy a chance. Fact 2: The Russians, the Chinese, and sometimes the European in-laws all believe that diplomacy is an alternative to sanctions (and vice-versa) rather than understanding that sanctions are a necessary component of the diplomatic track. In other words, sanctions are what you resort to when diplomacy has failed rather than something you resort to in order to help diplomacy succeed.

The "shocking" news that the Iranian regime had been misleading the international community with a hidden second enrichment program provided a one-time opportunity to bring the international community on side, impose

sanctions, and then pursue negotiations. Instead, the Obama team contented itself with the rhetorical support for sanctions the Russians offered - the vague suggestion that if the Iranians kept up their bad behavior stiffer penalties might follow - basked in the glow of praise for its deft diplomacy, and launched negotiations.

With Secretary Clinton in Moscow, the Russians sprung the trap. We can't do sanctions, the Russians explained, because that would undermine negotiations. As long as the negotiations are ongoing, the Russians will block sanctions. All the Iranian regime has to do to keep sanctions at bay is to string the negotiations along. As was foreseeable, Team Obama is trapped negotiating with the Iranian regime without significant leverage and without much prospect of additional leverage. This does not guarantee failure, but it does guarantee that the Iranian regime has the strongest possible hand and that the U.S. hole card, the evidence of Iranian duplicity revealed at the U.N. General Assembly in late September, has been played to minimal effect.

#26

The Reset Gains Substance

By Mikhail Margelov

Moscow Times, October 15, 2009

Hillary Clinton's visit to Moscow was the next important step in the process that has come to be called "the reset," which is now entering the phase of concrete action. The agenda that the U.S. secretary of state brought to Moscow gives reason to believe that President Barack Obama seriously intends to move away from the political objectives of the previous administration. He obviously gets personal credit for not being afraid to approach that objective necessity — he didn't get the country in the best of shape. And that opens the door to a review of both domestic and foreign policy. If the young Nobel Peace Prize laureate has enough political strength and courage, Washington may find in Moscow a reliable partner, and perhaps, an ally. Particularly since Russia has an interest in that — it needs to continue modernizing.

It's really starting to look like the new U.S. administration understands that an equal partnership with Russia could lessen the damage from the previous administration's political legacy, both at home and abroad. After all, the "peace without justice" established after the Cold War — and it's not just Russia that's to blame — doesn't come close to a full-fledged peace. The situation over the past decade looks more like a fragile truce. It's never too late to fix shared mistakes. And today there really is a chance for a long-term strategic partnership between Moscow and Washington. Our political leaders should actively work toward this alliance and not demand unilateral concessions. Russia shouldn't see an enemy in the United States, and the United States shouldn't suspect every Russian foreign policy decision to be anti-American.

Of course, we live in a practical age. They say there's no such thing as a selfless politician. And that's true. But I think collaboration between Russia and the United States to achieve the interests of each is mutually beneficial. Besides, walking together doesn't necessarily mean it must be done in an embrace. But walk together we must, because there are many problems in the world that affect both sides and which neither the United States nor Russia are strong enough to settle alone. I'm not supporting the recently fashionable theory about some U.S. "weakness." But it's impossible to ignore the growing strength of other players in world politics and economics. Certain contradictions will arise between Moscow and Washington. But, as Clinton showed on her visit, both sides intend to remove those contradictions. For example, it's clear that Moscow doesn't see sanctions as an effective way to reach agreement. Attitudes on this are also changing in the United States. In any event, Clinton announced in Moscow that sanctions could be avoided and that her country would prefer that Iran works with the world community in the P5-plus-one format. It's important to note that with the Iranian problem, we are brought together by a shared desire to strengthen the nuclear nonproliferation regime. But Washington's and Moscow's differences over Georgia remain. The United States does not plan to recognize the independence of South Ossetia and Abkhazia.

Nonetheless, I'm certain that Clinton's visit will give new momentum to the renewal of our relations. One of the important issues is a joint missile defense system. Remember that Russia was first to propose a joint system, when it offered to include Russian radar stations in Armavir and in the Azeri city of Gabala. There's a desire on both sides to reach agreement. And if they succeed, starting a joint project could, for example, change Europe's muted attitude toward President Dmitry Medvedev's initiative on a comprehensive European security pact. Joint work will also improve Russia's attitude toward NATO. And the sides intend to continue discussing the missile defense issue.

That was the promising result of Clinton's meeting with Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov. The United States and Russia will look together for alternatives to placing missile defense components in the Czech Republic and Poland.

Strategic-weapons reduction understandably occupies an important place in Clinton's negotiating playbook. This importance, experts believe, stems in part from Russia and the United States' practically equal positions. Russia has a special status in strategic nuclear arms-reduction talks and an interest in maintaining that status. Everything connected to strategic arms reduction has fundamental political and strategic significance for Russia. It's the bridgehead for advancing on all other security fronts. There's nothing about those fronts, by the way, that would prevent the United States' initiative to expand NATO into former Soviet countries, at least in the foreseeable future.

Clinton and Lavrov's attention to the effective work of a Russian-U.S. commission, created by the presidents, is also important. The point of this work is to substantiate the reset of relations with a specific and pressing agenda: from fighting terrorism to cooperating in space.

The tone both sides took also offers hope that the reset will not fail. In part, the visit to Moscow by Michael McFaul, who oversees civil society matters in the commission, to meet with Vladislav Surkov, first deputy head of the presidential administration, showed that he followed his president's words, "Democracy cannot be imposed on any nation from the outside."

Mikhail Margelov is chairman of the International Affairs Committee in the Federation Council.

#27

Reports: Russia warns US on missile defense

AP, October 15, 2009

MOSCOW — A top Russian diplomat suggested Thursday that the U.S. should not talk with non-NATO nations about a prospective missile shield, Russian news agencies reported.

Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Ryabkov's remarks appeared to reflect alarm over the idea that Western-leaning neighbors such as Ukraine or Georgia, Russia's foe in a war last year, could potentially host U.S. missile defense facilities.

Ryabkov said Russia is concerned about what he said were contacts between the U.S. and nations outside NATO on missile defense, state-run ITAR-Tass and RIA Novosti reported.

President Barack Obama removed a major irritant in relations with Russia last month by scrapping U.S. plans to place interceptor missiles in Poland and a radar in the Czech Republic — deployments Russia treated as a threat.

The Kremlin has praised Obama for the decision, but Russian officials have also said they want to know details about what system the U.S. will put in place instead.

Ryabkov's comments served as a warning that the United States should avoid taking steps that would threaten Russia or turning to its neighbors as potential partners in missile defense without consulting with Moscow.

"We are experiencing the concerns that emerge when major questions of strategic stability should be considered in a partner-like manner," he was quoted as saying.

Russia and the U.S. have discussed cooperating on missile defense, and Ryabkov represented Russia in talks on the issue in Moscow on Monday ahead of Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton's visit.

Ryabkov did not name any specific nations as being in contact with the U.S. about missile defense, but he spoke in response to a question about Russian media reports suggesting the U.S. might use Ukrainian radar stations.

Tensions over Georgia and uncertainty over the future of Ukraine, whose pro-Western president wants the country to join NATO, are hurdles in efforts by Russia and the U.S. to mend strained ties.

#28

As Clinton Continues Russia Tour, Many Ask: Why Kazan?

By Brian Whitmore

RFE/RL, October 14, 2009

In what officials describe as an effort to see Russia "beyond the Moscow ring road," U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton will spend several hours in the city of Kazan on her second and final day of a Russia tour.

Clinton's October 14 visit, coming after meetings in Moscow with Russian President Dmitry Medvedev and Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, marks the first visit by a senior U.S. official to predominantly Muslim Tatarstan.

U.S. officials say the short visit will highlight interfaith cooperation, with the secretary meeting religious leaders and young Muslims to discuss how to bridge the divide between faiths. She will also meet with Tatarstan's independent-minded president, Mintimer Shaimiyev.

Analysts say the visit is a continuation of a new White House strategy of multifaceted public diplomacy that aims to reach beyond the Kremlin.

Steven Pifer, a former State Department official specializing in Russian affairs who is now a visiting fellow at the Brookings Institution, says the strategy began with President Barack Obama's visit to Moscow this summer when he "attended the civil society summit."

Pifer says that the trip shows that Washington "is not just negotiating with the government in Moscow, but is engaging in some outreach to the broader country." He says Clinton is "demonstrating that part of the approach to Russia is outreach to broader society."

Religious Tolerance On Display

Tatarstan is an unusual example of a Russian region where the majority of the population is Muslim, but where interethnic and interfaith strife is rare. According to the latest census, 52.9 percent of Tatarstan's 3.8 million inhabitants are predominantly Muslim Tatars; 39.5 percent are predominantly Orthodox Christian Russians.

Nikolas Gvosdev, a Russia expert and professor of national security studies at the U.S. Naval War College, believes the visit will benefit the Obama administration's broader outreach to the Muslim world.

"I'm sure there will be some attempt to play up the Muslim-Christian coexistence of cultures in Kazan. That is always something that President Shaimiyev likes to show off and point out," Gvosdev says.

"This is a brand of Europeanized Islam, westernized Islam, that is Islamic yet functions in a Western society. As part of the ongoing engagement of the Muslim world, there could be benefits there."

Clinton's visit has sparked a wave of civic pride in the Tatar capital Kazan, a city of 1.1 million located on the Volga River about 700 kilometers east of Moscow. Local newspapers this week ran banner headlines reading: "Hillary Is Coming" and "Welcome Hillary!"

Speaking to RFE/RL's Tartar-Bashkir Service, Mirgalim, 63, says the city's tradition of multiculturalism and interfaith tolerance was worthy of admiration.

"Kazan is a multiethnic city. Different religions live in peace here. We celebrate our holidays all together," Mirgalim says.

"I once saw the Russian patriarch, the Tatar imam, and a Jewish rabbi were walking along the street together, talking to each other."

Moscow's Heavy Hand

But despite the pride many locals take in the atmosphere of tolerance, the region is not without its problems. President Shaimiyev has sought to steer an independent course for his oil-rich republic, which has often put him at odds with the Kremlin.

Tatarstan, a Russian federal republic, enjoys relative autonomy from Moscow, maintaining its own government and constitution. But Moscow's reach has grown more insistent -- most recently in September, when the Russian Supreme Court ordered the Tatar government to make Russian an official language together with Tatar.

Local Muslims have also bristled at changes in Moscow's education policies, which require public schools to teach courses in Orthodox culture as a required course, while courses in Tatar language and culture have been made electives.

One Kazan resident who sees little to celebrate in the Clinton visit is Fawzia Bayramova, an opposition leader and chairwoman of a self-proclaimed pan-Tatar parliament, the Milli Mejlis, which advocates Tatarstan's independence from Russia.

"Does she [Clinton] know about human rights abuses in Russia? Does she know about a new law on education which deprives people of the right to get an education in their native language?" Bayramova asks.

"Does she know that Christianity has become an official religion and is obligatory in schools? Does she know that other nations' religious rights and their right to an education are being abused? If she knows these things, then what is the United States going to do about it?"

Kazan's Place In Russia

Speaking to reporters before Clinton's departure from Washington on October 8, State Department spokesman Ian Kelly told reporters that "to understand Russia and its vibrancy and its diversity, you have to get outside of Moscow."

Kelly called Kazan "a good place to go because it really shows that the Russian Federation is a multiethnic country."

A Russian reporter present at the briefing, however, suggested a more nefarious motive, asking Kelly if Clinton's presence in the Tatar capital was "an attempt to demonstrate the U.S. presence in case of the dismemberment of Russia."

A surprised Kelly laughed and flatly denied the suggestion.

Local media reports in Kazan say the Kremlin suggested that Clinton visit other cities, including Samara and Nizhny Novgorod, before agreeing on Kazan.

But Pifer explains that it is highly unlikely that Clinton would travel to Kazan without the Kremlin's blessing. "Otherwise there probably would have been a lot of quiet pressure to direct her somewhere else," he says.

In recent years, Kazan has worked to raise its international profile. The city, which has shed its grim Soviet-era image in favor of a gleaming, renovated city center, is the annual host of Golden Minbar, an international Muslim film festival. Its 16th-century kremlin was declared a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 2000.

Shaimiyev has also sought to forge his own relations with the broader Islamic world, as Turkey and Iran have opened consulates in Kazan.

Rafael Khakimov, head of the history institute at the Tatarstan Academy of Sciences, says Kazan belongs with Moscow and St. Petersburg in the ranks of Russia's top cities.

Khakimov says that American researchers who visit Kazan are "attracted by the stability in the region, by the tolerant Islam, by its working peacefully with Moscow, and by the beauty of the city. If you sum up all these things -- Kazan is like Russia's third capital."

Alsu Kurmasheva of RFE/RL's Tatar-Bashkir Service contributed to this report.

#29

U.S.-Russian relations risk to be improved at expense of others - ambassador

Interfax, October 15, 2009

KYIV - Among U.S. politicians there are advocates of the idea of building the Washington-Moscow relations at the expense of paying less attention to Central and Eastern European countries, including Ukraine, Ukrainian Ambassador to the U.S. Oleh Shamshur said at a briefing in Kyiv on Thursday.

"One can understand the desire by the new U.S. presidential administration to improve, to make the relations with Russia more pragmatic," Shamshur said.

The administration of U.S. President Barack Obama has reassured the Central and Eastern European countries that the improvement of its relations with Russia will not hurt its relations with these countries, he said.

"However, on the other hand, I would like to note that as ambassador I am certainly concerned not by the administration's policy but by the growing influence of the U.S. politicians from the so-called 'school of realpolitik,'" Shamshur said.

Part of this approach consists in building the relations with Russia at the expense of the diminished focus on Central and Eastern Europe, he said.

"To what extent will it affect the formation of the administration's real course? Given the statements made by all foreign-policy officials from the Obama administration, I hope it will not affect it seriously. However, the danger does exist, it certainly is there," said the Ukrainian ambassador to the U.S.

#30

Russian Parliament Standoff Nears End

By Gregory Feifer

RFE/RL, October 16, 2009

Legislators who stormed out of the Russian parliament on October 14 to protest allegations of electoral fraud have begun to return.

But as evidence of voting violations piles up, many believe the speed at which the standoff is dissipating indicates it was no real protest, but prompted by political infighting among pro-Kremlin groups.

Vladimir Zhirinovskiy, leader of the ultranationalist Liberal Democratic Party that spearheaded the action, said he was satisfied the Kremlin had heard his complaints after speaking to President Dmitry Medvedev by telephone.

"I laid out all the party's positions and evaluations," he said, "and he agreed to meet with all the party leaders in the coming days."

Deputies from the Communist, Liberal Democratic, and A Just Russia parties stormed out of the Duma after candidates from the Kremlin's United Russia party swept regional elections on October 11.

Independent observers said there was evidence of mass violations.

Mobile-phone videos purporting to document voting fraud have been circulating on the Internet. One clip appears to show election observers stopping officials in the Rostov region from adding a stack of ballots marked for United Russia after polls closed.

Voting analyses showing a correlation between high voter turnout and wins for United Russia appear to back the fraud allegations.

But Medvedev and Prime Minister Vladimir Putin, who most Russians believe really runs their country, have said the elections took place without major violations.

They've told the protesting parties to challenge the results in court.

Fraud Complaints

Despite the growing evidence of fraud, deputies from A Just Russia Party have joined the Liberal Democrats returning to parliament. They said they would propose election laws be changed to ban early voting, which many believe enables serious fraud.

Duma Speaker and United Russia member Boris Gryzlov, who met with party leaders on October 15, said he supported several reform proposals, including the reinstatement of a Duma commission that would monitor elections.

But the Communists, who did not return to the Duma on October 16, complained that the commission would consist largely of United Russia members.

Communist Party leader Gennady Zyuganov said the party would hold national protests and called on the regional party branches to boycott local legislatures. He alluded to the elections' low voter turnout on October 14.

"Until we get massive numbers onto the streets to protest against politicians who have violated people's basic rights to take part in elections," he said, "we can't change the situation. Seventy percent of the people have already cast their votes by staying away from the elections."

But Zyuganov indicated the Communists may return to the Duma next week to debate next year's federal budget.

Standing Up For What?

Many Russians don't believe the walkout represented a spontaneous protest, saying all three parties are widely believed to carry out the Kremlin's bidding. A Just Russia was created by the Kremlin shortly before winning seats in parliamentary elections in 2007. No liberal opposition parties qualified.

But Nikolai Levichev, head of the Liberal Democratic party's faction in parliament, insisted the October 14 walkout was unplanned. "It was a moment of truth," he said, "that forced the leaders of parliament and the country to listen to the opinions of the opposition."

Most analysts disagree. The Moscow Carnegie Center's Nikolai Petrov told RFE/RL's Russian Service the walkout was partly prompted by the realization among party members that the Kremlin no longer needs their help to fix elections.

"The Duma parties didn't walk out because they suddenly decided to fight for democracy," he said, "but because they feel brushed under a rug. It was the Kremlin that provoked their actions."

Petrov said the walkout may also partly have been triggered by a standoff between Kremlin clans. Petrov said the walkout may lead to some political reforms.

But there have been only small public protests against the alleged voter fraud across Russia. Moscow police say they detained around 10 protesters on October 16. The demonstrators say they wanted to deliver a petition to the president.