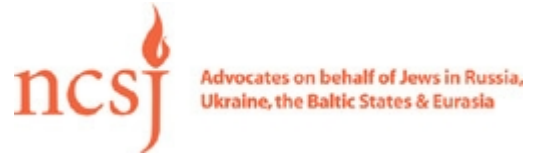


WASHINGTON, D.C. November 25, 2009



TO: NCSJ Leadership and Interested Parties

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

In Brief: New U.S. Envoys; Russian Politics; NCSJ Board Meeting

Dear Friend,

I have just returned from the State Department, where Lesley Weiss and I attended the swearing-in ceremony for the new U.S. Ambassador to Ukraine, John Tefft. John and I have worked together for more than 20 years on issues affecting the Jewish population in the former Soviet Union (FSU). A career diplomat, he has been stationed in Moscow, Vilnius and Tbilisi, and his first overseas posting was in Israel. John understands the challenges the Jews of the FSU confront, and will be an outstanding representative of the United States to Ukraine.

I would also like to extend congratulations to another colleague and friend, Hannah Rosenthal who will become the State Department's next Special Envoy to Combat and Monitor Anti-Semitism. Hannah was the executive director of the Jewish Council on Public Affairs for several years, and is a strong advocate in the fight against the rise of global anti-Semitism. I look forward to welcoming her to Washington.

In this week's update, which is being sent on Wednesday due to Thanksgiving, there are a number of interesting articles on President Medvedev's speech at the convention of Russia's ruling political party, United Russia. He called for a number of reforms to advance political discourse and even mildly criticized the party for its "backwardness." At the same meeting, Prime Minister Putin focused on party priorities and ignored the ongoing controversy about United Russia's almost complete domination of the political mechanisms in Russia.

It's been almost one year since the Obama Administration announced its "reset" of relations with Russia. A significant part of next month's NCSJ Board of Governors meeting will focus on the impact of the reset on the bilateral relationship as well as larger U.S. foreign policy initiatives. We will also hear reports about the recent opening of a new Progressive Synagogue in Moscow, the restoration of a Jewish cemetery in Lithuania, and the upcoming Ukrainian presidential election. I hope you can join us on Tuesday, December 8, in Washington, D.C. For details, and to RSVP, please visit www.ncsj.org/Board.html.

On behalf of NCSJ's leadership and staff, I want to wish you a happy Thanksgiving holiday. It's been a difficult year for many, but we have much to be thankful for as Americans and Jews.

Sincerely,

Mark B. Levin
Executive Director



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

NCSJ WEEKLY NEWS BRIEF
Washington, D.C. November 25, 2009

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#1a

In Tajikistan, Free Information Comes At A Price
RFE/RL, November 20, 2009

The Tajik government has introduced a new decree obliging journalists to pay for information obtained from officials, RFE/RL's Tajik Service reports.

According to the document issued on November 19, journalists must pay 25 somoni (about \$4.50) for each page of printed text provided by an official institution or state agency. As of January 1, the cost will be increased to 35 somoni per page.

Tajik officials say the decree was adopted on October 31 and corresponds to the newly adopted law on the mass media.

National Alliance of Independent Media Chairman Nuriddin Qarshiboev told RFE/RL the decree violates the constitution, which guarantees free access to information.

Juma Mirzo, editor in chief of the weekly "Nuri Zindagi," told RFE/RL the decree could bankrupt all media outlets in Tajikistan.

Tajik presidential administration spokesman Mahmud Saraev rejected such criticism, saying the decree does not restrict access to information since it applies only to information requested in advance. He didn't elaborate on that qualification.

#1b

Visiting U.S. Diplomat Pledges Support For Moldova RFE/RL, November 20, 2009

A high-ranking U.S. diplomat visiting Chisinau said the White House supports Moldova's democratic process and will stand by it as it makes its foreign policy choices, RFE/RL's Moldovan Service reports.

U.S. Deputy Assistant Secretary of State Daniel Russell told RFE/RL that the United States fully respects Moldova's sovereignty and territorial integrity and that Washington will help Moldova strengthen its democratic institutions.

Asked if Russia could hamper Moldova's integration into Western structures, Russell said that "Russia is not the Soviet Union," and reiterated the Obama's administration's belief that the era of "spheres of influence" has passed.

Moldova has been pressing the European Union for closer ties after a pro-Western alliance of four Moldovan parties won elections in July and ousted a pro-Russian, communist regime headed by former President Vladimir Voronin.

The ruling Moldovan coalition is split on the subject of NATO and has said it would not make joining the alliance a priority.

Moldova's constitution asserts the country's neutrality, and opinion polls show that most of its citizens oppose NATO membership.

#1c

Azerbaijan threatens force over Nagorno-Karabakh AP, November 22, 2009

BAKU, Azerbaijan — President Ilham Aliyev of Azerbaijan said Saturday his nation may resort to military force if talks with Armenia on resolving a long-standing territorial dispute produce no result.

Aliyev said he expects to hold talks next week with his Armenian counterpart, Serge Sarkisian, on resolving the dispute over Nagorno-Karabakh. "If that meeting fails to produce result, our hopes for negotiations will vanish," Aliyev said during a meeting with Azerbaijani refugees from Nagorno-Karabakh.

The mountainous region is an enclave in Azerbaijan that has been under control of Armenian troops and ethnic Armenian forces since a 1994 cease-fire ended six years of war that killed about 30,000 people and displaced 1 million. Diplomatic efforts to resolve the dispute have failed.

Aliyev said Azerbaijan wants a peaceful settlement, but won't wait indefinitely. "We have the right to free our land using military force," he said.

There was no immediate comment from Armenia's government.

Aliyev repeatedly has made similar threats in the past. His latest statement could be aimed at encouraging Azerbaijanis, who are concerned that Turkey's move last month to normalize ties with Armenia could ruin hopes for regaining control over Nagorno-Karabakh. Turkey has assured its ally Azerbaijan that it would continue supporting it in the dispute.

#1d
Medvedev pledges help to rights activists
AFP, November 23, 2009

MOSCOW - President Dmitry Medvedev on Monday told Russian rights activists he would submit a new bill to parliament to encourage their work as he moved further to burnish his image as a liberal reformer.

"A relevant bill has been prepared," Medvedev said as he received some of the country's top human rights activists at the Kremlin. "Today I am submitting it to the State Duma."

During his annual address to the nation on November 12, Medvedev promised he would do more to encourage non-profit "socially oriented" organizations by making them eligible for direct state support and tax benefits.

"Our common task is to bolster the authority of NGOs in society," Medvedev said.

At a previous meeting with rights activists last April, Medvedev said laws governing non-governmental organizations (NGOs) could be amended, signalling a break with his predecessor Vladimir Putin's policies.

Putin in 2006 signed legislation requiring NGOs to register with the state and increased scrutiny of their financing, one of several steps widely characterised as a rollback of democracy in Russia.

Putin let it be known at the time that the new rules were meant to tighten controls on Western funding of projects at odds with Kremlin policy, but the blanket regulations also took a heavy toll on Russian charities and NGOs.

Activists who participated in the meeting last April told Medvedev they longed for a change of atmosphere in Russian society and pleaded with the Federal Security Service (FSB), successor to the KGB, to stop "witch hunts."

#1e
Drunk Russian Police Kill Abkhaz Citizen In Moscow
RFE/RL, November 24, 2009

MOSCOW — Three Moscow police officers have been arrested and charged with murder after the death of an Abkhaz man, RFE/RL's Russian Service reports.

The Investigative Committee of the Prosecutor-General's Office told journalists that the officers -- Viktor Kuznetsov, Anvar Ibragimov, and Aleksei Chernikov -- attacked two people from Georgia's breakaway region of Abkhazia while inebriated last night.

One of the men who was attacked, Eduard Gurtskaya, died as a result.

The police officers have reportedly confessed to the assault.

Moscow's Interior Ministry chief Vladimir Koltsov said the three officers were sacked and their commander was officially fired as well.

Abkhazia, which broke away from Georgia in the early 1990s following a separatist war, was recognized as independent by Russia last year following Moscow's brief war with Tbilisi.

Abkhazia enjoys Russia's support, and most of its population of around 230,000 have been given Russian passports.

#2

Medvedev Says 'Backwardness' Undermines Party

By Ellen Barry

New York Times, November 22, 2009

MOSCOW — President Dmitri A. Medvedev of Russia accused the governing party, United Russia, of “backwardness” on Saturday, warning its leaders that they must learn to win elections honestly if it is to survive.

Mr. Medvedev's remarks, at the party's annual congress in St. Petersburg, were his most direct criticism of the party yet since it swept regional elections last month amid accusations of widespread fraud.

Some regional branches of the party “show signs of this backwardness and reduce political activities to bureaucratic intrigues and games,” he said, adding, “Elections, which are intended to express the national will and present competing ideas and programs, are sometimes turned into scenarios in which democratic processes are confused with administrative ones.”

He continued, “It is necessary to get rid of such people, and of bad political habits as well.”

United Russia is led by Prime Minister Vladimir V. Putin, the former president who handpicked Mr. Medvedev as his successor nearly two years ago and is still widely considered the stronger leader.

Mr. Medvedev's speeches have taken an increasingly harsh tone toward Putin-era policies, and though the words have been backed up by little in the way of concrete policy, some speculate that the president is challenging his mentor. It is not yet clear whether Mr. Putin will run for the presidency again in 2012.

Mr. Putin, also speaking at the congress, seemed eager to quiet the chatter about any disagreement by endorsing Mr. Medvedev's recent state of the nation speech, which called for Russia to modernize its economy and break free of its economic dependence on oil and gas.

“I am sure this call reflects the mood of all Russian society,” Mr. Putin said Saturday. “The crisis, with all its severity, has shown how costly it is for a country to reject innovation, have low worker productivity, waste resources and have a slow bureaucracy.”

United Russia's dominance of Russian politics has grown as the opposition has dwindled away, and many compare its clout to that of the Soviet-era Communist Party.

After United Russia swept regional elections on Oct. 11, there were widespread complaints about ballot-stuffing and accusations of extensive fraud, but Mr. Medvedev had been muted in his comments until Saturday, when he told members of his party that they “need to learn to win in open contests.”

“Democracy exists so that people can exercise their exclusive right to determine their government, to decide how their country is to be ruled, and the party is only an instrument,” Mr. Medvedev said. “A very important instrument, it's true, an absolutely necessary one, but only a tool, a means to an end.”

#3

Putin Thanks Party, Sets Priorities for 2010

By Irina Filatova

Moscow Times, November 23, 2009

Minister Vladimir Putin addressed United Russia's 11th party congress Saturday in St. Petersburg, where he congratulated his government for averting economic disaster and rehashed a set of policy ideas for the coming year.

Putin offered mild praise to the governing party, which had just met with a harsh rebuke from President Dmitry Medvedev, and promoted government programs in his first major domestic policy speech since the president's state-of-the-nation address.

"Russia's economy is showing the first signs of recovery. However, it's too early to speak about the end of the crisis. There are serious hurdles in a number of industries," Putin said in comments posted on the government web site.

The prime minister outlined a range of policy areas where he said the government would focus next year, including: modernizing strategically important companies, developing the country's high-tech sector, stimulating housing construction, boosting domestic demand and dealing with unemployment, especially in single-industry towns.

Putin pointed to the struggling automotive industry as one where the government has a particularly urgent role to play, singling out AvtoVAZ, the country's biggest carmaker, for support. (Story, Page 6.)

"Car production has contracted by 60 percent. That's why anti-crisis measures in this industry should be not only preserved but also increased," he said.

Putin pledged to launch a controversial "cash-for-clunkers" program, in which the government would give 50,000 rubles (\$1,274) to car owners who trade in cars more 10 years old for newer, domestically made vehicles.

He also proposed a pilot program to develop single-industry towns, which would start in AvtoVAZ's hometown, Tolyatti.

"We're talking about new infrastructure, roads, modern production facilities, techno-parks and 'business incubators,'" he said.

Modernizing Russia's economy and industrial base has been a goal pushed hard by Medvedev, who emphasized the topic again in his speech to United Russia.

He said United Russia would preserve its dominance in Russia's political system only if it could help modernize the country's economy.

"United Russia will be able to preserve its dominating position in the political system under the only condition, if it is able not only to stabilize the situation in the country but also modernize the economy - that's the main task today," he said.

Putin referred back to Medvedev's state-of-the-nation address, saying Medvedev's calls for modernization "reflect the mood of the entire Russian society."

"Today, a very difficult goal stands before us, but one that can absolutely be realized and fulfilled," he said.

As evidence of the success of his government's policies, Putin pointed to a less-than-expected decline in gross domestic product and lowered inflation.

“The decline in GDP by the end of the year will not be as big as we thought. Our calculation was at 10 percent or maybe even more,” he said, adding that Russia’s economy would return to the precrisis level not earlier than in two to three years.

The government is now projecting an 8 percent to 8.5 percent drop for the year.

Putin also said the inflation rate “would fall substantially” from 13.3 percent in 2008 to 9.6 percent in 2009, which was one of the lowest indicators since 1992.

Nevertheless, 9 percent, not to mention 10 percent, is “intolerably high” and the government will continue implementing its anti-inflation program, he said.

Putin also called for the extension of several government programs, some because they had been successful and others because they hadn’t worked out yet.

The government’s 300 billion ruble (\$10.3 billion) program for loan guarantees has not been effective enough and must be corrected, he said. He vowed that the state guarantees program would be implemented in full by the end of 2009 as planned initially. “We’ll continue this program in 2010. Enterprises will be able to raise more than 500 billion rubles in loans,” he said.

Critics have knocked the program of state guarantees, saying the bureaucratic hoops that banks and other enterprises had to jump through in order to qualify made them all but unattainable.

Putin also pushed a new mortgage program announced last week. The government plans to use 250 billion rubles from the Pension Fund to buy mortgage bonds, with the aim of pushing down interest rates on mortgages.

“In order for mortgages to become cheaper, rates should fall to 10 to 11 percent,” he said. “We have two sources for that purpose → the National Welfare Fund and pension savings being managed by Vneshekonombank.”

Putin said Thursday that the average mortgage rate of 14.5 was “too much.”

The prime minister also repeated pledges to provide support for the labor market, as the situation there was “very strained.”

The government will give 36 billion rubles in 2010 in order to support employment, Putin said, adding that it was less than in 2009, but was nonetheless “a significant sum.”

The country’s jobless rate was 7.7 percent in October, up from the September figure of 7.6 percent, the State Statistic Service said Friday.

In January, the government presented a 43 billion ruble employment stimulus package to fund region-specific job retraining programs, relocation assistance, small business development and job creation.

#4
Russia's Gorbachev considers political comeback
By Mansur Mirovalev
AP, November 20, 2009

MOSCOW — Former Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev criticized Kremlin policies Friday and toyed with the ambitious idea of attempting a political comeback.

Gorbachev said that corruption and overdependence on oil exports have aggravated the impact of the global economic crisis on Russia. He urged President Dmitry Medvedev and Prime Minister Vladimir Putin to restructure the economy, cut down government spending and ensure political freedoms.

But he also suggested everyday Russians must shake their reliance on government largesse that has been boosted by energy price hikes during the past decade.

"We have paternalistic expectations of government support," he told a conference at his charitable foundation. "The price of oil has gone up a little bit, and we're saying that life is back to normal."

Gorbachev said his concerns about Russia are prompting him to consider a more active role in politics.

"What I have said motivates me to create a political force that could oppose, that could pose questions," he said. "Evidently there is a need for it, and we should initiate it."

He spoke hesitantly, however, and seemed to acknowledge he would have a hard time winning active backing, even from like-minded people.

"Even those sitting here, I am sure no more than 10 per cent will say there is a need to act," Gorbachev said. "It's a personal choice, so make up your mind."

Gorbachev, 78, remains popular abroad for the role he played in ending the Cold War and liberating Eastern Europe from Moscow's grip. He was cheered enthusiastically by Germans this month at celebrations commemorating the 20th anniversary of Berlin Wall's fall.

But he is disliked by many Russians who blame him for the collapse of the Soviet Union and the years of social and economic turmoil that followed it.

Gorbachev has maintained a relatively low profile since stepping down as Soviet president in 1991 as the country disintegrated, and his political ventures have little success. In 2001, he helped found the Social Democratic Party of Russia, but resigned three years later in a dispute among its leaders about working more closely with the dominant Kremlin-backed party, United Russia.

The Social Democratic Party later was one of several ordered closed by the Supreme Court under new registration rules critics said were intended to help the Kremlin consolidate power. In 2007, Gorbachev was elected head of the Union of Social Democrats, which was formed with the goal of challenging the Kremlin, but its emergence went widely unnoticed.

#5

Russian Leader Expresses Support for Nonprofits

By Clifford J. Levy

New York Times, November 24, 2009

MOSCOW — President Dmitri A. Medvedev called Monday for tax incentives and other measures to assist Russia's beleaguered nonprofit groups, which have come under government pressure in recent years.

Mr. Medvedev, promoting policies that he hopes will modernize the country, said in a meeting with human rights advocates that new laws would not alleviate all the problems the groups faced, but that they would certainly help.

"Our main goal is the support of the authority of nonprofit groups in society, and the attraction to this sector of more talented people and philanthropic resources," Mr. Medvedev said. "We need to stimulate philanthropy and create a stimulus or a motivation for volunteers who toil for such organizations."

The government has sought in recent years to establish more control over nonprofit groups, especially those that receive foreign assistance. Mr. Medvedev's mentor, Prime Minister Vladimir V. Putin, the former president, has at times portrayed the groups as little more than tools that the West uses to meddle in Russia's affairs.

Under Mr. Putin, the groups were subjected to new regulations, as well as increased scrutiny that they have sometimes characterized as harassment.

Charities and other nonprofit groups have also not prospered in Russia because there is less of a tradition of giving here. In Soviet times, the Communist Party was supposed to take care of societal needs, so a philanthropic sector barely existed.

And current tax regulations do not encourage charitable donations or charitable activity, as they do in many countries, including the United States.

Since taking office last year, Mr. Medvedev has sought to reach out to nonprofit groups. He loosened the bureaucratic requirements that they face, which had been advocated by Mr. Putin. And on Monday, he indicated that the government would revamp tax and other laws, though he did not specify exactly how.

Still, groups that carry out what ruling party officials may view as provocative work, like human rights or election monitoring, may continue to face pressure. While Mr. Medvedev has in recent months suggested that these groups need to thrive, their leaders have reported that at the grass roots, little if anything has changed.

#6

Medvedev Orders Probe Into Lawyer's Prison Death AP, November 24, 2009

MOSCOW — Russian President Dmitry Medvedev on Tuesday ordered a high-level probe into the recent prison death of a lawyer who fought for greater transparency in Russian business.

Sergei Magnitsky, who died last week in a Moscow pretrial detention center, was arrested in November 2008 on tax-evasion accusations linked to his work with Hermitage Capital Management, once the largest investment fund in Russia.

William Browder, the chief executive of the London-based investment fund, has accused authorities of allowing pancreatitis that Mr. Magnitsky developed in jail to go untreated.

A Kremlin statement released Tuesday said Mr. Medvedev has ordered a probe into the death of Mr. Magnitsky, who was 37, and also into detention conditions for suspects of financial crimes.

Mr. Magnitsky's death is likely to deepen Western concerns about the risks faced by anyone who challenges the authorities in Russia.

Mikhail Khodorkovsky -- once Russia's richest man as the chief of oil major Yukos -- is serving an eight-year prison sentence on tax-evasion charges that critics call punishment for harboring political ambitions in then-President Vladimir Putin's Russia.

Mr. Khodorkovsky is currently fighting new charges that could keep him behind bars for decades while most of Yukos' assets were stripped and sold off to state concern Rosneft in auctions tainted by accusations of fraud. The jailed tycoon has issued a statement condemning Mr. Magnitsky's treatment.

The Prosecutor General's Investigative Committee said in a statement Tuesday that it was investigating the allegations that Mr. Magnitsky was denied medical assistance.

Hermitage fell from grace in Russia four years ago when Mr. Browder, a British citizen raised in the U.S., was barred from the country by authorities citing vague national security concerns.

Observers have said Messrs. Browder and Magnitsky may have made enemies in one of their campaigns for greater transparency and efficiency at some of Russia's biggest conglomerates, most of which have close ties to the state.

Mr. Browder said Mr. Magnitsky had been involved in defending Hermitage and its partner HSBC against a multimillion-dollar fraud and forgery scheme involving Interior Ministry officers. Mr. Browder said the scheme involved illegally taking over assets and using them to fraudulently reclaim \$230 million in taxes from the state.

The independent-leaning Novaya Gazeta on Monday published what it said were letters Mr. Magnitsky wrote from jail to a colleague complaining of insufferable chest pains and lack of medical care.

The Kremlin statement said Mr. Medvedev had taken on board concerns from a presidential council on human rights before ordering the chief prosecutor and the justice minister to look into the case.

#7

Russia corruption costs \$318 billion, one-third of GDP

By Fred Weir

Christian Science Monitor, November 23, 2009

MOSCOW — Why does the price of everything, from housing to food, keep shooting up in Russia despite a harsh economic downturn that's intensifying competition and dragging costs down just about everywhere else in the world?

There's a simple answer to that question, say experts: corruption.

"We estimate that businesses must add up to 40 percent to their production costs," due to the toll of bribery, official extortion and economic crime," says Anatoly Golubev, chair of the grass-roots Committee to Fight Corruption, who says corruption is a bigger threat to Russian society than terrorism. "It corrodes peoples' souls and destroys the state from within."

Surveys show that the vast majority of Russians encounter corruption at almost every turn in their daily lives, from dealing with traffic policemen to securing a place in a good school or getting a vital personal document renewed. Most businessmen maintain a permanent line in their ledgers entitled "problem solving" — a euphemism for paying bribes to inspectors, cops and local officials.

"If you're a government official in this country, and you have some sort of power over people, you invariably use it for your personal advantage," says Masha Lipman, an expert with the Carnegie Center in Moscow. "It's a ubiquitous problem."

The independent InDem Foundation in Moscow, which does the most comprehensive studies of the problem, estimates that Russians pay an estimated \$318 billion in bribes each year — a whopping one-third of gross domestic product.

In a survey released last week, the international consultancy PricewaterhouseCoopers found that 71 percent of domestic and foreign companies working in Russia were victims of "economic crime" in the past year, double the rate that prevails in other BRIC countries — Brazil, India, and China — and a 12 percent jump over a similar study in 2007.

Medvedev: Corruption 'public enemy No. 1

Kremlin leaders are acutely aware of the problem, and have frequently made it a rhetorical priority. Prime Minister Vladimir Putin, who was Russia's president from 2000-08 and is still viewed by many as the most powerful leader in the country, insisted from the beginning of his presidency that corruption was at the top of his to-do list.

President Dmitry Medvedev has pegged his political reputation to an official assault on corruption, which he labeled "public enemy No. 1" shortly after arriving in the Kremlin last year.

"Corruption is one of the main obstacles to [economic] development.... the fight against it must be waged on all fronts," Mr. Medvedev told Russians in his second annual State of the Nation speech earlier this month.

From 147th to 146th on Transparency International's ranking list

But Viktor Korgunyuk, an expert with InDem, says there have been no "serious" efforts to fight corruption so far — only words. "The whole system is based on corruption, and no one is going to cut off the branch upon which they are sitting," he says.

The only touch of faint praise for Medvedev's efforts comes from the global corruption watchdog Transparency International, which this year bumped Russia up one-tenth of a point in its Corruption Perceptions Index, so that it now stands at 146th (up from 147th last year), alongside Sierra Leone, in the group's 2009 list that ranks 177 countries according to the perceived levels of corruption.

"I wouldn't call it any kind of improvement, but the situation has stabilized," says Yelena Panfilova, director of the Moscow Transparency International Center.

She says the group's index, which is compiled from expert surveys, could be tracking a more hopeful reaction on the part of businessmen and political insiders to recent developments, such as a new law on corruption passed by the Russian parliament this year, which may set the stage for real change. Russia has never before had a comprehensive law that defines categories of corruption and sets criminal penalties for each, Ms. Panfilova says.

"There's been lots of anticorruption rhetoric in the past, but now we see the development of an institutional and legal framework to actually fight corruption," she adds. "Everything, of course, will depend on implementation in the future."

#8

U.S., Russia study ways to extend START verification

By David Alexander

Reuters, November 23, 2009

WASHINGTON — U.S. negotiators working to conclude a new strategic arms treaty with Russia are discussing ways to continue nuclear weapons monitoring until the new accord can be ratified, a State Department spokesman said on Monday.

U.S. President Barack Obama and Russian President Dmitry Medvedev agreed in July to work on a new treaty that would cut their deployed strategic nuclear arsenals to between 1,500 and 1,675 warheads.

The current Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty between Russia and the United States expires on December 5. Negotiators in Geneva are hopeful of reaching a draft agreement around that time, but the deal would still have to be ratified by both sides, State Department spokesman Ian Kelly told reporters.

"The negotiating teams continue to work very hard in Geneva. They have agreement on a number of issues but they are also trying to work out some of the areas where they need to come together," he said.

"Because the treaty has to be ratified by the respective legislatures, we ... know that we are not going to have a ratified treaty that can enter into force," Kelly added. "So we are having discussions with Russia to see how we can continue some of the transparency and verification measures ... until the treaty is ratified."

Senator Richard Lugar, the ranking Republican on the Foreign Relations Committee, introduced a bill last week that would permit Russian arms experts to come to the United States to carry out inspections permitted under the START treaty.

The measure would let Obama approve the inspections as long as the Russians extended similar permission to U.S. arms experts.

Lugar, in a Senate speech, said extending the START verification mechanism was particularly important because it is also used to monitor the 2002 Moscow Treaty on strategic nuclear forces.

Kelly said the Lugar legislation was part of the effort to extend the START weapons inspection and verification regime.

"Since we recognize we're not going to have a fully ratified treaty in both capitals, we're looking at ways that a number of provisions can remain in effect in this period between December 5 and whenever the new treaty is ratified," he said.

"These monitoring mechanisms are important," Kelly said. "You need to have some kind of mechanism to keep these means of monitoring in place and ongoing."

Estimates of current nuclear stockpiles vary, but the U.S.-based Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists estimated at the start of 2009 the United States had about 2,200 operationally deployed nuclear warheads and Russia had about 2,790.

#9

US legislators launch congressional caucus on Central Asia EurasiaNet.org, November 24, 2009

Nothing highlights the growing importance of Central Asia in Washington more than the formation of a congressional caucus.

The 21-member, bipartisan Congressional Caucus on Central Asia held its roll-out reception on November 18. Its stated aim is to strengthen US-Central Asia relations, paying particular attention to the shared interests of combating terrorism and drug trafficking, as well as promoting the development of the region's natural resources and encouraging democratization. The caucus is co-chaired by non-voting delegate Eni Faleomavaega (D-AS), Chairman of the Foreign Affairs' Subcommittee on Asia, the Pacific, and the Global Environment, and Rep. Buck McKeon (R-CA), the ranking Republican on the Armed Services Committee.

"For purposes of our energy security and especially given the increasing presence of US troops in Afghanistan and the threat terrorist organizations pose to all of us, now it is time for us to help the Central Asian countries make a peaceful transition to democracy," Faleomavaega said during the November 18 reception.

The caucus launch punctuates a year of increased focus on Central Asia by US officials. The establishment of the Northern Distribution Network - a route that funnels military and non-military goods to Afghanistan from Europe via Central Asian states -- has significantly heightened US interest in regional security issues. [For background see the Eurasia Insight archive].

Washington-based trade and business councils for Central Asian states have become more robust, and those tied to Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan have each held investment seminars in the United States this fall.

According to congressional staff, Faleomavaega was the driving force in creating the caucus. In 2006, responsibility for Central Asia was switched into his Foreign Affairs subcommittee, causing the delegate to become more involved with regional issues. But according to his office, Faleomavaega's original interest in Central Asia was based not on security or commerce, but on a shared nuclear history with his home territory of American Samoa. The South Pacific was a testing ground for US nuclear weapons during the Cold War - just as Kazakhstan served as the chief test site for Soviet scientists. The delegate was the first American legislator to visit the Soviet testing ground in Semipalatinsk.

About 100 guests attended the November 18 event, which included several speeches and traditional Central Asian dances. Among the attendees were diplomats from Central Asia and the former Soviet Republics of Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan, members of Congress, State Department officials, trade council representatives, Kazakhstan's Deputy Foreign Minister Kairat Umarov and US Ambassador to Kazakhstan

Richard Hoagland. The keynote speaker, Robert Blake, assistant secretary of state for South and Central Asian Affairs, announced that the State Department will be initiating annual bilateral talks with Central Asian nations. The first round of talks is expected to occur in 2010, he added.

"We aim to conduct these consultations in a spirit of mutual respect, which means that we won't pretend to have a monopoly on wisdom, or seek to impose our system or to preach or patronize," Blake said "But we will expect the same kind of respect in return and won't hesitate to speak, as friends, on issues like human rights or corruption."

Central Asian diplomats have reacted positively to both the formation of the congressional caucus and to the State Department's initiative. "Kazakhstan is pleased by the creation of the US Congressional Caucus on Central Asia, and we are honored to be a part of that caucus," Erlan Idrissov, Kazakhstan's envoy to Washington, said November 23 in written comments to EurasiaNet. "It is another example of the meaningful relationship between Kazakhstan and the other nations of Central Asia and the United States. As an emerging democracy, we intend to engage fully in the caucus to continue strengthening relationships as we build our own democratic processes."

On the question of democratization, Faleomavaega called for patience on behalf of the international community. "The path to democracy is difficult," he said. "Considering that until 18 years ago, the Central Asian countries had no known democratic past, it is my hope that we will offer these countries a helping hand rather than a clenched fist."

#10

Medvedev vs. Putin? Mystery returns to the Kremlin. Christian Science Monitor, November 24, 2009

Once again, Russia seems to be living up to Winston Churchill's famous description of being "a riddle, wrapped in a mystery, inside an enigma."

Vladimir Putin defied that description. By May 2008, when his eight years as president ended, Mr. Putin had clearly and purposefully turned Russia into a "managed democracy," cutting back political and human rights, leading an aggressive foreign policy, and reintroducing state control of giant corporations, especially oil and gas. No question about intentions there.

But mystery again shrouds the Kremlin's high walls, as people inside and outside Russia wonder what direction it is headed in. The uncertainty poses a particular problem for the White House, which is attempting to press the "reset button" in strained relations with Moscow. It needs Russian cooperation on front-burner issues such as Iran and the war in Afghanistan.

Until recent months, it's been assumed that Mr. Putin, now the prime minister, still runs Russia; that his protégé, President Dmitry Medvedev, is his political lapdog. Mr. Medvedev, however, appears to be straining at the leash. Will he eventually slip his collar?

In speeches, he sounds as if he wants to steer Russia away from the Putin model. In his Internet manifesto in September, in his state-of-the-nation speech earlier this month, and last weekend, when addressing his colleagues in the United Russia party, Medvedev sharply criticized much of what his mentor had built up (without naming names, of course).

He's railed against state-run corporations and Russia's unhealthy addiction to fickle revenues from natural resources. He's warned about a foreign policy in which Moscow puffs up its chest (Soviet style?). A lawyer by training, he's come out swinging for rule of law, and he lectured United Russia widely criticized for fraudulent regional elections in October that it must learn to win elections honestly. Fighting worsening corruption is also high on his list (an estimated third of Russian gross domestic product goes to paying bribes).

All of this in the name of "modernizing" Russia and all welcome by the West if his ideas are fulfilled.

But Russia's youthful, Internet-savvy president has taken pitifully few steps to back up his shake-things-up rhetoric, which stretches to the beginning of his presidency. He makes a dash here and there this week, for instance, he ordered an investigation into the prison death of a lawyer who advocated for greater transparency in Russian business. He also fired the Kremlin's longtime media adviser a Putin ally for abuse of office.

Medvedev's inaction prompts speculation. Is he truly interested in a different direction from Putin, but simply not in a political position to carry out his plans? Or is he merely Putin's valve to vent frustrations within a managed democracy? Perhaps the two are really on the same page, but trying to satisfy different audiences.

Indeed, Putin has since endorsed Medvedev's state-of-the-nation speech, which emphasized the need for economic modernization. "I am sure this call reflects the mood of all Russian society," Mr. Putin said Saturday at the United Russia conference.

The truth is, no one really knows where the Putin-Medvedev relationship is going perhaps not even both men themselves, though the answer should become clearer the closer Russia moves to the 2012 election, when Putin is qualified to again run for president.

This uncertainty makes trying to take sides a dangerous guessing game. The US has no choice but to deal with the ambiguity as best it can to use its leverage where it can, to argue in both countries' interest where it can, and to disagree where it must.

Medvedev may be Russia's next Gorbachev. Wouldn't that be nice. But don't count on it.