

WASHINGTON, D.C. December 18, 2009



TO: NCSJ Leadership and Interested Parties

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

In Brief

Dear Friends,

Please see below for NCSJ's Weekly News Update. We wish you a Chanukah Sameach for this last night.

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. December 18, 2009

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#1a

**Ukrainian teens arrested for Holocaust monument attack
JTA, December 13, 2009**

Four youths were arrested in western Ukraine for allegedly vandalizing a Holocaust monument.

The youths were arrested in Kamenets-Podolsky last week, according to the UCSJ: Union of Councils for Jews in the Former Soviet Union, citing the Forum news Web site.

The youths allegedly gathered ritual stones from nearby gravestones at the Holocaust site and threw them at the monument, damaging it in several places, according to UCSJ. Police detained the suspects two days later and charged them with desecrating gravestones.

The vandalism carries a possible criminal penalty of up to three years in prison, but usually results in nothing more than a fine or suspended sentence, according to UCSJ.

There is no indication that prosecutors plan on bringing hate crimes charges against the suspects.

#1b

Uzbekistan Accused of Pre-Election Crackdown Reuters, December 14, 2009

ALMATY, Kazakhstan — The Uzbek government is cracking down on rights activists before Dec. 27 parliamentary elections, Human Rights Watch said, criticizing the West for staying silent.

Uzbekistan this year mended ties with the West that had been all but severed in 2005 after its harsh suppression of a riot in the town of Andijan where hundreds died, according to witnesses. The country is now an important link in a supply route for U.S. troops in nearby Afghanistan. Western governments and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe have praised it for rights progress.

But the U.S.-based Human Rights Watch said the Uzbek government was attacking and harassing rights campaigners. “Uzbekistan’s international partners have been praising the government for human rights improvements, but this praise is wholly undeserved,” said Holly Cartner, the group’s Europe and Central Asia director. “Anyone who tries to report on human rights in Uzbekistan clearly risks getting attacked, arrested or worse.”

The group cited several cases where police prevented Uzbek activists from meeting its researcher Tanya Lokshina, who was attacked and held by police in what it called a “setup” this month.

#1c

Medvedev Calls for ‘Simultaneous’ Commitments on Climate Change By Lyubov Pronina Bloomberg, December 14, 2009

President Dmitry Medvedev called on the U.S., Brazil, India and China to coordinate efforts to combat climate change, while pledging to boost energy efficiency and nuclear power at home.

“These must be simultaneous commitments and commitments that we all abide by,” Medvedev said today in his video blog posted on the Kremlin Web site. “Trying to do this on our own will be fruitless and pointless.”

Russia expects the United Nations climate talks in Copenhagen to result in a “political” rather than a legal agreement, Alexander Bedritsky, Medvedev’s adviser on climate matters, said on Dec. 11. More than 190 countries are meeting in Copenhagen for two weeks of UN-led talks to negotiate terms for a climate accord. Medvedev will visit Copenhagen on Dec. 17 and 18, for the last two days of the talks.

Russia is seeking a binding agreement with the world’s largest economies on climate change. Russia aims to reduce emissions by as much as 25 percent from a 1990 baseline by 2020. The country’s greenhouse gas output, now at about 6 percent of global emissions, hasn’t recovered to Soviet-era levels.

The government plans to increase energy efficiency in Russia by 40 percent in the next decade by modernizing the economy, while boosting use of renewable energy sources, Medvedev said. Russia plans to boost nuclear power to 25 percent of its electricity supply by 2030.

#1d

Moscow is Ready for Chanukah FJC, December 14 2009

MOSCOW, Russia – Like every year, the Jewish community of Moscow is hosting widespread celebrations for Chanukah festival. The events began on December 13 at 5 p.m. at the city's famous Manezh Square. Manezh Square is near Red Square and the Kremlin, where a massive Chanukah Menorah is traditionally erected. The Menorah lighting ceremony was led by Russia's Chief Rabbi Berel Lazar and included Mayor of Moscow Yuri Luzhkov and the leadership of the Federation of Jewish Communities of Russia, as well as representatives of various political and social organizations. Guests enjoyed a holiday performance by the renowned "Chasidic Cappella" choir.

In addition, public Chanukah Menorahs are also being lit in other parts of the city. For instance, the Jewish community in the Fili-Davydkovo neighborhood is holding a Chanukah ceremony on the square in front of the Gorbunov House of Culture, a well-known center for concerts in Moscow.

In addition, a large Chanukah Menorah lighting is also taking place in the prestigious suburban neighborhood of Barvikha, located on Moscow's Rublevskoe Shosse.

In the days leading up to Chanukah, the kosher restaurant at the Moscow Jewish Community Center began preparing traditional Chanukah treats such as doughnuts and potato latkas (pancakes) which are quite popular.

#1e

Delay Is Expected on Treaty Talks Bloomberg, December 16, 2009

The United States does not expect to conclude negotiations with Russia on a nuclear arms treaty in time for an accord to be signed later this week when President Obama is in Copenhagen, the White House press secretary, Robert Gibbs, said Tuesday.

"We certainly hope that we continue to make progress on the negotiations," Mr. Gibbs said at his daily briefing. "I don't know if it gets done this week."

The 1991 Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty expired Dec. 5, although both countries continue to abide by it. Mr. Obama and President Dmitri A. Medvedev of Russia have pledged to sign a new accord that would lead to a reduction in the nuclear arsenals of both sides. Mr. Obama leaves on Thursday for the climate conference in Copenhagen.

"We're not planning currently for a signing ceremony in Copenhagen, and we're not planning to visit any nearby countries on that trip," Mr. Gibbs said.

#1f

President of Ukraine meets Chanukah in Odessa FJC, December 17, 2009

ODESSA, Ukraine – President of Ukraine Victor Yushchenko joined the Jewish community of Odessa in a ceremony for lighting the candles of the Chanukah Menorah. The event was held in the Odessa synagogue.

Chief Rabbi of Odessa and Southern Ukraine Avraham Wolf, who is also a Chabad-Lubavitch emissary serving Jews in this area, emphasized that the honor of lighting the shamash candle of the Chanukah Menorah was bestowed on President Yushchenko for all that he has done in order to ensure that there is freedom of speech and freedom of religion and conscience in Ukraine.

In addressing the crowd gathered for this Chanukah celebration, President Yushchenko noted that he is very happy to be attending this event on this particular occasion. The president noted that he feels that he carries a personal responsibility to all national minorities of the country, including the Jewish community, in such areas as securing their religious rights and freedoms. "I will do my best so that all nations, including Jews, can receive the benefits of everything that they might not even be able to enjoy in their homelands. This is so, because it would be a compliment to our country – Ukraine – and to our freedom and democracy," he stated.

The Jewish community of Odessa is one of hundreds across Ukraine that is celebrating the holiday of light. It is a member of the Federation of Jewish communities of the CIS and Baltic States.

#1g
Public menorah in Russia vandalized
JTA, December 17, 2009

Vandals damaged a public menorah in a Russian city.

The vandals also damaged posters and decorations set up around the menorah in Monday's incident in downtown Smolensk, according to the Interfax news service.

Smolensk Rabbi Levi Mondshain and head of the local Jewish community Zinovy Agranat filed an official complaint with police, according to the report.

Hundreds of Jews had gathered Sunday in Victory Square in downtown Smolensk for a public candlelighting ceremony.

#1h
Medvedev Signs Climate Doctrine as Copenhagen Prospects Fade
By Maria Kolesnikova
Bloomberg, December 17, 2009

Russia President Dmitry Medvedev signed a climate change doctrine for the world's largest supplier of oil and gas, even as prospects for a political agreement at a climate summit in Copenhagen fade.

"We realize that signing a global agreement in Copenhagen is virtually impossible," Arkady Dvorkovich, the president's top economic adviser, told reporters in Moscow today. "But we need a road map for the coming months so that we can reach an agreement."

Medvedev's plan sets out steps Russia, the world's third- biggest power consumer, must take to use less power to create the same economic benefits, Dvorkovich said. The government plans to increase energy efficiency in Russia by 40 percent in the next decade by modernizing the economy, Medvedev said on Dec. 14.

The plan, which the president signed yesterday, urges further study of climate trends and sets aside funds to monitor and aid regions of Russia that may be affected by the effects of global warming, Dvorkovich said.

Russia seeks a binding agreement with the world's largest economies on climate change, and aims to reduce its emissions by as much as 25 percent from a 1990 baseline by 2020. The country's greenhouse gas output, now at about 6 percent of global emissions, fell by about one-third after the Soviet Union collapsed.

#2
Moldovan Christians tear down public menorah
JTA, December 14, 2009

Some 200 fundamentalist Orthodox Christians in Moldova took down a public Chanukah menorah and planted a wooden cross in its place.

News footage showed a bearded priest leading the group in chanting anti-Semitic slogans during Sunday's incident. The menorah had been installed by the Jewish community in the Moldovan capital, Chisinau.

The group removed the large, metal menorah, which had been set up on downtown Europe Square, and placed it upside down on Stefan cel Mare Square, at the base of a statue of King Stephen the Great. Neither police nor onlookers intervened.

"The Jews can try to kill us, to traumatize our children," but Moldovan Orthodox believers will resist, the priest said, speaking into a sound system. Moldova, he said, was an Orthodox country, and the Jewish people are trying to "dominate people." Allowing the menorah to be set up had been "a sacrilege, an indulgence of state power today," he said.

Justice Minister Alexandru Tanese condemned the incident. The Orthodox Metropolitan promised to investigate and take action, according to reports.

Incitement to racial and religious hatred in Moldova is subject to a fine or imprisonment of up to three years.

"It's a despicable act. We hope the government will take appropriate action against the perpetrators," said Mark Levin, executive director of NCSJ, an advocacy group for Jews in the former Soviet Union. "This is obviously something that should never have been allowed to happen."

In neighboring Romania, the Center for Monitoring and Combating Anti-Semitism issued a statement urging authorities to take "immediate measures" against the perpetrators.

"Such an act committed by a priest with the Orthodox Church is totally inconceivable, and it takes us back to the days when the local population, if it did not participate, witnessed with indifference the crimes committed against the Jews," the center's statement said.

"The Moldovan government and the Orthodox Church must punish the perpetrators of this despicable anti-Semitic crime and send a clear signal to Moldovan society and to the Jewish community that the government and the church will not tolerate anti-Semitism," said Abraham H. Foxman, National Director of the Anti-Defamation League.

In a letter to Nicolae Chirtoaca, Moldova's Ambassador to the United States, ADL called on his government "to apprehend and punish the perpetrators of this anti-Semitic crime." The ADL letter said it was particularly shocked at reports that 15 to 20 police officers were at the site during the protest, but did little to intervene.

#3

Moldovan government 'regrets' menorah incident JTA, December 16, 2009

The Moldovan government has expressed "deep regret" over the tearing down of a public menorah in its capital.

In a letter to Richard Stone, chairman of the NCSJ, an advocacy group for Jews in the former Soviet Union, and Mark Levin, NCSJ executive director, Moldovan U.S. Ambassador Nicolae Chirtoaca wrote that "(T)he Republic of Moldova is a democratic state and guarantees the fundamental human rights and freedoms, whereas hatred, intolerance, xenophobia and other negative phenomena are inadmissible."

On Sunday, some 200 fundamentalist Orthodox Christians took down the Chanukah menorah in downtown Chisinau that had had been installed by the Jewish community and planted a wooden cross in its place. Neither police nor onlookers intervened as the large, metal menorah in Europe Square was placed upside down on Stefan cel Mare Square at the base of a statue of King Stephen the Great.

News footage showed a bearded priest leading the group in chanting anti-Semitic slogans during the incident.

According to the letter, the Moldovan government has "called on representatives of all religious confessions, ethnic groups and all citizens to abstain from actions that may damage harmony in society, friendship and co-existence of various ethnic groups and religious confessions, peace and good understanding."

#4

In Shift, U.S. Talks to Russia on Internet Security

By John Markoff and Andrew E. Kramer

New York Times, December 13, 2009

The United States has begun talks with Russia and a United Nations arms control committee about strengthening Internet security and limiting military use of cyberspace.

American and Russian officials have different interpretations of the talks so far, but the mere fact that the United States is participating represents a significant policy shift after years of rejecting Russia's overtures. Officials familiar with the talks said the Obama administration realized that more nations were developing cyberweapons and that a new approach was needed to blunt an international arms race.

In the last two years, Internet-based attacks on government and corporate computer systems have multiplied to thousands a day. Hackers, usually never identified, have compromised Pentagon computers, stolen industrial secrets and temporarily jammed government and corporate Web sites. President Obama ordered a review of the nation's Internet security in February and is preparing to name an official to coordinate national policy.

Last month, a delegation led by Gen. Vladislav P. Sherstyuk, a deputy secretary of the Russian Security Council and the former leader of the Russian equivalent of the National Security Agency, met in Washington with representatives from the National Security Council and the Departments of State, Defense and Homeland Security. Officials familiar with these talks said the two sides made progress in bridging divisions that had long separated the countries.

Indeed, two weeks later in Geneva, the United States agreed to discuss cyberwarfare and cybersecurity with representatives of the United Nations committee on disarmament and international security. The United States had previously insisted on addressing those matters in the committee on economic issues.

The Russians have held that the increasing challenges posed by military activities to civilian computer networks can be best dealt with by an international treaty, similar to treaties that have limited the spread of nuclear, chemical and biological weapons. The United States had resisted, arguing that it was impossible to draw a line between the commercial and military uses of software and hardware.

Now there is a thaw, said people familiar with the discussions.

"In the last months there are more signs of building better cooperation between the U.S. and Russia," said Veni Markovski, a Washington-based adviser to Bulgaria's Internet security chief and representative to Russia for the organization that assigns Internet domain names. "These are signs that show the dangers of cybercrime are too big to be neglected."

Viktor V. Sokolov, deputy director of the Institute of Information Security in Moscow, a policy research group run by General Sherstyuk, said the Russian view was that the American position on Internet security had shifted perceptibly in recent months.

"There is movement," he said. Before, bilateral negotiations were limited to the relevant Russian police agency, the Bureau of Special Technical Operations, the Internet division of the Ministry of Interior, and the F.B.I.

Mr. Sokolov characterized this new round of discussions as the opening of negotiations between Russia and the United States on a possible disarmament treaty for cyberspace, something Russia has long sought but the United States has resisted.

“The talks took place in a good atmosphere,” he said. “And they agreed to continue this process. There are positive movements.”

A State Department official, who was not authorized to speak about the talks and requested anonymity, disputed the Russian characterization of the American position. While the Russians have continued to focus on treaties that may restrict weapons development, the United States is hoping to use the talks to increase international cooperation in opposing Internet crime. Strengthening defenses against Internet criminals would also strengthen defenses against any military-directed cyberattacks, the United States maintains. An administration official said the United States was seeking common ground with the Russians.

The United Nations discussions are scheduled to resume in New York in January, and the two countries also plan to talk at an annual Russia-sponsored Internet security conference in Garmisch, Germany.

The American interest in reopening discussions shows that the Obama administration, even in absence of a designated Internet security chief, is breaking with the Bush administration, which declined to talk with Russia about issues related to military attacks using the Internet.

Many countries, including the United States, are developing weapons for use on computer networks that are ever more integral to the operations of everything from banks to electrical power systems to government offices. They include “logic bombs” that can be hidden in computers to halt them at crucial times or damage circuitry; “botnets” that can disable or spy on Web sites and networks; or microwave radiation devices that can burn out computer circuits miles away.

The Russians have focused on three related issues, according to American officials involved in the talks that are part of a broader thaw in American-Russian relations known as the “reset” that also include negotiations on a new nuclear disarmament treaty. In addition to continuing efforts to ban offensive cyberweapons, they have insisted on what they describe as an issue of sovereignty calling for a ban on “cyberterrorism.” American officials view the issue differently and describe this as a Russian effort to restrict “politically destabilizing speech.” The Russians have also rejected a portion of the Council of Europe Convention on Cybercrime that they assert violates their Constitution by permitting foreign law enforcement agencies to conduct Internet searches inside Russian borders.

In late October at a luncheon during a meeting on Security and Counter Terrorism at Moscow State University, General Sherstyuk told a group of American executives that the Russians would never sign the European Cybercrime Treaty as long as it contained the language permitting cross-border searches.

#5

Top Russian Prison Officials Are Dismissed by Medvedev

By Clifford J. Levy

New York Times, December 12, 2009

MOSCOW — President Dmitri A. Medvedev has dismissed the head of the Moscow prisons and numerous other prison administrators in response to the death of a lawyer in pretrial detention, officials said on Friday.

The lawyer, Sergei L. Magnitsky, had been ensnared in a feud between an international investment fund, Hermitage Capital Management, and the Russian law enforcement authorities, and his defenders said his death last month showed that the country’s criminal justice system was severely troubled.

Mr. Magnitsky died of toxic shock and heart failure at a pretrial detention center in Moscow, and Mr. Medvedev reacted by ordering an inquiry into how Mr. Magnitsky was treated and into the quality of medical care in the prison system.

Aleksandr Reymer, director of the prison system, said in a radio interview on Friday that the head of the Moscow division, Vladimir Davydov, had been ousted.

Mr. Reymer said Mr. Magnitsky's death spurred an inquiry into medical care in the prison system that found "violations of our requirements" and resulted in the dismissal of several top officials.

Mr. Reymer told the Echo of Moscow station that Mr. Magnitsky's death itself was still being investigated. Another prison official acknowledged last month that preliminary indications showed that there had been wrongdoing in Mr. Magnitsky's care.

Besides Mr. Davydov, several other senior prison officials, including those overseeing pretrial detention and medical services, were dismissed, as were regional administrators elsewhere. Russian media reported that in all, more than 20 officials lost their jobs.

While Mr. Medvedev has taken action on prison conditions, he has not addressed broader questions related to Mr. Magnitsky's death.

Mr. Magnitsky's defenders assert that he was arrested by corrupt law enforcement officials who were behind a scheme to steal hundreds of millions of dollars from the government. They say he was being pressed to testify against Hermitage, whose owner, William Browder, was once one of the most prominent foreign investors in Russia.

Mr. Browder regularly criticized corruption in Russian companies before being barred from the country in 2005 for reasons that the government has never explained.

#6

Why Georgia sends troops to Afghanistan

By Mikheil Saakashvili

Telegraph.co.uk, December 14, 2009

Following President Obama's compelling speech on our common mission in Afghanistan, NATO members and other countries pledged about 7,000 additional troops for this critical effort. My country, Georgia, committed just under 1,000 of that total. As Secretary of State Clinton observed, this likely makes Georgia the highest per-capita troop contributor to NATO's operation in Afghanistan.

This is not easy for our small nation, with its population of just 4.7 million. Our economy, like those of other countries, has been buffeted by the global economic downturn. Unlike most countries, we are struggling with a recent invasion that ethnically cleansed tens of thousands of Georgian citizens and an illegal occupation of 20% of Georgia's sovereign territory.

Perhaps some might be astonished that a country not yet in NATO—and partly occupied by more than 10,000 hostile troops—would make such a deep commitment to an Allied mission abroad. Let me explain why, on the contrary, it makes perfect sense.

As President Obama pointed out, the threat of violent extremism endangers all nations that subscribe to the principles of liberal democracy, tolerance, gender equality, and rule of law. Those principles made America the target on 9/11. Spain was hit on March 11, 2004, and Britain on July 7, 2005. Any of our countries could be next. So we have a shared interest in preventing Afghanistan from again becoming a safe haven for extremists and terrorists who might target any of our states.

Even though Georgia is not yet a NATO member—and while we know our path to membership may be long—we see ourselves as firmly allied in purpose and values with the U.S. and the transatlantic community. But this cannot just be rhetoric or an empty affiliation. Being part of such a community, even as a small country, we feel obliged and honored to contribute to our common security.

That is why we are sending serious forces—a heavy battalion and two light companies—and we are committing them with no restrictions on the kinds of missions and combat in which they can participate. Indeed, almost 800 will be deploying with the U.S. Marines into Helmand Province, where some of the most intense fighting has occurred.

Afghanistan and its region are now the central battle for the transatlantic community, and we will do everything possible to help. In addition to the nearly 1,000 troops we committed last week, we are making contributions in other ways.

For example, the U.S. and NATO have already started using Georgian ports, rail lines, and roads to transport non-lethal supplies to Afghanistan. American military experts have concluded this is a safe, reliable, and cost-saving transit route, and we stand ready to expand its use—particularly as the US and NATO work to speed the arrival of new troops and equipment.

As President Obama so eloquently expressed, the fight against extremism and terrorism cannot be won by military means alone; education, democratization, and institution building are equally, if not more important. Here, too, Georgians have something to contribute, given our recent experience in democracy building.

Less than a decade ago, Georgia was considered by many to be a failing state. But with the support of our friends in the West, and driven by our shared values, we were able to make dramatic changes. As a young democracy, we continue working to open our politics, judiciary, media, and other major institutions. We now include the opposition in meetings of our national security council. We have given opposition-controlled media stations nationwide broadcast licenses. In May, we will hold our first direct elections for mayor in our capital, Tbilisi, after multiple rounds of dialogue with the opposition that bolstered confidence in the electoral process. And we continue to make dramatic gains against corruption and toward an open business environment.

Over the past five years, Georgia was the most successful country in the world in terms of fighting corruption, according to Transparency International, and Europe's top economic reformer, according to the World Bank.

Our experience gives us confidence that success is possible on the political and civil fronts in Afghanistan, and Georgia will do everything possible to help strength Afghanistan's institutions. Six years ago, less than 10% of Georgian citizens trusted the police; today, more than 70% do. Our reform know-how could help in training Afghanistan's police forces and other civil servants, an effort that is crucial to achieving long-term stability and a more transparent government.

The test of the bonds among nations is not what we do when it is easy, but rather what we do when it is necessary and hard. Georgia has been grateful for the extent to which the United States and Europe have stood alongside us over recent years.

Now we are proud to stand - and fight - alongside you.

Mikhail Saakashvili is President of Georgia.

#7

Russia Demands Its Credits Moscow, to Keep Its Carbon Permits, Threatens to Block a Global Climate Deal By Guy Chazan and Jacob Gronholt-Pedersen Wall Street Journal, December 14, 2009

A Russian demand that it keep its huge surplus of emissions permits after they expire in 2012 is overshadowing global climate talks now under way in Copenhagen, with some observers saying it could hamper efforts to reach a deal and upset the global carbon market.

Russia has warned it could reject any deal from Copenhagen that doesn't allow it to carry forward the unused carbon permits it holds as a result of the 1997 Kyoto Protocol. Those who argue against letting Russia keep the credits say Moscow could end up selling them abroad, leading to a collapse in the price of carbon.

That in turn could hurt efforts to green the world's economy. One principle behind promoting an international system of carbon credits – the currency for buying and selling the right to pollute – is that the price of carbon should be high enough to encourage investment in nonfossil-fuel technology such as nuclear, wind and solar.

In a bid to reassure leaders meeting at Copenhagen, Alexander Bedritsky, an adviser to Russian President Dmitry Medvedev, said Russia had no plans to sell its unspent permits abroad. But he stressed that Russia would endorse a global deal only if it allowed Moscow to bank its permits.

Observers say Moscow hasn't decided what to do about the surplus. "There is a chance that Russia could relinquish the permits if it will help the talks," says Vladimir Slivyak, head of Ecodefense, a Russian environmental group. "The authorities would like to be seen as saving Copenhagen if the talks get into trouble." He noted that Mr. Medvedev was due to join world leaders at the summit next week. Previously, Mr. Medvedev had said he would stay away.

The dispute dates to the Kyoto Protocol of 1997, the first international treaty obliging countries to cut their emissions of greenhouse gases. Under Kyoto, a country that has difficulty meeting its emissions goal can buy credits from another country that has reduced them beyond its target.

Russia was required by Kyoto to maintain its carbon-dioxide output at 1990 levels, rather than cut them. But in the aftermath of the Soviet breakup in 1991 and Russia's subsequent economic collapse, its emissions plummeted, and it easily exceeded its Kyoto targets.

That left it with a surplus of carbon allowances equivalent to six gigatons of carbon dioxide, or roughly the same as China's annual emissions. In theory, Russia could sell the stockpile to other countries – a potential multibillion-dollar bonanza.

The fate of the allowances is unclear once Kyoto expires in 2012. Russia wants them carried forward, in recognition of its achievement in cutting its CO2 volumes, which it says have fallen by 34% since 1990.

Mr. Bedritsky said Russia wasn't ready to curb its economic growth for the sake of reducing emissions.

#8

Statement on First Meeting of Russia-US Working Group on Cultural Exchanges Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, December 10, 2009

The Russian-American Presidential Commission Working Group on Educational and Cultural Exchanges held its first meeting in Moscow, December 7-9, under the chairmanship of Mikhail E. Shvydkoy, Russian Special Presidential Representative for International Cultural Cooperation, and Judith McHale, US Under Secretary of State.

The sides reviewed the current situation, and discussed the prospects for stepping up bilateral cooperation in culture, education, science, sports and youth exchanges to widen the mutual interest of the peoples of both countries and to realize new projects in these areas.

At the conclusion of the talks, the sides issued a joint statement (follows below).

JOINT STATEMENT

At a meeting in July, President of the Russian Federation Dmitry Medvedev and United States President Barack Obama recognized the need to "reset" relations between our countries and deepen the partnership between the peoples of Russia and America on the basis of mutual respect and understanding.

In this connection a Russian-American Presidential Commission, including 16 working groups, was established to start the process of creating the foundations of cooperation on a wide range of issues in which we have common interests.

The Working Group on Educational and Cultural Exchanges, headed by Mikhail E. Shvydkoy, Russian Special Presidential Representative for International Cultural Cooperation and Foreign Ministry Ambassador at Large, and

Judith McHale, US Under Secretary of State for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs, held its first meeting in Moscow, December 7-9.

Apart from the co-chairs and officials, leading representatives of Russian and American nongovernmental organizations, business circles and professional sports associations took part in its work.

During the discussions a broad range of questions was touched on, and a number of recommendations and innovative initiatives were worked out that should provide a solid foundation for future cooperation.

In the field of culture we intend to embody the traditions, achievements and aspirations of our peoples in a series of events in Russia and the United States.

We will also explore the possibilities for innovative use of the Internet to ensure that students in both countries have the opportunity to keep abreast of the dynamic development of our cultures.

Russia and the United States have agreed to work together on new projects of mutual interest in the field of primary, secondary and higher education.

A part of our discussions will focus on developing new ideas in the field of education and research activities, particularly in the scientific field, in the study and advanced learning of foreign languages and in teacher training and professional development.

We will broaden the existing mechanisms for exchanges, including the Fulbright Program, teacher exchanges and the Program of Partnerships between Universities.

In the field of sports we will hold the first exchange of young nonprofessional athletes in several team sports, including ice hockey, basketball, beach volleyball and swimming.

We will study the possibility of expanding this program both in quantitative terms and by the inclusion in it of participants representing other sports.

We will also continue the search for new spheres for cooperation in the field of media.

We are pleased to announce that a delegation consisting of leaders of American technology sector companies will visit Russia in February next year to further develop ties and cooperation in this area, as well as the search for new possibilities of using modern technology to address the broader challenges facing the Presidential Bilateral Commission.

The Working Group plans to hold the next meeting in the United States in March 2010.

We firmly believe that by working together we will be able to impart to our relations a new quality and to move from confrontation to cooperation.

We will be able to build more productive relations based on common interests and goals.

#9

President of Abkhazia Re-elected by Wide Margin

By Ellen Barry

New York Times, December 14, 2009

MOSCOW — Voters in Abkhazia, the separatist enclave in Georgia, have re-elected President Sergei V. Bagapsh by a decisive margin, amid protests from the Georgian government that the vote was invalid.

In final results of the Saturday vote announced on Sunday, Mr. Bagapsh won 59.4 percent of the vote, more than he needed to avoid a second round of voting.

His closest rival among four other candidates, Raul Khajimba, a former agent in the Russian F.S.B. security service, trailed with 15.4 percent. Turnout was 73 percent, election officials said.

Mr. Khajimba alleged widespread violations and vowed to challenge the results in court.

Mr. Bagapsh, a former energy tycoon, spent most of his first five-year term fighting to separate Abkhazia from Georgia. In August 2008, when Russia recognized Abkhazia as a sovereign nation, his focus swung to a different challenge: Negotiating its long-term relationship with Russia.

Pressure points have emerged in that relationship, from the Russian hunger for beachside real estate to a contract giving Russia control of Abkhazia's main railroad. But Russia remains the only major power to have recognized Abkhazia, as well as being its military protector and source of financial support, and the five candidates all had similar pro-Russian positions.

At a news conference on Sunday, Mr. Bagapsh said that his victory reflected a widespread desire to strengthen ties to Russia, and that recognition from the West was not so important.

"We have chosen our path, whether the European Union and United States like it or not," he said. "Abkhazia will never again be part of Georgia."

There is little distinction between Abkhaz and Russian interests for the moment, said Nikolai Zlobin, an analyst at the Washington-based Center for Defense Information. But the next president will play a crucial role, he added, as the Abkhaz balance a desire for foreign investment with maintaining control over their territory.

"They know that the only thing they have is land," Mr. Zlobin said. "It's not a big piece of land, but eventually it will be fantastically expensive. The next president will be the guy who redesigns these property rights."

Nearly two decades after ethnic Abkhaz, who then numbered around 93,000, fought a war for independence, 200,000 ethnic Georgians remain unable to return to their homes in Abkhazia and ethnic tensions remain strong. More than 45,000 ethnic Georgians still live there, but most do not hold Abkhaz citizenship so they cannot vote.

Georgian authorities called the election invalid, because, among other factors, it excluded the votes of the long-displaced Georgians. Temuri Yakobashvili, Georgia's minister for reintegration, said Mr. Bagapsh has little power in any case, given Abkhazia's reliance on Russia.

"At the end of the day, it's an occupied territory and the Russians are calling the shots," he said. "The Russians are comfortable with him and he will stay there. That's it."

#10

Chanukah Kicks Off Near Moscow's Kremlin

FJC, December 16 2009

MOSCOW, Russia – Russia's capital continues to celebrate Chanukah with candle lightings on Manezh Square, located right in the heart of Moscow near Red Square and the Kremlin. The ceremony that kicked off the festival was led by the director of Public Relations at the Federation of Jewish Communities of Russia, Boruch Gorin, with participation by Chief Rabbi of Russia Berel Lazar and Moscow Mayor Yuri Luzhkov.

"We took a long time to think about whether we should organize festivities following the recent tragic events in the country – a derailment of the train 'Nevsky Express,' and a fire that overwhelmed a nightclub in Perm. But we decided we personify the teachings of Judaism that a little lit dispels much darkness and be involved in spreading light everywhere," commented Rabbi Lazar. "About those who died as a result of these recent tragedies, it is necessary to pray for them and we do. Today we are celebrating Chanukah, but there is still a sense of sadness in our hearts." The Chief Rabbi further noted that people should always remember their responsibility and live up to that responsibility.

Recalling how relations with the Jewish community used to be in the Soviet Union several decades ago, Rabbi Lazar expressed how wonderful it is to be able to celebrate Chanukah in the very heart of Moscow. "This is a miracle. May G-d let it continue. I wish you all success and health! Happy Chanukah," he stated to the crowd.

Boruch Gorin also stated that one of the meanings of the word "Chanukah" is renewal, citing that Moscow Mayor Yuri Luzhkov was among those who enabled the process of Jewish renewal to unfold in the Russian capital. When it came time for his speech, Mayor Luzhkov recalled the time when the public celebration of Chanukah was difficult to implement. "Time removes all obstacles. Today we can say that the celebration of this holiday in the city center has become somewhat of a tradition, a constant joy for the Jewish community," commented the mayor. "It is a sign and indicator of changes in our lives and that we have to win and build our common desire and decision, and retain much that is positive from the past times, so that nothing negative from the past returns."

The evening reached its most exciting point with the lighting of the Chanukah Menorah, accompanied by a grand fireworks display. Then the informal part of the celebration began, as everyone who was gathered in the square got to enjoy a performance by the "Chasidic Cappella" choir, and samples of the traditional Chanukah treat –sufganiyot (jelly doughnuts).

#11

Sex, world record lure young people to Moscow Chanukah party

By Anna Rudnitskaya

JTA, December 14, 2009

MOSCOW -- A Jewish holiday, the lure of sex and the possibility of helping break a Guinness world record drew hundreds of young people to a Moscow nightclub for an unusual Chanukah celebration.

Sunday's event was the brainchild of the new Russian Hillel director, Alexander Shlimak, who was appointed in September and says he is trying to come up with new ways to attract young people to the Jewish community.

Some 500 young people came to the party at Zona in a bid to break the Guinness world record for most Chanukah candles lit simultaneously.

"There are about 15,000 Jewish students in Moscow," Shlimak said. "Only 10 percent of them take part in the events organized by the Jewish community. I feel my task in this post is to raise this figure up to at least 40 percent. To achieve this, we have to show the modern face of Jewish life to young people and provide them with events that look neither dull nor frightening. I hope this party is a good example of what can be done."

Held in a large and fashionable nightclub covered with posters declaring "Strip Dancers Wanted," the celebration did manage to attract some who don't usually attend Jewish events.

Elena, a graduate student at Moscow State University, told JTA she heard about the party through promotional e-mails.

"I got several e-mails, and even a message on my mobile that said I could take part in setting a Guinness world record," said Elena, who preferred not to give her last name. "They must have had my contact details because I took part in a Taglit program several years ago. I thought it could be fun, so I came."

Taglit is the Hebrew name for Birthright Israel, the program that brings Jewish 18- to 26-year-olds to Israel on free 10-day trips.

Evgeny Lensky, 26, the owner of a small trading firm, said he also received a promotional e-mail and decided to attend because he had nothing better to do that night. A graduate of a Jewish high school, Lensky said that although he knows a lot about Jewish tradition, he considers himself assimilated and is not that interested in Jewish community.

Lensky said, however, that parties like these have the power to draw young people like him to Jewish venues.

“Probably I was just unlucky in my first experiences, but somehow my attitude in general to Jewish society isn’t good,” he said. “I live a very assimilated life and I don’t think anything could really get me back into the community. But there are thousands of young Jewish men who just know nothing about Hillel and all these events. Sometimes they don’t even know they are Jews.

“I think Jewish organizations should work with them,” he said.

Lensky brought his non-Jewish girlfriend, Katya, to the party. She said she knew nothing about Chanukah before, but found the event “very colorful.”

The candlelighting ceremony itself took only a few minutes. After Shlimak recited the prayers over the candles, those who registered to take part in the record attempt each lit four candles, one after another – three for the third night of Chanukah, plus the shamash, or middle candle. In total, 1,440 Chanukah candles were lit in one place nearly simultaneously. Shlimak said he believed it was a new world record; the final result should be announced in about a month.

Before the dancing segment of the party started, organizers talked to the crowd about the Chanukah tradition of giving money, or gelt, to children, and suggested everyone donate a small sum to help the children who were orphaned by the nightclub fire in the Urals city of Perm earlier this month. More than 140 people were killed in the blaze.

Many Chanukah celebrations in Russia this year were affected by the tragedy, which was sparked by fireworks at the Lame Horse nightclub.

“When we learned about the Perm fire, we thought it probably would seem wrong to light candles and set off fireworks for Chanukah,” Russia’s chief rabbi, Berel Lazar, told JTA after the public ceremony of lighting the menorah on display in Moscow’s Manezhnaya Square. “But then we decided that bringing a bit more light to the world is always good. So we held this ceremony, as usual, in an effort to show that we remember miracles and still hope for better.”

In St. Petersburg, Russia’s second-largest city, Chanukah celebrations were held without the expected fireworks. In Perm itself, celebrations commenced with Kaddish for those killed in the nightclub fire.

#12

Moscow Cultural Landmark Is Seen as Threatened

By Sophia Kishkovsky

New York Times, December 15, 2009

Artists and preservationists are in uproar because Prime Minister Vladimir V. Putin has signed a decree that critics say would allow developers to demolish a Soviet-era cultural landmark, the Central House of Artists.

The property houses, among other things, the 20th-century works of the Tretyakov Gallery, including paintings by Malevich and Kandinsky as well as Soviet Socialist Realists. Covering 23 valuable hectares, or about 57 acres, along the Moscow River and opposite Gorky Park, it has long been in the sights of Yelena Baturina, a billionaire real estate developer and the wife of Mayor Yuri M. Luzhkov.

Last year, Ms. Baturina unveiled a design commissioned from Norman Foster. It resembles a disco ball sliced into sections like an orange and is known by that name, apelsin, in Russian.

Although Mr. Putin’s decree was dated Nov. 28, it became public only early this month. Neither Mr. Putin, Ms. Baturina or any other government official has commented on the decree.

But David Sarkisyan, director of the Shchusev State Museum of Architecture, who has campaigned against the destruction of dozens of Moscow buildings, said in a telephone interview that he was certain it was motivated by intrigue and financial interest. "They divided the territory and money somehow," he said.

The Central House of Artists is at first glance a Soviet white elephant. Built for the Moscow Olympics in 1980, it occupies a special place in the hearts of Moscow intellectuals, who recall special films, concerts and countless art exhibits mounted there. It receives almost two million visitors a year. A book fair early this month, for example, drew tens of thousands.

Mr. Sarkisyan and leading Moscow architects like Yevgeny Asse assert that the building, which is not officially a landmark, can be renovated rather than demolished.

The building's grounds have become famous as a post-Soviet venue for statues of leaders from Stalin to Brezhnev and Felix Dzerzhinsky, founder of the Soviet secret police, who was toppled from his perch outside K.G.B. headquarters in the aftermath of the August 1991 coup attempt. The monuments have been artistically arranged alongside an installation commemorating victims of the Gulag.

The decree calls for the territory's "integrated development" by the Moscow City government and construction of a building that Moscow would turn over to the federal government for the Tretyakov Gallery.

The document, which critics of the plan describe as convoluted and skillfully worded, does not specify any dates for construction or even mention demolition. But Vasily Bychkov, director of the Central House, said it was a "green light" to tear down the building.

Ms. Baturina presented her apelsin project as a multipurpose complex that would include a hotel, retail space, restaurants and space for a museum.

Officials of the Tretyakov Gallery and the Confederation of Artists' Unions, which owns the other 40 percent of the building, and leases the land under it from the Moscow City authorities, expressed shock at her announcement. Several months later, after meetings with government officials, they voiced support, saying they would get much-needed state-of-the-art spaces, to be built next to the existing structure, which would then be demolished.

Supporters of the Central House have signed petitions, held protests, and packed hearings advertised by Moscow city officials as a forum to take public opinion into account.

There were hopes that the financial crisis would curb demolition in Moscow. But Kommersant, the Moscow business newspaper, reported this month that Ms. Baturina attended a recent government meeting about the site. Grigory Revzin, the newspaper's influential architecture critic, told Radio Liberty last week that Mr. Putin was an admirer of Mr. Foster's work.

Mr. Bychkov, the director of the Central House of Artists, also owns a company called Expo-Park that rents space in the building for popular events. He said in an e-mail message that he would fight on, using a new tactic.

Experience "has shown that it's senseless to organize campaigns within Russia," he wrote. "We would like to involve the international art community. This won't be a political discussion, but an ethical, professional and artistic one."

#13
The Case for Letting Estonia Into the Euro Zone
By Paul Taylor
New York Times, December 15, 2009

If governments in the euro zone are serious about wanting to expand monetary stability and prosperity into Eastern Europe, they should agree next year to admit Estonia to their single currency area in 2011.

The tiny Baltic state has fared better in the financial crisis than its two fellow former Soviet republics, Latvia and Lithuania, because it was more prudent about foreign borrowing and fiscal discipline in the boom years.

All three have pegged their currencies to the euro and endured contractions in their economies of as much as 18 percent. All have made deep cuts in public spending to cope with balance of payments problems made untenable by the global economic downturn.

Estonia is a test case for the willingness of the euro zone — and especially the zone's most powerful member, Germany — to continue to expand in the face of worries about the economic cohesion of the existing 16 member states.

The decision, which is likely to be made in June, will also send a powerful political signal about a country that used to be part of the Soviet Union, at a time when many East Europeans are worried about Russian muscle-flexing.

Privately, some West European officials and central bankers say the euro area has enough problems — notably the huge fiscal deficits of countries like Greece, Ireland and Spain — without taking in poorer new members.

“What's the hurry? Let them wait a bit longer till their economies have really converged with ours,” said a senior West European central banker, speaking on condition of anonymity because of the sensitivity of the subject. He was not referring specifically to Estonia.

Many East European governments complain that the economic criteria of the Maastricht Treaty, which laid down the rules for the euro zone, have been applied more stringently to the newcomers who joined in 2004 and 2007 than they were to the euro zone's founders.

The East Europeans contend that the reference value for public debt — 60 percent of gross domestic product — was interpreted extremely flexibly to permit Italy and Belgium, each with a national debt equal to more than 100 percent of its gross domestic product, to join in the first wave in 1999.

By contrast, Lithuania became the only country to be rejected for membership in the single currency area when it failed to meet the inflation criterion by just 0.1 percentage point in 2007, prompting cries of discrimination.

E.U. officials say the fact that Lithuanian inflation has increased since then proves that the country has not converged in a sustainable way with the euro area and that it would have had greater difficulties down the road, had it joined.

Estonia intends to have an impeccable case to present and has made additional progress on inflation, even in the past month, when analysts polled by Reuters forecast the country would not join until 2012.

“It is probable that we will fulfill all the Maastricht criteria already in 2009,” Finance Minister Jurgen Ligi of Estonia said last week.

That means achieving a budget deficit equivalent to about 3 percent of gross domestic product at a time when most members of the euro zone are running shortfalls at least twice that size.

The E.U. economic and monetary affairs commissioner, Joaquin Almunia, told Profil, an Austrian magazine, that Estonia, which will be formally assessed by the European Commission in May, was well on its way to membership.

“This country has made good progress towards fulfilling the criteria,” he said. “If everything goes well, we could in June 2010 give the green light for the 17th member.”

While the admission of Estonia would bolster morale in the other Baltic states, which face at least two more years of sharp austerity before they can hope to qualify, some economists say the E.U. should be bolder and admit all three now.

Together, they account for less than 1 percent of the euro zone's economy, so the effect of any adjustment problems on the other members would be minuscule.

"The three Baltic countries face the deepest recessions among all countries of the world, and it is not just the fault of the politicians and the people of these countries that they are in this predicament," wrote Zsolt Darvas, a fellow at Bruegel, a research institute in Brussels.

In a paper published this month, Mr. Darvas argued that the E.U. should re-interpret the euro criteria to admit the three Baltic states immediately with compensatory economic measures.

"The E.U. has mobilized resources to support crisis-hit countries in Central and Eastern Europe according to its rule books, but the E.U. should be more than just a rule book," he said. "When everyone is aware that a rule has deficiencies, action is needed to modify the rule."

But given the determination of the European authorities to avoid creating any precedent for larger newcomers, Estonia is likely to join on its own.

#14

Rights Activists Press Medvedev

By Alexander Bratersky

Moscow Times, December 15, 2009

President Dmitry Medvedev distanced himself from his mentor Vladimir Putin on Monday by praising the ideas of the late human rights champion Andrei Sakharov, even as rights activists complained that Medvedev has failed to make Sakharov's vision a reality.

"Analyzing the experience of modern history, we can fully understand the deepness and actuality of Sakharov's ideas," Medvedev said in a letter to human rights groups gathered for a conference dedicated to Sakharov, the Nobel-winning nuclear scientist-turned-human rights campaigner.

Medvedev's comments, made on what would have been Sakharov's 90th birthday, marked a departure from his predecessor, Prime Minister Putin, who has never celebrated Sakharov's legacy as the symbol of the human rights movement in Russia. Curiously, opposition activists from the banned National Bolshevik Party commemorated the 85th anniversary of Sakharov's birth in 2004 with a rally demanding Putin's resignation.

Medvedev, in sharp contrast to Putin, has made several steps toward the human rights community, giving an interview to the liberal Novaya Gazeta, freeing jailed Yukos lawyer Svetlana Bakhmina and, more recently, firing 20 prison officials after ordering an investigation into the November death of lawyer Sergei Magnitsky in a Moscow detention center.

But at the same time, human rights groups have continued to face pressure from the authorities, as in the recent case of Kazan-based Agora, which was hit with a large back tax claim that it says is punishment for its assistance to other nongovernmental organizations.

Veteran human rights activist Lyudmila Alexeyeva praised Medvedev on Monday as an "intelligent man" who is listening to human rights groups, but she said she was disappointed that he has not addressed specific issues brought to his attention at meetings of his presidential human rights commission in April and November.

Alexeyeva said she had asked Medvedev at the first meeting to review several laws and decrees that violated citizens' constitutional right to protest peacefully and had expected to hear his comments at the second meeting, but that had not happened.

"I thought that he would tell us what has been done, but the problems still exist," Alexeyeva, who heads the Helsinki Moscow Group, said at the opening of a two-day conference titled "Sakharov's Ideas Today."

Alexeyeva cited the recent example of an opposition group that tried to organize a peaceful rally outside the presidential administration building on Constitution Day last Saturday. Activists Mikhail Kriger and Sergei Konstantinov, who carried a sign reading, "Respect the Russian Construction," were detained by plainclothes officers with the Federal Guard Service. Alexeyeva said the officers did not show their IDs to demonstrators and beat several of them.

Alexeyeva's colleague Sergei Kovalyov, once Sakharov's aide and Russia's first ombudsman in the early 1990s, went even further, criticizing Medvedev's support of Chechen President Ramzan Kadyrov, whom he called a "bandit."

"Authorities of a country where political murders take place are always guilty," Kovalyov said, referring to the unsolved murder of Chechen human rights activist Natalya Estemirova in July.

Kadyrov, a former guerilla leader who sided with the Kremlin during the second war in Chechnya, was promoted by the Interior Ministry to the rank of police lieutenant-general on Monday.

Human rights abuses in Russia are of "deep concern," Thomas Hammarberg, the Council of Europe's human rights commissioner, said at the conference. He said more than 3,000 people were still missing in Chechnya.

But Hammarberg also said he saw some progress, with NGOs becoming more active in society and a network of ombudsmen expanding across the country.

Heidi Hautala, chairwoman of the European Parliament's Subcommittee on Human Rights, noted that federal ombudsmen Vladimir Lukin, who also attended Monday's conference, had helped her enter a prison in Yekaterinburg to meet with opposition activist Alexei Nikiforov, who is serving a prison sentence on extremism charges. Nikitin was jailed for raising a banner reading "Enough of Putin!" opposite United Russia's headquarters in Yekaterinburg last spring. "I am deeply concerned when people who peacefully demonstrate are detained and beaten. According to the Russian law, I am an extremist," Hautala said.

Speaking to The Moscow Times, Alexeyeva said she understood that activists' latest criticism of the authorities might deprive them of whatever support Medvedev has offered them. But she said the issue was bigger than any one person. "I don't connect the situation of an improvement of human rights with Medvedev or any particular president. If a civil society is to emerge in Russia, any president will have to take it into account," she said.

#15

Soviet industrial collapse reaps climate credits

By Douglas Birch and Simon Schuster

AP, December 15, 2009

MOSCOW -- As other countries struggle to cut greenhouse gas emissions, two ex-Soviet industrial powerhouses have found themselves heirs to an unlikely windfall.

Russia and Ukraine head into the Copenhagen summit with credits for billions of tons of carbon dioxide they no longer belch, thanks to the collapse of the Soviet industrial machine that gave them favorable terms under the 1997 Kyoto Protocol.

The situation allows the two countries not only to pollute more but also sell carbon credits to other countries for millions of dollars.

Now environmentalists and some European countries are urging Moscow and Kiev to give up those credits and strengthen efforts to slash global carbon production. Both countries say they won't do so without a fight.

President Dmitry Medvedev said in a video blog posted this week that Russia is committed to limiting greenhouse gases by 2020 by expanding the use of nuclear power and promoting energy efficiency. "This is a question of existence itself," he said.

But he also pointed out that Russia's carbon emissions today are about 34 percent lower than they were in 1990. He said the Kremlin plans to allow emissions to grow over the next decade, although by 2010 they will still be 25 percent below 1990.

Alexander Bedritsky, a Kremlin adviser, told reporters last week that European nations are calling on Russia to slash its output of carbon dioxide at a time when the European Union hasn't been able to meet its own goals under Kyoto. He said the EU's emissions have risen steadily since 1990, unlike Russia's.

"They take on certain commitments, don't fulfill them and then go out there shouting about new and more ambitious ones," he said.

In 1990 the antiquated Soviet military-industrial complex was still churning along at full speed as smokestacks belched hot gases and soot across the U.S.S.R. But the Soviet Union collapsed a year later and by the mid-1990s many of these factories were shuttered and rusting.

Under the Kyoto treaty, emissions cuts are measured against 1990 levels, meaning that on paper, former Soviet states have made steep cuts over the past 20 years. This gave them billions of tons of carbon allowances that they could sell on to other countries, mainly in Europe, which needed them to meet their own commitments under Kyoto.

Many Kyoto participants have complained of the alleged injustice of this provision. But a key priority for both Russia and Ukraine at the current climate talks in Copenhagen is to hold on to these credits after Kyoto expires in 2012.

In addition, Russia wants any new treaty to recognize the capacity of its vast forests to absorb carbon dioxide, a proposal that could allow the Kremlin to claim credit for huge new emissions cuts. Critics say these would result from ingenious accounting rather than increases in energy efficiency or the adoption of cleaner technology.

Vladimir Sliviyak, co-chairman of the Moscow-based environmental group Ecodefense, said Monday that Russia should freeze its current level of carbon dioxide emissions rather than allow them to grow.

"We think technically and economically, it is more than possible," Sliviyak said. "It is just a question of political will."

Ukraine has also said that it would only be prepared to reduce emissions by 20 percent compared to 1990 levels under the Copenhagen agreement, which translates into an increase of around 30 percent from today's emissions levels.

"This is not a meaningful contribution at all," said Maria Kovalenko, the director of the Kiev office of Point Carbon, a global analytics firm for the carbon market.

Igor Lupaltsov, the head of Ukraine's National Agency for Ecological Investment, which handles climate policy, said that his country's main priority in Copenhagen is to keep 1990 as the base year for calculating emissions. That would allow Ukraine to keep all the preferential benefits it won under Kyoto.

"This is a pretty serious compromise on our part, considering that our industrial output was cut in half after the collapse of the Soviet Union, and we still need to catch up," he said in televised remarks.

Under the Kyoto treaty, countries that produce less than their quota of carbon emissions can sell them to nations that need credits to meet their lower targets.

The decision to give Russia, Ukraine and other eastern European nations credit for reductions from Soviet-era levels of production was in part a recognition of their economic problems after the Soviet collapse.

In part, it was intended as an incentive for struggling ex-Soviet countries to sign up to the climate agreement, which would have failed without their participation.

The United Nations says Ukraine still has around 500 million tons of excess carbon it can produce each year under Kyoto, and Russia has about 1.1 billion tons per year.

Sliviyak and other environmentalists are worried by warnings from Medvedev and others that Russia may not sign a successor to Kyoto if the U.S., China and other major industrial nations don't do so as well.

In his blog, Medvedev said Russia would not go it alone in pledging cuts in carbon emissions. "Trying to do this on our own will be fruitless and pointless," he said.

Bedritsky, the Kremlin adviser, told reporters last week that "no agreement on climate would be effective without the United States."

Bedritsky also seemed to warn that Russia, where much of the land is above the Arctic circle, was not as vulnerable to climate change as other nations and might even benefit from a warmer earth.

He noted that higher average temperatures would vastly expand available arable land and save huge amounts of energy now used for heating cities.

But he said that Russia would suffer from climate change as well, citing a recent increase in the number of icebergs in the Barents Sea threatening offshore oil platforms. "We can't afford to say we won't be doing anything" about greenhouse gases, Bedritsky said.

Simon Shuster reported from Kiev.

#16

Moldova at the Crossroads

The United States Can Help the Country Through This Difficult Period

By Samuel Charap and Yekaterina Chertova

Center for American Progress, December 15, 2009

Moldova's minority Communist Party, which held power from 2001 until September 2009, boycotted a vote on December 7 that would have given the presidency to Marian Lupu, above, the candidate put forward by the majority coalition that favors reform and European integration.

On December 7, the parliament of Moldova—a small, impoverished former Soviet republic of roughly 4.5 million people nestled between Ukraine and Romania—failed once again to elect a president. The minority Communist Party, or PCRM, which held power from 2001 until September 2009, boycotted a vote that would have given the presidency to Marian Lupu, the candidate put forward by the majority coalition that favors reform and European integration. While U.S. policymakers might be tempted to throw up their hands and give up on Moldova—where political instability has become a fact of life—it would be a profound mistake to let a country so close to the heart of Europe drift and potentially descend into chaos. This is all the more true given the transnational threats such as human trafficking that emanate from Moldova and the presence of a “frozen conflict” on its territory.

Eight years of Communist rule left Moldova in shambles. Grinding poverty, porous borders, corruption, and inadequate rule of law have contributed to widespread human trafficking, human rights abuses, and poor governance. These problems were compounded by the “frozen conflict” in Moldova, where the unrecognized self-proclaimed pseudo-state of Transdniestria straddles the country's eastern border with Ukraine. Transdniestria is to Moldova as South Ossetia and Abkhazia were to Georgia before its August 2008 war with Russia—a separatist enclave with Russian “peacekeepers” stationed on its territory that is sustained by financial support from Moscow.

Fortunately, the dispute over Transdniestria is not presently fraught with the risk of violence as South Ossetia and Abkhazia proved to be in Georgia, but nonetheless 16 years of international mediation efforts have largely failed to produce progress. “Frozen conflicts” such as Transnistria, which are only frozen in the sense that they have not yet been resolved, are inherently destabilizing and can erupt at any time, as the war between Russia and Georgia

demonstrated. The possibility, however remote, of comparable hostilities breaking out on Europe's very borders represents a security concern for the entire Euro-Atlantic community.

The breakaway region is also a notorious hub for criminal activity, including narcotics and gun-running. Moscow supports Transdniestria both economically and politically and ensures its security with its continuing military presence, but it has not recognized the separatist government. Progress on reintegrating Transdniestria effectively stalled under the PCRM, which failed to launch an effective reconciliation process or work toward the withdrawal of Russian troops.

Moldova's current political drama began in April, when the first round of parliamentary elections took place. The country's convoluted constitution calls for the election of a president by a three-fifths majority of the 101-member parliament. Once elected, the president appoints a prime minister and assembles a cabinet, subject to a parliamentary vote. The April elections saw the PCRM win 60 of the 101 parliamentary seats. Over the course of the following two days, protests erupted in the capital of Chisinau and quickly became violent, culminating in the vandalism of both the parliament and the presidential building. The protestors—mostly young Moldovans fed up with years of corrupt rule and economic mismanagement under the Communists—alleged fraud.

With only 60 MPs, one short of three-fifths, and staunch opposition from their opponents, the PCRM could not push its candidate through parliament and the deadlock forced new elections at the end of July. The second poll brought the pro-Western, pro-reform Alliance for European Integration to power, with a slim majority of 53 MPs. AEI formed a government with Vlad Filat as prime minister. Its platform calls for desperately needed economic reforms, democratization, and greater engagement with the West.

The intervening period has been characterized by political wrangling, with the AEI trying to persuade eight Communist MPs to switch sides and failing twice. The PCRM walkout on Monday was the second in two months.

The situation in Moldova now seems likely to take one of three paths. First, legislative elections—probably sometime in the summer of 2010—might take place as the constitution demands. Second, the ruling coalition could initiate a referendum to amend the constitution to allow for direct presidential elections. Third, the parliament could adopt legislation to lower the number of MP votes needed to choose a president to a simple majority of MPs.

The last two options might seem appropriate to break the current stalemate. But Moldova should resist the temptation to alter its constitution simply to solve the crisis. Any changes to the country's basic law should be taken in a considered, well-thought-out manner—not as a one-off attempt to end a crisis. Doing so could lead to false steps and unintended consequences, as in Ukraine, where the poorly designed constitutional changes implemented at the height of the "Orange Revolution" resulted in unending political turmoil. The Obama administration should communicate to the Moldovan leadership that such a development would not serve the long-term interests of their country.

Regardless of how the situation develops, the administration should make clear that it is prepared to strengthen the U.S. relationship with Prime Minister Vlad Filat's legitimately elected government. The administration has so far taken steps in this direction: The U.S. government-sponsored Millennium Challenge Corporation has pledged \$262 million for Moldova's development and Filat will visit the United States in January to meet with Secretary of State Hillary Clinton.

The United States should also push the Moldovan government to pursue desperately needed economic reforms, which are a condition for the International Monetary Fund's \$590 million support program agreed to in October. The package is vital to salvaging Moldova's economy, covering the country's budget deficit—estimated at 9 percent of gross domestic product for this year—and boosting its meager reserves. We should encourage the European Union to join our efforts, and the U.S. Agency for International Development should also up its aid to local nongovernmental organizations that work to improve living conditions and good governance in Moldova.

Congress has a role to play, too. If the United States is serious about supporting political stability in the country, strong consideration should be given to repealing the Jackson-Vanik amendment for Moldova. This legislation was originally intended to support freedom of emigration from the Soviet Union and was an important policy tool when it passed in 1975. Traditionally Congress repeals the amendment when one of the former Soviet republics—which

were subject to the amendment after the collapse of the Soviet Union—becomes a World Trade Organization member, because keeping it on the books would deny the United States certain trade advantages.

Although Moldova became a member of the WTO in 2001, Congress has yet to “graduate” it from the Jackson-Vanik provisions. Members have little incentive to act given the tiny size of Moldova’s economy and the minimal impact of not having fully normalized trade relations.

But repealing Jackson-Vanik now for Moldova would have crucial symbolic importance. It would demonstrate U.S. solidarity with the Filat government in its drive to implement reforms and steer the country toward Europe. And it would cost nothing—in fact, it could provide some benefit to the U.S. economy that come with removing the amendment for WTO members.

Finally, greater engagement with Moldova could provide an opportunity to improve ties with Russia. Russian and Ukrainian mediators have been working alongside U.S. and European diplomats on resolving the Transdniestrian dispute. And whereas Moscow was once a staunch ally of the PCRM, it recently tried to push the Communists to accept a Lupu presidency, indicating the possible emergence of a more constructive approach. The Kremlin might be coming to the conclusion that a stable Moldova is more in its interest than having the country under its control. Moldova could become a testing ground for a new type of U.S.-Russia interaction in the former Soviet region, where the tradition has been zero-sum games. Moscow and Washington could actually work together to contribute to regional stability and prosperity.

Support from the West clearly cannot solve Moldova's problems. Political bickering and grandstanding, and the habits of cronyism, corrupt rule, and weak governance must come to an end if the country is to have any hope of escaping from its current state. The parliament’s failure to elect a president last week was an unfortunate development, but it should be the cause for greater U.S. engagement, not neglect.

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#17

Swiss minaret ban recalls synagogue bans of past eras

By Ruth Ellen Gruber

JTA, December 14, 2009

VILNIUS, Lithuania -- A week after the Swiss referendum banning the construction of new mosque minarets in Switzerland, I flew to Vilnius, Lithuania, for a seminar that focused on the destruction of Jewish heritage in Lithuania during the Holocaust.

The timing was coincidental. And I realize that the Swiss voters who overwhelmingly approved the minaret ban were responding to scare tactics that raised the specter of an extremist Islamic takeover in their country.

Yet in a certain way, the Swiss vote Nov. 29 and the Lithuanian seminar were connected.

To me, the ban on minarets recalled centuries of restrictions on the size or prominence of synagogues. The Swiss ban is just the latest example of how governmental authorities target religious architecture as a means of limiting religious or cultural expression.

From early medieval times, synagogues in Europe often were forbidden to stand taller than Christian churches, and in many cases they were forbidden even to be outwardly visible. There were restrictions on synagogue architecture in Muslim countries, too.

This had nothing to do with zoning. It was a way for the dominant religion to demonstrate control over minority faiths, their practice and their adherents.

Opulently decorated synagogue sanctuaries often were hidden behind anonymous exteriors, and a number of synagogues had their floors and foundations laid much lower than street level so they wouldn't be too tall. These included Vilnius' own Great Synagogue, which was built in the early 17th century.

But religious architecture, too, often suffered much worse than restrictive regulation; it was targeted for destruction as a symbol of the people who prayed there.

"Beginning in the fourth century and continuing through the Middle Ages, and again in the 20th century, the 'legal' restriction and destruction of synagogues quickly led to the same policies applied against individuals, and then whole communities," said Samuel Gruber, president of the International Survey of Jewish Monuments.

(Sam is one of the leading international authorities on Jewish heritage -- and also my brother. We have worked together for many years on issues related to Jewish heritage preservation.)

During the Holocaust, the Nazis torched, blew up or desecrated hundreds of synagogues with the same fervor that they devoted to destroying Jewish communities, culture and civilization.

More recently, during the Yugoslav wars in the 1990s, Orthodox Serb, Catholic Croat and Muslim Bosniak fighters destroyed mosques, churches and other culturally significant places.

The term "warchitecture" was coined at the time to describe the deliberate destruction of architectural heritage as a tool of conflict or persecution.

The lasting impact of the Holocaust destruction of Jewish heritage was the focus of our seminar in Vilnius. It brought together representatives of various local institutions to discuss how the important Jewish contribution to the history and culture of Vilnius could most effectively be made known to today's residents and visitors.

How to convey what was lost in the absence of tangible traces was a key part of the agenda.

"In a sense we are in search of the lost Vilnius," said Deividas Matulionis, chancellor to Lithuania's prime minister.

Vilnius, known in Yiddish as Vilna, was the so-called Jerusalem of the North. It was home in the 18th century to one of modern Judaism's most influential intellectual and spiritual leaders, the so-called Vilna Gaon, Elijah ben Solomon Zalman.

Before World War II, about 100,000 Jews lived here. The Great Synagogue, standing in the heart of what is today's postcard-perfect Old Town, was the most magnificent of more than 100 synagogues and prayer houses in the city.

The Vilnius Old Town today is on UNESCO's roster of World Heritage Sites, but almost no physical traces of its Jewish past remain. There are a few street names, wall inscriptions and plaques, but that's it.

The Great Synagogue itself, and the teeming Jewish quarter around it, was bombed during World War II and its ruins were razed by the Soviets in the 1950s. A kindergarten was built on the site.

Controversy has raged for years over what to do with the old Jewish quarter.

One multimillion-dollar plan, promoted by a Jewish member of Parliament and activist, Emanuelis Zingeris, called for sites, including the Great synagogue, to be rebuilt. The plan was approved but never really got off the ground due to financial considerations and opposition from within the 5,000-member Jewish community.

Complicating matters is Lithuanian society's ambivalence about its past. Local nationalists regard the Nazis as liberators and the postwar Soviet government as an occupier, and anti-Nazi activity gets conflated with Soviet oppression. The Genocide Victims Museum in Vilnius is mainly about the Soviet persecution of Lithuanians between 1940 and 1991.

Local Lithuanians collaborated with Nazis to help kill about 90 percent of the 250,000 Jews who lived in Lithuania before the war. For Holocaust survivors, the Soviets were liberators before they became an occupying power.

The destruction of nearly all traces of Jewish historic presence in Vilnius left a gaping hole that has yet to be filled.

I know it's a very long way from a ban on new minarets to the much more drastic measures that led to this state of affairs. But as my brother Sam put it, "Restricting specific types of religious or cultural expression -- especially when such restrictions are deliberate exceptions to existing building, zoning, health and safety codes -- is discriminatory."

It is, he said, "an act of denigration of cultural custom and, by extension, of the people who cherish, or the religion that requires, those very customs."

#18
Soviet Union Was Safer Than Putin's Russia, Dissidents Say
By Lucian Kim
Bloomberg, December 14, 2009

Former Soviet dissidents criticized the condition of human rights in Russia under Prime Minister Vladimir Putin, saying their work is more dangerous than in the final decades of the communist regime.

"We live in the Soviet Union, only a modernized, improved one," Sergei Kovalyov, 79, said at a conference in Moscow marking the 20th anniversary of the death of dissident and Nobel Peace Prize winner Andrei Sakharov.

Human rights activists gathered to pay tribute to Sakharov's legacy in a year when government critics have increasingly become targets of attack. The July murder of Natalya Estemirova, a human rights worker in Chechnya, was the first in a string of killings of activists in the North Caucasus region, where the government is fighting an Islamic insurgency.

While Russians today enjoy many more freedoms, there were "much fewer" killings of dissidents during the communist era, said Lyudmila Alexeyeva, 82, who was forced to emigrate to the U.S. in the 1970s because of her anti-Soviet views.

Kovalyov, Alexeyeva and Oleg Orlov, head of the Memorial human rights group, will receive the European Parliament's Sakharov Prize for Freedom of Thought later this week in Strasbourg. Estemirova was a member of Memorial, which documents Soviet-era repression and human rights violations.

Orlov is appealing a Moscow court ruling ordering him to retract a statement that Kremlin-backed Chechen President Ramzan Kadyrov was to blame for Estemirova's death. Legal pressure on government critics such as Orlov or billionaire Mikhail Khodorkovsky, in jail for more than six years, has replaced the Soviet gulag, said Kovalyov, who served time in prison camps for his opposition to the Soviet regime.

"The government of a country where political murders take place is always guilty," said Kovalyov. "It turns out 'criminals' are behind the killings. Why do they always kill government opponents? Why do they love the authorities so much?"

Orlov criticized European and U.S. politicians, whose statements on human rights in Russia are turning into more and more of a "ritual."

"It's not that it's completely impossible to work as a human rights defender," Orlov said. "It's just that your life is under threat every single day."

While Alexeyeva said she found President Dmitry Medvedev "sympathetic" by comparison with Putin, she faulted the 44-year-old lawyer for not addressing concerns she brought up during two meetings with him.

Putin handpicked Medvedev to replace him as president last year because of a constitutional ban on running for a third term. Neither man has ruled out running in the 2012 elections, raising speculation of a split between Putin and his protege.

“This is a fake debate. In any country, no president can have real influence if the political and legal institutions are not functioning,” said Heidi Hautala, chair of the European Parliament’s subcommittee on human rights. “Here we come back to the issue of free and fair elections. That could be the starting point to putting in place functioning institutions.”

#19
At Kremlin, NATO’s Chief Seeks Military Help in Afghanistan
By Clifford J. Levy
New York Times, December 17, 2009

MOSCOW — The secretary general of NATO held talks at the Kremlin on Wednesday for the first time since relations soured last year, though Russia would not immediately agree to his request that it provide more military assistance in Afghanistan.

The secretary general, Anders Fogh Rasmussen, met with the Russian leadership and asked for Russian helicopters and spare parts for the Afghan military, as well as more help in training the Afghan police and combating drug trafficking.

NATO has been seeking to step up its efforts in Afghanistan in the wake of President Obama’s decision to send an additional 30,000 American troops there.

While Russia’s president, Dmitri A. Medvedev, did not say Wednesday whether he would support the NATO request, he indicated that the two sides were succeeding in improving ties, which were damaged last year over Russia’s war with neighboring Georgia, a Western ally.

“We are reaching a new level in our relations,” Mr. Medvedev said at a meeting with Mr. Rasmussen, who took office in August.

Mr. Rasmussen responded: “It is my priority to develop a true partnership between NATO and Russia. We all know that we do have disagreements in some areas. But despite these difficulties, we have done a lot.”

Mr. Rasmussen also met with Prime Minister Vladimir V. Putin and Foreign Minister Sergey V. Lavrov.

Mr. Lavrov said the Kremlin would closely examine the NATO requests.

Russia is ambivalent toward the NATO mission in Afghanistan, in part because the Soviet Union had a long and costly occupation of the country in the 1980s that ended with a humiliating withdrawal. The Kremlin has concerns about the spread of Islamic fundamentalism, but it also does not want to see American influence spread in Central Asia.

Russia has declined to send troops to take part in the NATO mission, though it has increasingly been willing to offer logistical support. In July, it said it would allow American troops and weaponry to fly through Russian airspace to Afghanistan, although that arrangement has encountered delays.

Mr. Rasmussen told Mr. Putin that Afghanistan was a vital area for the two sides.

“I believe that Afghanistan is a key element of this cooperation, because we are facing the same threats — terrorism and drug trafficking — that have their roots in Afghanistan,” Mr. Rasmussen said. “We have already developed extensive cooperation on this issue, but I’m convinced that we can do even better.”

Mr. Putin appeared to express optimism.

"If Russia and the North Atlantic alliance pool their efforts in areas of common interest, we can achieve good results," he said.

#20

Yegor Gaidar: In Russia's rocky soil, he planted seeds of liberal democracy Washington Post, December 17, 2009

YEGOR GAIDAR, who died Wednesday at the age of 53, was a Russian hero little appreciated by most of his compatriots. Many of them associate him with the miseries of the 1990s. History – if it is written honestly, always a question in Russia – will record him as a fearless, clear-eyed believer in liberal democracy who accepted an impossible challenge that most others shied away from.

When the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991, Russian President Boris Yeltsin assigned to Mr. Gaidar, then only 35 years old, the task of rescuing Russia's economy. Mr. Gaidar became associated with what Western economists called "shock therapy," but he always maintained that his reform program was the minimum that could begin to bring Russia out of the wreckage that communism had bequeathed. He freed prices, knowing that some people's meager savings would be wiped out, because there was no other way to get goods to market. He favored rapid privatization, knowing that the only people with capital to invest were, by Soviet definition, criminals, because he had faith that property-holders would begin to understand the importance of the rule of law. And he always defended his program with logic and honesty against enemies who bothered with neither.

His program brought less success than similar policies applied in Poland and other central and eastern European countries. He made mistakes, of course. But he also faced ferocious opposition from unrepentant communists and inconstant support from Mr. Yeltsin. Having spent a generation longer under communism, Russia had a deeper hole to dig out from. And while outposts of the Soviet empire could blame Russia for their unhappiness during the difficult transition to capitalism, Russians, having no such ready scapegoat, found it convenient to blame Mr. Gaidar.

It was always something of a surprise that Mr. Gaidar, scion of an illustrious Soviet family, came to feel so deeply the value of freedom, both political and economic. Certainly it was not an understanding shared by Mr. Yeltsin's successor, Vladimir Putin, who spurned Mr. Gaidar's humanism while embracing the nationalism and heavy-handed governance that Mr. Gaidar knew would take the country toward a dead end. Soaring oil prices during most of this decade allowed the Kremlin to set aside the remaining economic reforms Mr. Gaidar knew to be necessary. The health and welfare of the country declined, so much so that Mr. Gaidar's age of demise is close to average for Russian men.

Still, it would be wrong to label Mr. Gaidar a failure. The middle class he dreamed of has indeed emerged in Russia, and it enjoys a kind of personal freedom unknown in previous Russian history. Mr. Putin has given way to the third president of the modern era, Dmitry Medvedev, who talks of a "freer, more just, and more humane" political system. Whether he means what he says, or can bring about the change he describes if he does, is unclear. But the debate over Russia's future, in which Mr. Gaidar engaged so uncompromisingly, continues.

#21

Kiev infighting sours presidential race By Stefan Wagstyl and Roman Olearchyk Financial Times, December 17, 2009

KIEV – If Ukrainian politics were a pantomime, this year's production would surely be Beauty and the Beast.

The stage is dominated by the presidential election, the first since the country's 2004 Orange Revolution. With the contest now barely a month away, the two leading candidates are Yulia Tymoshenko, the glamorous prime minister, and Viktor Yanukovich, the combative opposition leader. His last stab at the presidency, in 2004 when he was prime minister, ended in ignominious defeat amid widespread allegations of electoral fraud.

President Viktor Yushchenko, the hero of 2004, is virtually out of the race, his bid blighted by failure to stabilise Ukraine's politics and impose his will on Ms Tymoshenko and Mr Yanukovich.

The heady mood of 2004 has been swept away by political in-fighting, a surge in corruption and economic crisis. According to the US-funded Ipes poll, 74 per cent of Ukrainians think their country is on an unstable path, compared with just 13 per cent in early 2005. "There is massive disillusionment," says Mychailo Vynnytsky, a sociology professor at Kyiv Mohyla Business School.

The electoral drama has little to do with political programmes and much to do with power and money. Ms Tymoshenko, 49, may have the looks of a stage princess but none of the innocence. A tough operator, she made her fortune in the murky natural gas trade of the 1990s and has established her claim to the presidency by out-maneuvring Mr Yushchenko, her Orange Revolution ally. Alexander Ginzburg, a Tymoshenko adviser, says: "She has shown that she can govern. She would be effective from day one."

Too effective, say critics, who see in Ms Tymoshenko an authoritarian streak. Despite strong opposition, she wants to change the constitution to end the division of power between the president and parliament agreed in 2004 and return to presidential rule.

In a television debate recently, she parried a question about the dangers of dictatorship with the words: "Who tells you that dictatorship is bad?" She later explained she meant the dictatorship of the law, but the comments have not been forgotten.

In many countries, Mr Yanukovich, 59, would have lost all credibility after his 2004 campaign was widely condemned for abuse of power.

But he has kept himself centre-stage by retaining control of his political base → the Regions party → and maintaining his ties with billionaire backers.

With the aid of western public relations advisers, the former truck driver has tried to modernise his political image. Serhiy Lyovochkin, an aide, says time in opposition has changed Mr Yanukovich. "Now he's for democracy, for free speech and for the rule of law."

Business people have doubts about Mr Yanukovich's ideological shift. But many see him as a more predictable leader than Ms Tymoshenko. They worry about her populist/interventionist approach to the economy. Examples include plans for price caps on imported drugs (vetoed by Mr Yushchenko) and proposals for profit controls in food distribution.

Both leading candidates pledge to stick with Ukraine's \$16.4bn (€11.2bn, £10bn) International Monetary Fund rescue programme. This may be easier for Ms Tymoshenko, as her move from prime minister to president would assure some continuity. It might take longer for Mr Yanukovich to form his administration and he might be pushed into early parliamentary elections if his government could not secure a majority.

On foreign policy, both leading candidates have distanced themselves from the pro-west Mr Yushchenko's bid to join Nato, which brought few results except for antagonising Moscow.

Mr Tymoshenko boasts of her good relations with Vladimir Putin, Russia's prime minister, which, she says, has resulted in solid co-operation, including over Russia's crucial gas supplies to Ukraine.

Mr Yanukovich has long been seen as the most pro-Russian of Ukraine's leaders and portrays himself as a more reliable partner than Ms Tymoshenko. But he also intends to reopen gas talks with Moscow and negotiate hard over prices.

With the vote taking place in two rounds, on January 17 and (probably) February 7, opinion polls give Mr Yanukovich and Ms Tymoshenko a big advantage over the other 16 candidates. If the two go into the second round, Mr Yanukovich is predicted to win with 40-45 per cent, against Ms Tymoshenko's 25-35 per cent.

The third-placed runner is Serhiy Tigipko, the former central bank governor, who has won favour with urban elites. He has positioned himself as a potential prime minister for either likely winner. But only the voters will decide whether that will be Beauty or the Beast.

Economic cloud

With Viktor Yushchenko, Ukraine's president, warning for much of the year that the country is close to default, investors have struggled to get a clear view of its economy, write Stefan Wagstyl and Roman Olearchyk in Kiev .

Last week's revelation that Kiev wants the early resumption of a suspended \$16.4bn (€11.3bn, £10bn) International Monetary Fund loan seems to add weight to the president's jeremiads, though markets barely moved on the news.

Jorge Zukoski, president of the American Chamber of Commerce in Kiev, says IMF re-engagement is "critical" because Ukraine needs its money and reform-orientated programme. But investors doubt the IMF will release more money before the elections, he says. "Meanwhile, nobody knows if they can pay the bills."

Ukraine plunged into crisis in autumn 2008, when demand for steel, collapsed and foreign lenders cut credit. The decline in gross domestic product is likely to be 15 per cent this year.

The IMF launched a rescue plan but this faltered when Ukraine failed to implement required budget cuts. In October, the IMF suspended a \$3.8bn loan tranche. Kiev is struggling to meet payments, including monthly gas bills, raising concerns of a repeat of last year's gas supply problems. The shortage of cash has been exacerbated by corruption.

#22

Ukraine's predicament

Oranges are not the only fruit

Five years after the "orange revolution", Ukraine faces a less uplifting election

The Economist, December 19-25, 2009

THE good news is that nobody can predict the result of Ukraine's presidential election on January 17th, a sign of a healthy democracy. The incumbent, Viktor Yushchenko, who swept to power in the "orange revolution" in 2004-05, is almost certain to be voted out. But a second round of voting is likely to be needed between Yulia Tymoshenko, the prime minister and former orange ally of Mr Yushchenko, and Viktor Yanukovich, a former prime minister who was the anti-Yushchenko loser then. In the fluid world of Ukrainian politics, allies become enemies and vice versa. Russia strongly backed Mr Yanukovich in 2004. This time, the Kremlin would settle for either frontrunner and has also promised no gas war this Christmas.

After years of political crisis, at least Ukraine is taking the election in its stride. The protesters' tents that were once a fixture of Ukraine's political life are so far absent. Political fighting is fierce, as reflected by television channels that plug the interests of their powerful owners. But at least the overall coverage is diverse.

The bad news is that the leaders of this country of 46m, bordering the EU in the west and Russia in the east, have largely squandered the credit they won in the heyday of the orange revolution. Corruption is rife, the courts are bent, institutions are dysfunctional and the economy (dominated by Soviet-era steel and chemical factories) is sick. Instead of reforming Ukraine, politicians have fought over power and assets, blocking each other's decisions. This is exemplified by Mr Yushchenko's recent actions, aimed at damaging Ms Tymoshenko at any cost, even if they discredit the country.

Mr Yushchenko has even managed to sabotage the disbursement of a badly needed IMF loan. The fund bailed out Ukraine to the tune of \$16.4 billion, and was relatively lenient over its conditions. One thing it did ask was that the budget deficit be kept down. So when Mr Yushchenko signed a law to increase public-sector wages, the fund had little choice but to suspend the final \$3.8 billion tranche.

On paper, both Ms Tymoshenko and Mr Yanukovich are promising reforms. But Ukrainians know better than to believe promises. Ms Tymoshenko's record in office is mixed. In two stints as prime minister, she reversed one of Ukraine's more controversial privatisations and scrapped an opaque intermediary in the gas trade between Russia and Ukraine. She has also held down public spending.

But her bid to control prices, her rabble-rousing instincts and her scheming were all alarming. Not long ago she tried to forge a deal with Mr Yanukovich to amend the constitution so that parliament would elect the president. According to a leaked document, parliamentary elections were to be held in two rounds, giving the winning party total control. The arrangement fell through only after Mr Yanukovich walked away.

The common wisdom in Ukraine suggests that, if Ms Tymoshenko wins the election, she will consolidate her power, undermine the opposition and micromanage the government. There is no danger of micromanagement with Mr Yanukovich, who represents the interest of big industrial groups in the Russian-speaking east. Worryingly, his political camp includes Ukrainian officials involved in the scrapped gas intermediary. Yet corruption is so rife in Ukraine that even the most scandalous allegations surprise nobody. "The trouble is that 80% of what Tymoshenko says about Yanukovich is true, but 80% of what Yanukovich says about Tymoshenko is also true," says Yulia Mostovaya, editor of *Zerkalo Nedeli*, a weekly.

The choice in this election is not, say some Ukrainians, who would do the best job but who would do the least damage. Whoever wins will have to amend the constitution that makes decisions in Ukraine so hard to reach. The worst outcome would be a result in the second round so close that neither concedes defeat. If that happens, expect more tents in Kiev.