

WASHINGTON, D.C. December 24, 2009



TO: NCSJ Leadership and Interested Parties

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

In Brief

Dear Friends,

Please see below for NCSJ's Weekly News Update. The next weekly update will be on Friday, January 8, 2010. We wish you a joyous and safe New Year.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads 'Mark B. Levin'. The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

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 24, 2009

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#1a

Russian Court Upholds Sentences Of Racist Group RFE/RL, December 21, 2009

MOSCOW -- Russia's Supreme Court today upheld the sentences given to members of a racist group in the city of Barnaul, RFE/RL's Russian Service reports.

The regional court in southern Siberia's Altai Krai sentenced a group of young men to long prison terms for murder and attacks on non-Slavic people in Barnaul in 2007.

The group, which was led by teenager Aleksei Kelber, called itself "Odin's Wolves." Kelber called himself "Odin" after the god from Scandinavian mythology.

Members of the group considered themselves representatives of a higher Aryan race.

In 2007 they killed two people of Altai and Azeri origin.

They also attempted to kill two Tuvans and a Tajik, and severely beat a Chinese person the same year.

Investigators found black masks, excerpts of statements made by Adolf Hitler, and nationalist literature in members' apartments.

Kelber was sentenced to 23 years in prison, while other group members received jail terms of between eight and 19 years.

#1b

Russian Border Town Celebrates Chanukah FJC, December 22, 2009

BRYANSK, Russia – For many years already, Jews in Bryansk have been proud and eager to participate in Chanukah events. This year's Chanukah celebration was no exception. The Chanukah event, which was organized

by the Jewish community of Bryansk under the leadership of Chief Rabbi of Bryansk Menachem Mendel Zaklos, was attended by hundreds of people.

The festivities took place in one of the most important concert halls in the city with the participation of many distinguished guests. In addition, a group of young women who attend the seminary of Rabbi Yosef Yitzchak Chitrik in Safed, Israel, also participated.

The Chanukah celebration in Bryansk was made possible thanks to the support of the Federation of Jewish Communities of the CIS and FJC President Lev Leviev, as well as S. Petersburg businessman Mikhail Mirilashvili.

Jewish life in Bryansk is gaining momentum under the leadership of Rabbi Zaklos and the community's chairman, Lev Linkov. Situated on the border of Belarus and Ukraine, Bryansk is home to a relatively large Jewish population. It is also the regional center for Jews in four towns – Klintzy, Novozybkov, Surazh and Unecha. All of the towns are members of the Federation of Jewish Communities of Russia.

#1c

Fire and Ice: Chanukah's Light Reaches Siberia FJC, December 22, 2009

NOVOSIBIRSK, Russia – Jews who live in Russia's third largest city – Novosibirsk – greeted Chanukah 5770 in a unique way. While festive celebrations are held and remain popular from year to year, this time around, the venue of the festivities was the city's largest ice skating rink, which is situated in the famous 'Siberia' stadium.

At the stadium, hundreds of people gathered not only for a fun evening of skating, but also for an entire program dedicated to celebrating the Festival of Lights. Everyone listened intently as Chief Rabbi of Novosibirsk Region Zalman Zaklos, who is also a Chabad-Lubavitch emissary serving in the region, told the story about the meaning and significance of Chanukah. His words were followed by a presentation put on by students from the Ohr Avner Chabad Day School of Novosibirsk, under the guidance of Rebbetzin Miriam Zaklos.

Afterwards, everybody enjoyed skating to the musical accompaniment of Chanukah melodies and other lively Jewish music. This is the tenth year in a row that a massive public celebration of Chanukah was organized by the Jewish community of Novosibirsk, a member of the Federation of Jewish Communities of Russia. Along with ice skating rink, the program also included fireworks, a concert by a Jewish music ensemble and brass band, and the opportunity to enjoy traditional Chanukah refreshments.

The celebration of Chanukah this year in Novosibirsk was made possible thanks to the support of Mr. Meir Zeiler of Kiryat Malachi, Israel.

#2

New Gas Pipeline From Central Asia Feeds China By Andrew E. Kramer New York Times, December 15, 2009

MOSCOW — With the turn of a ceremonial valve, China's president, Hu Jintao, opened a big natural gas pipeline from central Asia to China on Monday, significantly increasing China's access to the fuel and providing the first major alternative to exporting the region's gas through Russia.

The ambitious project runs 1,140 miles across three Central Asian nations to the Chinese border, linking Turkmenistan to the Chinese region of Xinjiang. Once inside China, it connects with a pipeline that can carry the fuel even farther east.

Though helpful to energy-parched China, the project siphons potential supplies from the long-delayed pipeline that the European Union would like to see built from Turkey to Central Europe. Such a project could also tap sources of natural gas in Turkmenistan, a stark illustration of the overlapping energy interests at play in the region.

For the China pipeline, Turkmenistan says it can supply 40 billion cubic meters of gas for 30 years once the line reaches full capacity, reported China Daily, an official English-language newspaper. That is about the equivalent of half of China's current consumption of natural gas.

The pipeline is the first major export corridor for natural gas out of the region that does not pass through Russia. It breaks from the Soviet-era design of a pipeline system built to supply Eastern Europe via Russia to the north of Central Asia. The new pipe revives a pre-Soviet view of trade in the region, in which economic exchanges flow east and west, not just through Russia.

"The startup of this pipeline reconstructs the ancient Silk Roads and symbolizes friendship and cooperation," Kazakhstan's president, Nursultan Nazarbayev, said at the ceremony on Monday, the Interfax news agency reported.

Mr. Hu was in Turkmenistan to turn the valve, which signaled the start of gas being transported along the pipeline. An inauguration ceremony was also held Saturday in Kazakhstan for that country's part of the project.

China's accomplishment was all the more notable because Europe and the United States have been jousting with Russia for years to break its natural gas pipeline monopoly.

Alexander A. Cooley, an authority on Central Asia at Barnard College, said China succeeded because it did not blend energy ventures with support for democratic change in the region, or demands for access to the military bases the United States needs to help wage the war in Afghanistan, as was the case with the Western powers. These other Western policy goals in Central Asia served only to stiffen Russian opposition to European and American oil and gas ventures, which fed into Russia's fear of being encircled by Western interests in the region, he said.

Russia also acquiesced to the Chinese because the pipeline poses far less of an immediate threat to the business of Gazprom, the Russian gas monopoly, than a westbound pipe would, according to Vitaly Y. Yermakov, research director for Russia and the Caspian for IHS CERA, an energy consulting group.

Russia's paramount goal is to prevent the West from breaking a monopoly on natural gas pipelines from Asia to Europe, which is the core of Gazprom's business. The eastbound Chinese pipeline, in contrast, does not undercut an existing Russian export market, because Russia sells no pipeline gas to China now.

#3

Controversy erupts over Holocaust revisionism in E. Europe

By Toby Axelrod

JTA, December 20, 2009

BERLIN -- Was the Soviet Union a force for good or ill during the Nazi years?

That question is at the core of a controversy between and among some Jewish groups and former Soviet republics over the issue of Holocaust revisionism, and it erupted last week at a conference in Berlin organized by the World Congress of Russian-Speaking Jews on "The Legacy of World War II and the Holocaust."

Some former Soviet republics view Stalin's Soviet regime as evil and laud those who fought it as nationalist heroes. The problem, many Jewish groups say, is that some of those nationalists were Nazi collaborators and vicious anti-Semites.

In their bid to condemn these nationalists and their murder of Jews, some Jewish groups are trying to promote the image of Stalin's Red Army as liberator, not occupier, of Eastern Europe. It's a hard sell in countries such as Ukraine and Moldova, and in the Baltic states, where many say glorification of the nationalists is on the rise.

Others say, however, that the problem of nationalist extremism is exaggerated, and a Ukrainian diplomat and some Ukrainian Jewish leaders denounced the conference as an exercise in propaganda.

"From the very beginning it was obvious that the conference was not aimed at a constructive approach but at politicizing this issue and extremely over-exaggerating," charged Ukraine's ambassador to Germany, Natalia Zarudna, who spoke at the conference.

"Russia never misses an opportunity to bash Ukraine," concurred Rabbi Yaakov Bleich, a chief rabbi of Ukraine. Bleich said he was invited to the conference but "did not come because I think it was orchestrated by a Russian propaganda machine."

Boris Shpigel, president of the World Congress of Russian-Speaking Jewry, insisted that his concerns about nationalism in Ukraine and elsewhere were genuine, and that he wants to spur a new movement to combat revisionism in former Soviet bloc countries.

"At a time when a new generation doesn't know about the history of World War II, about the Holocaust, we will be a foundation for consolidating all civilizations to fight against new forms of revisionism," said Shpigel, who is also a senator in the Russian parliament. "We are not going to fight with these countries. Ninety percent of the people in these countries are good. It is the other 10 percent who are lying, and it is our goal" to reach them.

The conference passed resolutions to establish an international, anti-fascist umbrella organization to monitor historical revisionism and resurgent neo-fascism; called on the people of Ukraine not to cooperate with fascist and Nazi groups, and to stop glorifying wartime nationalists such as Stepan Bandera and Roman Shukhevych, who helped Nazis kill Jews; and demanded that the international community decry the Iranian regime's Holocaust denial and verbal threats against Israel.

Among the some 500 people from 28 countries attending the conference were many Soviet World War II veterans, who came with medals pinned to their jackets.

Zarudna said groups like Shpigel's exaggerate the degree of neo-fascism in Ukraine, and the envoy condemned what she described as attempts by conference organizers to interfere in the country's upcoming presidential elections next month.

Joseph Zissels, the head of Ukraine's Jewish umbrella group, the Vaad, said the conference "can be seen as an indirect attempt to have an impact on the election."

In a telephone interview from Ukraine, Zissels also said ultranationalists were not as big a problem in Ukraine as described, and that it is Russia that is attempting to portray Ukraine as extremist in order to weaken Ukraine's ties with the West.

"Ultranationalists in Ukraine have the support of less than 1 percent of the population," Zissels said. "Russia's concern is European integration of Ukraine, and that is why they play with the impression that Ukraine is very nationalistic, which it is not."

Efraim Zuroff, director of the Simon Wiesenthal Center in Jerusalem, told JTA that any country that ignores the war crimes of nationalist figures encourages extremists.

"There is a need for an organization that will monitor these issues," Zuroff said.

Israel's Foreign Ministry declined to send representatives to the conference because "We don't want to get into internal politics in this regard," said Aviva Raz Schechter, head of the ministry's Department for Anti-Semitism and Holocaust Issues.

Rabbi Andrew Baker, director of international Jewish affairs at the American Jewish Committee, said there has been "genuine progress" on issues of anti-Semitism in the former Soviet bloc countries.

#4

EU Deputies Give Azerbaijan A 'Wake-Up Call' On Media Freedom

By Anna Zamejc

RFE/RL, December 18, 2009

EU parliamentarians say they want a resolution critical of Azerbaijan to be seen as a warning message for authorities in Baku, RFE/RL's Azerbaijani Service reports.

The parliament on December 17 adopted a resolution expressing concern over what it called the deterioration of media freedom in Azerbaijan.

The document criticized the jailing of opposition journalists, such as newspaper editor Eynulla Fatullayev, and called for their immediate release, and urged authorities to renew FM radio licenses of international broadcasters, including RFE/RL.

Speaking to RFE/RL, Tunne Kelam, one of the resolution's co-authors, recalled that the European Union had made a critical statement on the media climate in Azerbaijan earlier this year.

European deputies later met their Azerbaijani counterparts and informed them about their concerns regarding civil liberties, but to no avail, Kelam said.

Bloggers Emin Milli and Adnan Hajizada were jailed last month for up to 2 1/2 years on charges of hooliganism. "It was up to the Azerbaijani government to produce feedback, to react to these concerns, but nothing happened," Kelam said. "Now, it is the end of the year and it has actually become worse. There was no information, no reaction. That's why we decided to come forward with an urgent resolution."

The Estonian Christian Democratic MEP welcomed Azerbaijan's efforts to integrate with the Western community but added that European partners also have their expectations regarding Baku.

"The current resolution is a strong signal that these relations have a price. They include media freedom and other democratic freedoms," Kelam said.

James Nixey, Russia and Eurasia program manager at the British think tank Chatham House, said the resolution was a positive development in the attitude Brussels is shaping toward Baku.

"Azerbaijan seems to be sleeping. The direction of travel in terms of its democratic credentials is not positive. The West must engage in this crucial, pivotal, strategic energy-rich state, but not only on Azerbaijan's terms," he said. "One must also look at the issues Azerbaijan is less comfortable with."

The researcher stressed that the internal domestic question of democratic backsliding must not be left out and should be addressed alongside the issues of energy cooperation and the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict.

Bernd Posselt, another Christian Democratic MEP and co-author of the resolution, echoed that the European Parliament simply wants to remind Azerbaijan that it should abide by its own commitments.

"Azerbaijan, as a member of the Council of Europe, committed to respect conventional human rights. This was not dictated by us. This was decided by Azerbaijan," he said. "We want to inform the Azerbaijani people that the government should fulfill its obligations."

Italian MEP Fiorello Provera, representing the nationalist Europe of Freedom and Democracy group, delivered the only critical voice during the December 17 debate, arguing against the adoption of the document.

He said that the resolution might be counterproductive and trigger a firmer Azerbaijani stance in relations with the EU, which eventually could become an obstacle in mutual contacts.

Posselt was outraged by his colleague's comments.

"Mr. Provera is not representative of the European Parliament. We have always this type of people speaking on behalf of dictators. We don't speak on behalf of dictators. We speak on behalf of democracy," the German MEP said.

"I remember the Soviet times. If you did something against the Soviet Union, it was [said to be] counterproductive. But it was not. It was the beginning of the process of freedom," Posselt said. "We supported the opposition movement, so we will go on."

But what will happen if Azerbaijani authorities simply decide to ignore the EU's call?

Kelam says Baku's refusal to acknowledge criticism and change things on the ground could eventually affect relations between Europe and Azerbaijan.

"We would need to come back to this issue on a higher level -- that is the relations between European Commission and Azerbaijan and also the European Council. The EU Parliament is going to have a much more important role beginning from next year," Kelam said. "It will be the co-speaker and co-decisive force, also in foreign relations. Therefore, parliamentary resolutions will become more influential and more important."

Nixey, the Chatham House researcher, said that while the resolution might not change things overnight, it is welcome nonetheless.

"Words can hurt and words should hurt sometimes if they are used properly. The EU often doesn't have sufficient backbone, spine, and strength. It has been a lot softer in the past and has not even spoken of such things. So there is some progress here," Nixey said.

#5

Fund gives millions of dollars to keep Russian-speaking Jews Jewish

By Haviv Rettig Gur

Jerusalem Post, December 19, 2009

The only long-term social investment fund focused on Russian-speaking Jewry celebrated its second birthday in Tel Aviv last week, and highlighted the profound challenges to identity faced by the far-flung Russian Jewish communities.

Genesis Philanthropy Group (GPG), founded by four Russian Jewish billionaire businessmen, has set itself the goal of connecting Jews to "Jewish values, culture, and ethics." But not necessarily to religion.

For Russian-speaking Jews, Jewishness "is more cultural than religious, more emotional than technical," according to Sana Britavsky, executive director of GPG Israel.

Russian Jews know they are Jews, she insists. "We feel Jewish as we wander the world. We are different from the Russian world that we come from." But, alongside their uniqueness as Jews, they are also different from other Jews. "Russian Jewry thinks differently from other Jewish communities, since Jewish identity is very different in different places," says Britavsky.

At Tel Aviv's chic Azrieli towers last week, Genesis held a slightly belated birthday party celebrating two years since its start of operations in September 2007.

It has since contributed millions of dollars to dozens of programs, large and small, in Israel, the United States and the former Soviet region that can help keep Russian-speaking Jews Jewish.

Such a fund has been sorely lacking, believes Britavsky.

As a largely secular cultural world, Russian-speaking Jewry doesn't connect easily to, for example, American synagogue life.

Of over two million Russian-speaking Jews who left the former Soviet Union over the past generation, about half landed in Israel, perhaps 40 percent in the United States, and the remainder in Germany.

What remains of the Jewish community in Russia, Ukraine and the region is almost entirely intermarried and unaffiliated.

Thus, the challenge of preserving Russian-speaking Jewry is formidable; they are scattered in different countries and cultures, face "the tremendous temptations of the modern world," in Britavsky's words, and possess identities largely disconnected from Jewish religious life.

To keep them in the Jewish orbit, Jewish educators must appeal to their sensibilities, developing programs "that fit them and understand their Jewishness," explains Britavsky.

"What I'm trying to do is give them tools for life, in particular this tool called Judaism. I'm looking for programs that show them all the happiness and vividness that comes with that." Enriching their lives on their own terms means that Genesis does not focus on specific religious streams or ideological camps. Programs supported by the fund deal with preschoolers as well as the elderly, secular Jews and the observant, huge globe-spanning organizations like the Jewish Agency and birthright Israel and tiny local ventures such as the immigrant-cast "Mikro" theater in Jerusalem.

"We don't care what religious stream you are, or what your level of religiosity," she says of the programs she seeks, "but you have to be capable of making systemic changes, not just publicity." Thus, Genesis funds about one-third of Nativ, a Jewish studies program operating inside the IDF for Russian-speaking immigrant soldiers. Nativ specializes in helping non-Jewish soldiers who are the family members of Jews to prepare for conversion through Israel's Chief Rabbinate.

In Israel, Genesis funds many such systemic efforts, such as Taglit-birthright Israel, Yad Vashem educational projects and programs by the New Israel Fund.

In the FSU, it funds programs ranging from a Moscow youth soccer club to tolerance programs for high schoolers based on study of the Holocaust. It even supports a Jewish studies research center at the Russian State University for the Humanities.

But its broad reach is most noticeable in the US, where the fund pays for scholarships for Russian-speaking Jewish youth to study at Brandeis University, supports the Orthodox youth group Ezra USA and helps finance the eclectic post-denominational informal Jewish gatherings known as "Limmud" across North America.

Genesis tackles head-on the question of Russian Jewish identity in a way that none have done before. Its Web site explains its funding strategy in Israel by noting the "complications" inherent in Russian-speakers' Jewish identities.

"Having acted on their Jewishness by moving to the Jewish state, [Russian-speaking Jews] find their very identity challenged by the twin forces of the secular-religious divide and the political and religious implications of the 'who is a Jew?' debate, leaving numerous Russian Jews even further on the margins."

Instead of taking sides, Genesis wants to preserve all these interweaving identities simultaneously: "[allowing] Russian-speaking Jews to connect to their Jewish identity, while also helping them integrate into Israeli society, while retaining their links to their Russian-Jewish heritage. As many FSU-born olim become more successful economically and begin to acquire a new identity, Genesis aims to work with them to ensure they see themselves not only as Israelis but also as Jews."

Mikhail Fridman, one of the Moscow-based businessmen who established the fund, sent a short video-taped speech to be played at the Tel Aviv party. He used the speech not for congratulations, but to offer his own account of the challenge of Russian Jewish identity.

Russian Jews "are not very religious," he said. "Most of us don't follow many rules and traditions that are characteristic of Jews. We don't speak the national language, whether Hebrew or Yiddish. We're just simple citizens of the countries [where we live]." Genesis must work to preserve and encourage "the values and principles of the Jews," rather than any specific notion of religion or nationhood, he explained.

And, said another speaker, in strengthening the identity of Russian-speaking Jewry, the Jewish world would gain a powerful resource.

"No other Diaspora group has as many relatives in Israel" as the Russian-speaking Diaspora, said Ukraine-born MK Ze'ev Elkin. Their relatively recent scattering into Israel, the US and Europe means that Russian-speaking Jewry can be an important plank in better connecting Israel with the Diaspora.

"Regardless of their level of prosperity, American Russian-speakers visit Israel twice as often as other American Jews," he noted. "They are connected intimately, personally to life in Israel."

#6

Forgotten Stalin Victims Despair In Kazakh Steppe Reuters, December 21, 2009

DOLINKA, Kazakhstan - Their only crime was to be German.

An icy wind lashing against his face, Viktor Fast gazed at rows of crumbling barracks in the snows of central Kazakhstan where his parents -- along with millions of other Russian Germans -- endured years of cruelty in Soviet labor camps.

"It was a bitter time," said Fast whose family members were accused of collaborating with the Nazis in the 1930s despite having lived in Russia for centuries as ordinary farmers.

"It was not a good time to be German," said Fast, 58. Now a resident of Frankfurt, he often comes to this remote spot to pay respect to those who died here as part of Stalin's purges.

Millions of people including ethnic Germans and Russian dissidents died between 1930 and 1960, unable to survive starvation and torture in a network of gulag camps scattered from Russia's Arctic tundra to the inhospitable Kazakh steppe.

Snow crunched under his feet as Fast toured Dolinka, a village at the center of the Kazakh gulag system. Only scraps of barbed wire and a scattering of crumbling barracks -- many converted into houses -- remind visitors of Dolinka's past.

Decades on, Stalin's Great Terror campaign is recognized globally as one of the biggest crimes against humanity. Yet survivors and campaigners lament what they see as Russia's reluctance to face up to the horrors of its past.

"People don't cherish their memories," said Fast, speaking Russian with a German accent. "Seventy years of Soviet policies have erased their memories."

As Moscow debates Stalin's role in its history, rights campaigners have accused Vladimir Putin's Russia of trying to whitewash the dictator's ruinous legacy, turning Stalin's purges into a forgotten chapter of Soviet history.

There is little debate about gulag camps in Russia where Stalin was voted Russia's third most popular figure in history in a nationwide poll last year.

An epigraph praising him was recently restored on the wall of a metro station in Moscow where communists laid wreaths on Monday to mark 130 years since Stalin's birth in Georgia.

"There is a creeping effort to vindicate Stalin and promote the benefits of strong-hand rule, and that is a big worry," said Yekaterina Kuznetsova, 71, a prominent gulag researcher. "But history is cunning. It tends to repeat itself."

MASS GRAVES

It is unclear exactly how many died in the Kazakh gulag camps, collectively known as Karlag. The overall gulag death toll also varies from 1.5 million to 20 million. Dolinka residents describe the surrounding steppe as one big mass grave.

One field is dotted with crosses, a place where hundreds of children – "the offspring of the enemies of the people" – were buried. It is known as Mamochkino – or Mummy's – cemetery.

A chilly 1943 note by the NKVD Soviet security service, a copy of which was seen by Reuters, states: "The death rate among prisoners has increased sharply in Karlag ... Having spent a work shift in the frost many are unable to warm up in the cold barracks ... and die without receiving any medical help."

Stalin's legacy hangs like a dark cloud over this part of Kazakhstan, a vast steppe nation deemed remote enough by Soviet rulers to test hundreds of nuclear bombs and lock up dissidents.

The nearby city of Karagandy, many of its imposing Stalin-era buildings constructed by gulag prisoners, is dominated by a big statue of Bolshevik leader Vladimir Lenin. A tiny marble memorial to gulag victims stands in a local park.

Twenty years since becoming independent, Kazakhstan itself is struggling to come to terms with its past, keen to maintain good relations with Russia – its biggest trading partner.

Many are upset with their government's reluctance to skirt its Soviet legacy in a nation where over a million Kazakhs died in gulags and during a Soviet-inflicted famine in the 1930s.

Last week hundreds of people rallied in Almaty to accuse the government, which has retained a Soviet style of governance, of not doing enough to respect the past.

"It's a difficult topic. I would say it's a taboo," said Achim Schmillen, a researcher from Germany who traveled to Dolinka to visit a gulag memorial.

"Relations with Russia are very important. It's hard for them to get the right attitude and define their identity."

STALIN'S DEATH

Many former camps are now part of Kazakhstan's jail system. Some, like a row of abandoned barracks in Dolinka, are used as a waste dump. Wrapped tightly against the biting cold of -30 C (-22 F), villagers turn away as they walk past briskly.

A tiny village museum is packed with gulag items, its walls plastered with photos of prisoners' gaunt faces.

A journal kept by one prisoner lies on display, showing a hastily written entry dating back to March 1953. "Today there was an announcement ... that Stalin died ... I can't believe this."

Karlag was closed after Stalin's death. Often unable to find anywhere to go, many survivors and their wardens settled down in the same villages, forming an uneasy fusion of tragedies that were never discussed in public.

"After the Soviet collapse some of them were worried that they would be tried for crimes against humanity," said Kuznetsova, the researcher. "But of course no one came."

Russia denies accusations that it is whitewashing Stalin's totalitarian system. In October, President Dmitry Medvedev said the crimes of the past should not be forgiven.

Survivors think otherwise. Mikhail Shmulyov was jailed for not killing himself when captured by German troops in the 1940s. The 90-year-old feels bitter about Russia's stance on history.

"I was never a communist. But after this experience I became a true anti-Sovietchik (dissident)," he said in his wooden home in Almaty which he has elaborately decorated with Buddha statues, paintings and old black-and-white photographs.

"Today we see pictures of Lenin and Stalin everywhere again. I find it shocking. Communism must never be forgiven."

#7

Russian Foreign Minister Aims To Thaw Relations In Uzbekistan RFE/RL, December 21, 2009

TASHKENT -- Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov has arrived in Tashkent for a two-day visit aimed at improving cooled relations between Moscow and Tashkent, RFE/RL's Uzbek Service reports.

Lavrov will meet with Uzbek President Islam Karimov and Foreign Minister Vladimir Norov to discuss regional security and cooperation issues.

Tashkent political analyst Toshpulat Yuldashev says he thinks Lavrov's visit illustrates the Kremlin's attempts to keep Uzbekistan within its sphere of influence.

He says Uzbekistan is increasingly strengthening its diplomatic relations with Western countries and China, and avoids participating in the Russian-led Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) and the Collective Security Treaty Organization.

Farkhod Tolipov, another political analyst in Tashkent, says that due to the unstable situation in Afghanistan the importance of the Central Asian region for the United States and NATO is increasing.

Tolipov adds that as a result, Russia is reviewing its relations with Uzbekistan and might change its political strategy towards the country.

He says Uzbekistan has been sending warnings to Russia by missing several CIS summits and other collective organization meetings -- Karimov did not attend an informal CIS presidential summit in Almaty on December 19-20.

But Tolipov says Uzbekistan wants Moscow to support Tashkent in negotiations over natural gas and water resources with neighboring Central Asian countries.

He adds that Russia provides Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan with financial assistance -- two countries that have serious disagreements with Uzbekistan over water issues.

Tolipov says Uzbek-Russian relations would improve if Russia provided similar assistance to Uzbekistan.

The Russian Embassy in Tashkent said Uzbekistan has the fourth-largest trade turnover of CIS countries with Russia after Ukraine, Belarus, and Kazakhstan.

Trade between the two countries from January-October 2009 amounted to some \$2 billion.

#8

Georgia Razes Soviet Memorial, Angering Russia
Reuters, December 17, 2009

TBILISI (Reuters) - Diggers tore into a Soviet World War Two memorial in Georgia on Thursday to make way for a new parliament in the former Soviet republic, drawing condemnation from Russia.

Pro-Western President Mikheil Saakashvili, whose country was defeated by Russia in a brief war last year, wants parliament sessions to be relocated to Georgia's second city of Kutaisi under an initiative to revitalize the former industrial hub.

Russia's defense ministry said it was "concerned" by the demolition of the 46-meter-high (150-foot) concrete and bronze war memorial at the proposed construction site. Parliament member and former prime minister Sergei Stepashin called it "sacrilege."

Russia's Foreign Ministry said the move was "disrespectful" to Georgians who had fought in the Soviet army during World War Two, of whom some 300,000 were killed.

"This is an attempt to erase from memory Georgia's hundreds of thousands of sons and daughters, who stood shoulder to shoulder with their brother nations, who selflessly fought on the front and gave their lives," it said on its website.

The dispute has echoes of Estonia in 2007, when Russia reacted furiously to the removal of a statue of a Soviet Red Army soldier in the capital Tallinn.

Critics said the Georgian move reflected an indifference to public opinion by authorities under Saakashvili, whose rejection of the Soviet past has been his signature policy since taking power on the back of the 2003 "Rose Revolution."

"The decision to dismantle this memorial without asking the people and without asking the author of this memorial is a very good example of how our leadership ignores public opinion," said Georgy Akhvlediani of the opposition Christian Democrats.

NAKED HORSEMAN

One part of the monument, a statue of a naked Georgian horseman in front of the main concrete structure, has already been removed. Authorities said it would be relocated within Kutaisi, 236 km (147 miles) west of the capital Tbilisi.

City officials could not confirm Russian media reports that the main structure -- designed by Georgian sculptor Merab Berdzenishvili -- would be blown up on December 21, the birthday of Saakashvili which he shares with Josef Stalin.

A spokeswoman for Saakashvili declined to comment when contacted by Reuters. A Russian lawmaker said it was a crime.

"The ... criminal nature of such evil acts must be raised at all international events," Alexei Ostrovsky, a committee chairman in the Duma, the lower house of Russia's parliament, told RIA Novosti news agency.

Relations between Russia and Georgia show no sign of improving since they fought a five-day war in August last year, when Russia crushed an assault by U.S. ally Georgia on the breakaway pro-Russian region of South Ossetia.

#9

Russia's Communists mark Stalin's birthday

By Simon Shuster and Misha Dzhindzhikashvili

AP, December 21, 2009

MOSCOW – The Russian Communist Party called for a moratorium on criticizing Josef Stalin on Monday to allow the country to celebrate the Soviet dictator's 130th birthday in peace.

Nationwide, Stalin's popularity in Russia has been climbing amid Kremlin-backed efforts to defend his image.

"We would very much like for any discussion of the mistakes of the Stalin epoch to be silenced today, so that people could reflect on Stalin's personality as a creator, a thinker and a patriot," Ivan Melnikov, the Communist deputy speaker of the lower house of parliament, said in comments posted on the party's Web site.

The Communist Party is still the second most powerful political force in the country after United Russia, the ruling party chaired by Prime Minister Vladimir Putin. At times, the Communists have defeated Putin's party in regional elections.

But in their efforts to rehabilitate Stalin's image in the eyes of the public, the Communists are taking at least some of their cues from Putin and the Kremlin, which have been pushing for Stalin's accomplishments to be recognized at home and abroad.

Putin has lauded Stalin's victory over the Nazis during World War II and his drive to industrialize the Soviet Union as deserving of respect, despite the purges and repression that killed millions of Soviet citizens in the 1930s.

"In my view, you cannot make one gross assessment. ... Any historical events need to be analyzed in their entirety," Putin said during his annual call-in show with the Russian public on Dec. 3.

A majority of Russians - 54 percent - have a high opinion of Stalin's leadership qualities, according to a survey released Friday by state-run polling agency VTsIOM, while only 23 percent rate his personal character traits as below average. The survey questioned 1,600 people nationwide Dec. 5-6 and gave a margin of error of plus or minus 3.4 percentage points.

In the late 1980s, the last Soviet leader, Mikhail Gorbachev, lifted the taboo against criticizing Stalin as part of perestroika, his sweeping campaign of political and economic reforms that precipitated the 1991 collapse of the Soviet Union. Since then, the Russian public has been exposed to dozens of documentary films, books, memoirs and biographies detailing the atrocities committed by Stalin's regime.

A hardcore of his followers, mainly elderly people educated before perestroika, nevertheless uphold the view that Stalin was a great and valiant leader whose repressive grip on the nation was needed to ensure security and industrial growth.

Stalin was born Josif Dzugashvili in 1878 in the former Soviet republic of Georgia.

On Monday in his home town of Gori, now in independent Georgia, about 300 mainly elderly people gathered outside the Stalin museum to wave flags and his portrait as they celebrated his life

Russian President Dmitry Medvedev says there can be no justification for the Soviet-era oppression that left millions dead at the hands of their own state. In a blog posting Friday, he said Russians must not forget the crimes of the Soviet era, and suggested young people were learning too much about the country's victories and not enough about the bloodbath that reached its peak under Josef Stalin.

The remarks, following critics' claims that the Kremlin was whitewashing history, represent perhaps the Kremlin's strongest condemnation of Soviet repression since Medvedev's predecessor, Vladimir Putin, became president a decade ago.

#10

Chanukah Gift to Dnepropetrovsk: New Torah Scroll FJC, December 21, 2009

DNEPROPETROVSK, Ukraine – On the fifth day of Chanukah, the Jewish community of Dnepropetrovsk was presented with a wonderful gift: a new Torah scroll. The Torah scroll was prepared by scribes at the Dnepropetrovsk-based National Sofer Center, under the supervision of the chief scribe of Ukraine, Rabbi Reuven Margolin.

The scroll was presented as a gift to the community by a member of its Board of Trustees, Vyacheslav (Reuven) Kapustin and his son Dmitry (Arieh), together with Vyacheslav Rysin. Rabbi Elisha Baram, director of the Nachlas Levi Yeshiva in Dnepropetrovsk, pointed out that this new Torah is the second scroll locally prepared from beginning to end since the revolution in 1917. Both Ukrainian scrolls were written at the National Sofer Center, which operates under the auspices of the Jewish community of Dnepropetrovsk.

The ceremony to complete the Torah scroll took place in the Golden Rose Synagogue. Many distinguished guests and leaders of the Jewish community were honored with the privilege of writing the final letters in the scroll. Amongst those honored were people who have been extremely supportive of the revival of the Jewish community.

The honor of writing the very final letters in the Torah was bestowed upon Chief Rabbi of Dnepropetrovsk Shmuel Kaminetsky, Mr. Rysin, and the Kapustins.

"Since completing a Torah scroll by writing the last letters is very significant, it is deeply symbolic that the community is completing the scroll on the fifth day of Chanukah. On the fifth day, the candles in the Menorah that are lit are greater in number than those that are not lit. This makes the Menorah itself a visual reminder of the victory of light over darkness, and good over evil," explained Rabbi Kaminetsky.

The Chief Rabbi thanked the Kapustins and Mr. Rysin for this magnificent gift, and emphasized how much Mr. Vyacheslav Kapustin, his family and his friends are doing for the Jewish community. Mr. Kapustin thanked the Jewish community for giving him the honor and privilege of presenting the Torah scroll as a gift. He shared that he intends to present a Torah scroll to the synagogue being built in Krivoy Rog which, with G-d's help, will be completed before Rosh Hashanah.

#11

Chanukah 5770 Across Russia: A Snapshot FJC, December 24, 2009

MOSCOW, Russia – From December 11 through 19, Jews around the world marked Chanukah, celebrating the miraculous Jewish victory more than two thousand years ago. Across Russia, the Festival of Lights was celebrated privately and publicly in synagogues, community centers, educational institutions, concert halls and city squares, with Chanukah Menorahs symbolizing the victory of light over darkness.

On Moscow's Manezh Square, the celebrations began on December 13 when Chief Rabbi of Russia Berel Lazar and Moscow Mayor Yuri Luzhkov lit the Chanukah Menorah at a gathering attended by thousands. As in the capital city, hundreds of smaller celebrations also took place across Russia.

In Russia's northern capital, Chief Rabbi of S. Petersburg Menachem Mendel Pewzner lit a seven-meter-high Chanukah Menorah, followed by a communal feast featuring lively traditional Jewish music, dances and a laser show in place of the usual fireworks display, a decision that was made after fireworks triggered a blaze in a Perm nightclub that killed over 100 people earlier in the month.

Near the beginning of the holiday, major celebrations that included public Chanukah Menorah lightings were also held in the cities of Yekaterinburg, Perm, Birobidjan, Barnaul and many other cities. Members of the Jewish community of Perm gathered on the city's central square, where they looked on as the Chanukah Menorah was lit.

The ceremony also featured the reading of a memorial prayer to pay tribute to those killed in the nightclub fire and to pray for those who continue to fight for their lives.

The ceremony in Barnaul was attended by Chief Rabbi of the Altai Region Yisroel Noach Kamenetsky and members of the local Jewish community. Young and old attended the lighting of a large Chanukah Menorah on the main square of Barnaul, the third consecutive year that this event has been organized in this part of western Siberia.

In addition to its regular Chanukah celebration, residents of Birobidjan also received good wishes from Chief Rabbi of the Jewish Autonomous Region Mordechai Scheiner and Birobidjan Mayor Alexander Vinnikov.

In Petrozavodsk, Nizhny Novgorod, and Izhevsk, Chanukah celebrations involved groups of artists and entertainers. The celebration in Nizhny Novgorod, held at the Comedia Theater, featured the presentation of the "Man of the Year" awards for achievements made at the local level. Ten separate residents of Nizhny Novgorod received this award for their significant contribution to the development of the spiritual and communal life of their fellow citizens.

In the capital of Udmurtia, Izhevsk, a Chanukah Menorah two meters in height was erected in front of the House of Peoples' Friendship, lighting up the sky with specially crafted electric lights that lit up the entire sky. Students of the Sunday school and members of the youth club run by the Jewish Community Center put on a concert for the holiday, featuring a theatrical performance on the theme of Chanukah.

Throughout Russia, Chanukah was celebrated this year in more than 200 communities in 180 cities extending across the country. Together with the hundreds of Jewish communities located across the Former Soviet Union, the Federation of Jewish Communities of the CIS and Baltic Countries would like to thank all of the sponsors who made these celebrations possible for their dedicated support and for bringing light into the lives of hundreds of thousands of Jews.

#12

FJC Russia's "Man of the Year 5769" Awards FJC, December 23, 2009

MOSCOW, Russia – On December 20, the Kremlin Palace hosted the award ceremony for the annual Federation of Jewish Communities of Russia "Man of the Year" 5769. The FJC Russia established the "Man of the Year" award in 2002 to recognize people who have made significant contributions to the development of the cultural and social life of the country, regardless of their nationality and religion.

Chief Rabbi of Russia Berel Lazar gave the opening speech, reminding the audience that the award ceremony coincides with Chanukah. "Despite the fact that Chanukah is coming to an end, its light will be felt everywhere," stated Rabbi Lazar.

The awards are granted in 11 categories, with all winners receiving a "Fiddler on the Roof" statuette by Israeli sculptor Frank Meisler, created especially for this ceremony. The MCs of this year's ceremony were Andrei and Ivan Urgant.

In the category of "Community Life," the award went to Igor Melzer, chairman of the Jewish community of Irkutsk, for his active participation in the construction of the synagogue in Irkutsk. Boris Altshuler, the head of the NGO "Rights of the Child" received the "Public service" award for his many years of human rights and humanitarian aid aimed at helping children.

The award in the "Government Representative" category went to Major-General Alexander Protopopov, head of the federal penitentiary system in the Arkhangelsk Region, for assistance in organizing the first synagogue in a Russian prison. In the "Television" category, the award went to the CEO of TV AB-TV, producer Yakov Kaller for the film "Kiselev's List."

For "Publications," Rabbi Alexander Feigin received the award for the translation of Rashi's commentary on the Torah from Hebrew into Russian. The award in the "Journalism" category went to journalist Matvey Ganapolsky for his series in the Lechaim Magazine. Theatrical director Dmitry Krymov received the award in the "Cultural Event of the Year" category for the play "Opus number 7. Lineage. Opus number 8. Shostakovich."

The award in the "Patron" category went to S. Petersburg businessman Mikhail Mirilashvili for participating in the development of the Jewish educational system in Russia.

The Bravery Award was presented to Aron Bielski, a partisan, for his outstanding contribution to the victory over Nazi Germany. In the Film category, actor George McKay received the award for his portrayal of Jewish partisan Aron Bielski in the feature film "Defiance."

For his unique role in the development of the Jewish human rights movement in the USSR, the "Man of the Year 5769" award was presented to Jewish Agency Chairman Natan Sharansky, a "Living Legend."

Aron Bielski and Natan Sharansky each received a standing ovation. Aron Bielski expressed his gratitude to the FJC Russia and also thanked the Russian people, through which his family was saved from destruction.

In his speech, Natan Sharansky noted that there were many leaders in the room and a lot of fighters. Among them, he specifically singled out Lev Leviev, emphasizing that he has "in both good and difficult times helped Jewish education worldwide." He also mentioned Lyudmila Alekseeva, the head of the human rights chapter of the Moscow Helsinki Group. Mr. Sharansky promised that, as head of the Jewish Agency, he will do everything in his power to strengthen ties with Jewish communities and to ensure that the Jews of Russia will be proud of a strong Israel, and that Israelis may likewise be proud of a thriving Jewish community in Russia.

Following the presentation of the awards, participants enjoyed a concert featuring performances by internationally famous Jewish singers Dudu Fisher (Israel) and Avraham Fried (USA).

#13

In memory of Andrey Sakharov and Yegor Gaidar Moscow bureau for human rights, December 23, 2009

20th anniversary of the decease of Andrey Dmitiyevich Sakharov obliges us not just to recall the great human rights activist but also to think: why did his heritage get no adequate continuation?

This question may be responded in different ways. For example: unfortunately a person of this scale having similar indisputable authority did not appear in Russia during these years. Or: the political regime existing in our country does not permit a person similar to Sakharov ripening and showing its worth. Or: the democratic opposition in today's Russia is too weak and incapable to propose the ideas that would be followed by significant public majority.

There is a grain of truth in each of these assertions but still they do not provide an answer that would satisfy us. Yes, we don't see a leader similar to Sakharov today. But the conditions under which Sakharov lived and worked were tougher than today and this did not prevent him from acting "in spite of circumstances". Yes, the democratic opposition is weak in our country and has no public support. But in 1960-1980s (up to Gorbachev's time) it was even weaker and scantier and had no mass support either but it was a moral power the authority had to reckon with. And this moral power was basing to a great extent upon the firm position and fearlessness of academician Sakharov. Besides, other moral authorities were available in the country: father Alexander Men, Dmitry Likhachev, Alexander Solzhenitsin. It's hard to call them human rights activists in the narrow sense of the word but they created the spiritual climate that enabled the development of human rights movement.

Before trying to respond the question set by us, it's necessary to understand what the heritage of Sakharov is. Yelena Bonner wrote about this in detail in her recent article. But in brief words – this is (using Pushkin's word) "self-reliance", or standing in truth. Being a mild, intellectual, tolerant man, Sakharov was absolutely uncompromising when it dealt with moral principles. This took place under Brezhnev, Andropov, and Gorbachev. This would take place today too. No doubt many tendencies of contemporary Russian policy would get a sharp protest on the part of

Andrey Dmiriyevich. He knew that considerations of “political expedience” and rationality that is perceived untruly can lead to a deadlock.

Sakharov was not just an outstanding scientist – he was a citizen and a fighter for human rights. Rights of not abstract but quite specific human. He did not avoid everyday, rough work. He sustained long-term calumnious campaign against himself and his nearest people stoically. Neither searches, nor actual arrest, nor exile could make him reject his views. He suffered from public incomprehension but did not leave the road he chose. He was really modest. Awareness of his own greatness was alien to him. He did not separate his life from the life of his country. The strength of spirit was his weapon.

Those who continue the cause of Sakharov today are people deserving every respect. They also withstand the state machine and undergo a real risk. But they work under the changed conditions. On one hand, human rights community exists legally and on the other hand it is disintegrated and acts in the atmosphere of social atomization, public apathy, disappointment with previous ideals and moral decline. Great courage is necessary for resisting almost general disbelief in favorable prospect for our country, for withstanding such an atmosphere that demoralizes the soul. It is necessary to maintain adherence to Sakharov’s moral imperative: “Do what is due and come what may”. This Socrates’ wisdom would not let down.

On December 16 Yegor Timurovich Gaidar died. A lot is already said about him – that this is a man who saved our country from hunger, civil war and disintegration, that this is a great economist and outstanding statesman, that this is a modest and courageous man. This is all fair enough, this is true. But how can one determine in brief formula who was Gaidar? Without fearing to be mistaken one can assert: Gaidar is a hero of our time, hero without quotes and without irony. His heroism was quiet, not ostentatious, and hidden.

But the hero does not only accomplish the feats – he suffers more than anyone. Instead of gratitude he deserved, Gaidar received another things: avalanche of hatred fell upon him. Not only on the part of Communists, ruling bureaucracy, numerous envious persons but also on the part of the majority that did not understand what Gaidar did for Russia and that yielded to malicious, pseudo-patriotic propaganda.

Years will pass and we think the majority would understand that it was mistaken cruelly, that it was for saving the country from blood and for saving the people from brutality and death that Gaidar’s reforms were undertaken.

#14

“Stalin should not stand up and the past with him ...”

Moscow bureau for human rights, December 21, 2009

Today, when some Russian historians seriously call Stalin a statesman-creator, it should be admitted that the state of historical memory in Russia and the level of comprehension of the whole Lenin’s-Stalin’s epoch do not correspond to the scale of political repressions in the USSR at all (according to some estimates, they led to death of up to 60 mln. people). We had no radical de-Stalinization of the society like de-Nazification in Germany, and Lenin’s and Stalin’s regimes got no definition of unequivocally criminal ones.

Moreover, very few of today’s young people have even approximate understanding of the scale of political repressions during Soviet time. Stalin’s person and activity are treated as “contradictory”, and his services as Stalin-commander-in-chief, Stalin-industry captain are asseverated. Busts to Stalin are installed all round the country, underground stations with Stalin’s slogan are restored, and on the eve of 130th anniversary of birth of the “nation’s father” banners with Stalin’s portraits and inscriptions “The victory will be ours!”, “Stalin is with us!” appeared in the streets of Voronezh and other Russian cities.

According of Levada-center interrogation, just a little more than 38% think that Iosif Stalin was a state criminal and 12% of the interrogated do not agree with this point absolutely. And finally, the project “Name of Russia” became the brightest indicator of perturbation of minds – Stalin occupied the third place in it and was very close to the first place.

Lack of historical memory is not just immoral but also dangerous – it is it that gives birth to the possibility of repeating the recurrences of the past and forms pro-Stalin moods of the youth being close to neo-Nazi ones. In Russia where the level of xenophobia, intolerance, political radicalism is high, such moods may provoke provocative actions with unpredictable consequences.

Stalinism is the decades of unprecedented state terror, total lack of freedom, fear, lie and snitching. Stalinism is the policy of mass liquidation of kulaks in the countryside that led to devastation of millions, hunger and death of hundred thousands people. Stalinism is the combat against any form of dissent that came to a simple and primitive formula: “the one who is not with us is against us”. Stalinism is the criminal practice of sticking the label of “enemy of the people” to the people of own country and ranging them according to extent of their loyalty. Stalinism is the innumerable number of trumped-up, forged proceedings against invented “wreckers”, “underground workers” and “counter-revolutionaries”. Stalinism is the incessant purges in Bolshevik party accompanied by cynical saying “you cannot make an omelet without breaking eggs”. Stalinism is the large-scale repressions in the army that weakened its ranks and broke the continuity and officer’s dignity that were established for centuries. Stalinism is the interminable persecutions of ethnic minorities and foreign subjects. Stalinism is the mass terror of 1937-1938 that was a symbol of culmination of actions of the punitive machine created by Stalin. Stalinism is the humiliations over members of families of the victims of political repressions (arrests, exiles, camps) authorized by the leader. Stalinism is the inhuman mass deportations of small nations in late 1930s – early 1950s. Stalinism is the state anti-Semitism; disbandment of the Jewish Anti-fascist committee and murder of Solomon Mikhoels, “case of the doctors” and preparation of deportation of Jews to the Far East were its apotheosis. Stalinism is the crushing of genetics, perversion of philosophy, falsification of history and apotheosis of militant Lysenko’s views. Stalinism is the medieval ideological dogmatism, extreme political narrow-mindedness, glaring intellectual ignorance and monstrous moral deafness of the regime adherents. Stalinism is the idolatry, fetishizing, sacralization of bloody dictator that developed into the notorious “cult of personality” (that was exposed by Khrushchev as long ago as in 1956 but is still persistent to some extent). Stalinism is the undeclared war against own citizens of the country regardless of their ethnic or social belonging, sex, age, form of activity and status: both the persons invested with official authorities and large public figures and unremarkable private persons were included into the ranks of victims

...

On November 7, 2009 the president of Russian Federation Dmitry Medvedev made an unambiguous estimate of tragic events of Stalinist epoch in his interview to the German journal “Spiegel”: “The authority must be honest, and the honesty of authority also consists in the fact that certain historical events that were already profoundly analyzed are interpreted in clear legal language. From the legal point of view the elimination of a great number of compatriots basing upon political or farfetched economic reasons is the crime. Whatever economic successes we reached, however well the state mechanism was constructed, rehabilitation of persons involved into committing crimes is impossible”.

#15

The Difficulty of Being Ukraine

By Mark Medish

International Herald Tribune, December 22, 2009

Ukraine holds presidential elections next month, and the outcome is likely to spell the epitaph of the Orange Revolution. The euphoria of 2003-04, when a grand display of “people power” reversed a rigged election, has long faded.

The country of 46 million has been one of the hardest hit by the global financial meltdown, suffering a sharp currency devaluation and a projected 14 percent GDP drop this year.

President Viktor Yushchenko, once the Orange hero, is now polling in low single digits. Much like Lech Walesa in Poland a generation ago, the out-of-touch Yushchenko has unceremoniously morphed from national icon of change into political footnote.

The January ballot is likely to lead to a run-off between Prime Minister Yulia Tymoshenko, a feisty populist, and Viktor Yanukovich, a drab but steady former premier and Yushchenko rival, whose Party of Regions boasts the strongest organization.

Both are pragmatic leaders. But whichever wins will face enormous challenges, foremost restarting the anti-crisis program with the IMF, which suspended its \$16 billion lending facility last month due to the bitter political impasse between Yushchenko and Tymoshenko.

The winner will also need to remember that to lead Ukraine is to balance East and West. This imperative reflects the pressures of both external geopolitics and internal demographics.

Russia and the United States tend to view Ukraine as a key battleground in a cosmic proxy war between East and West. Both have a bad habit of trying to pick winners in Ukrainian politics. These interventions, naive in their own ways, tend to backfire, often at Ukraine's expense.

Russian meddling fueled the Orange backlash against the mediocre Leonid Kuchma and his cronies and ended in a series of crippling winter gas cut-offs and sabre-rattling over Crimea.

Meantime, the U.S. expected far more from Yushchenko than he could deliver, deepening his isolation at home. The curse of U.S. foreign-policy idealism, whether neoconservative or liberal, is to make the best the enemy of the good.

By putting more emphasis on the symbolism of a failed NATO membership bid than the unglamorous work of energy reform, the U.S. did no favor for Ukraine's security. It should be clear that an independent Ukraine must not consume Russian-sourced energy as though it were still part of the U.S.S.R.

By contrast, Russia's designs on Ukraine are hardly idealistic. At the NATO summit last year, Vladimir Putin reportedly remarked to former president George W. Bush, "You understand, George, that Ukraine isn't even a country. What is Ukraine? Part of its territory is Eastern Europe, and part of it, a significant part, was given by us."

Political bullies can be clever at implanting a grain of truth in their predatory barbs. Like other European nations, Ukraine's ethnicity is mixed and its borders were not God-given. These things emerged through collisions of tribes, ethnic intermingling and considerable bloodshed over centuries.

Western Ukraine — Galicia and Bukovina — were Habsburg lands and never part of the czarist empire. The Crimean peninsula was transferred from the Russian Republic to Soviet Ukraine by Nikita Khrushchev in 1954, when both were part of the Soviet Union.

Ukraine faces deep identity issues. Ethnic Russians are roughly 20 percent of the population, and many more Ukrainians speak Russian. The languages are close, like High German and Bavarian or Danish and Swedish.

Europe prides itself on what Freud called "the narcissism of small differences." However, Ukrainian nationalists would be wise not to overplay their hand, as Yushchenko often has done on sensitive language and historical issues.

In the 21st century, Ukraine needs to pursue its own path as a pluralist democracy and emerging market, balancing Western integration with a respect for its older cultural roots and affinities. Despite the present economic crisis and wide dissatisfaction with the political elite, Ukraine has a bright future. It has fertile land, solid industry and well-endowed human capital.

It also has a libertarian Cossack streak that explains how Ukraine came into being — precisely because of the proud self-reliance of its diverse people. The streets of Kiev, Lvov, Kharkov, Dniepropetrovsk and Simferopol (forgive the Russian transliterations) today have a distinct whiff of freedom, and they should keep it.

What should the West do to help? The U.S. needs to continue balancing its important "reset" policy with Russia by reassuring its neighbors, foremost Ukraine, of its active commitment.

It is the fate of the post-Soviet countries to be part of what Moscow calls the “near abroad.” While these states will always be near, it must be the policy of the U.S. and European Union to make sure they remain “abroad,” and free and prosperous.

Earlier this year, a senior Ukrainian official, anxious about the reset, asked me whether the Obama administration would “trade us for something like cooperation on Iran.” I told her that the U.S. was rooting for Ukraine even when Leonid Kravchuk and Leonid Kuchma, less than stellar figures, were its elected leaders. This will not change.

Yet Ukrainians remember lost dreams of statehood during the two great European wars in the 20th century. And they remember the “Chicken Kiev” speech of President George H.W. Bush to the Ukrainian Supreme Soviet on Aug. 1, 1991, just months before the unraveling of the U.S.S.R., when he said, “Americans will not support those who seek independence in order to replace a far-off tyranny with a local despotism.” Bush had uncannily bad timing, but his underlying point about the need for political maturity remains important.

Ukrainians and their Western partners alike should stick to a balanced path of reform and long-term sustainability, not quick fixes and grand gestures. The end of the Orange era will not be the end of Ukraine’s independence — nor of its Euro-Atlantic identity.

#16
My Conversations With Yegor Gaidar
By Lyudmila Telen
RFE/RL, December 16, 2009

I met Yegor Gaidar in early 1990. He was the editor of the economics department at “Pravda” and I was looking for a job. Yegor spent a long time explaining to me what his department was doing, what was allowed and what wasn’t. “I’m outta here,” I decided to myself, but I didn’t have time to tell him before he unexpectedly concluded with: “You don’t want to work here.”

Two years later, when he was named acting prime minister, I interviewed him for the first time. It was late in the evening in the government office complex on Staraya Ploshchad. The corridors of the building were dimly lit. There was no receptionist; there were no guards.

A portrait of Lenin hung on the wall of his ordinary, bureaucrat’s office. “You didn’t take that down?” I asked. “They couldn’t,” he answered. He told how the American economists Jeffrey Sachs and Rudiger Dornbusch tried to cope with Lenin when they came to visit him. But they couldn’t budge him — the portrait was fastened to the wall for all time. And Gaidar began his reform work under its gaze.

While we were talking that night, the telephone rang constantly. Gaidar was busy with everything — money, bread, gasoline. He practically never left the office in those days. After I had spoken to him for more than an hour, I asked him if he had anything for a headache. “I don’t,” he said. “My head doesn’t ache.”

In later years, we spoke together many times: In 1996, after he’d written a letter to President Boris Yeltsin urging him not to run for reelection. In 1998, after the Russian government defaulted. In 2001, after Vladimir Putin became president. The last time was in 2007, when we discussed former oligarch Boris Berezovsky and his role in Russian politics.

Today, when I read through these old interviews, I suddenly remembered that they required almost no correction. He answered directly, formulated his thoughts carefully, and didn’t get bogged down in particulars. And this wasn’t because he knew how to speak eloquently. It was because he knew how to think.

Here are some excerpts from those interviews:

2003

Lyudmila Telen: In the 1990s, we Russians lived through a second, great revolution. It was largely bloodless, but nonetheless it was a real revolution with all its consequences. For some reason the Russian intelligentsia has always had a romantic view of revolutions. Do you?

Yegor Gaidar: No. For me, revolution is a misfortune.

Telen: But you were one of the central figures.

Gaidar: I know. But that doesn't mean that I liked it. For me, that time was a real trial. I understood the logic of revolution and I understood that under such circumstances any government is fated to be weak.

Telen: You aren't trying to find a justification for what didn't turn out right?

Gaidar: Revolutionary governments are weak because their leaders are weak. Can we say that Oliver Cromwell was a weak politician? But he couldn't find the money to pay for his army. And Maximilien Robespierre was also strong, as were Lenin and Yeltsin. But their governments could not collect taxes or pay wages....

Telen: And what is the main reason?

Gaidar: Revolutionary governments are not backed by tradition. They can't govern the country the way it has been governed for the last 50 years or even the last 10 or one.

When we took over in the early 1990s, we were forced to govern in way that no one had ever governed before. And everyone had the right to ask: "What the hell are you doing here? Why are you issuing such orders?"

Telen: You have said that you picked your team -- and I quote -- "Not only on the basis of their understanding of macroeconomics" but also on their personal decency. But not everyone lived up to your expectations....

Gaidar: Not everyone, but many did. I made some mistakes out of the naivete that was part of the intelligentsia's consciousness of the 1990s.

Telen: What do you mean?

Gaidar: We thought that if a person was smart, educated, talented, then it stood to reason that he would also be honest. And in most cases, this is true. But not always.

Telen: Were there people you were forced to sever relations with because of this?

Gaidar: Yes.

Telen: From your team?

Gaidar: Yes.

Telen: And was that painful for you?

Gaidar: Yes, very. But there were about three dozen people determining economic policy in the 1990s and today I would gladly shake hands with most of them.

Telen: And do you remember the others, who were involved in major corruption scandals?

Gaidar: If you take the 50 biggest scandals of that type and look at who was involved, you'll see there were very few people from our team, even if you define "team" very broadly.

Telen: Try explaining that to the man on the street.

Gaidar: What do you mean? We began the reforms and so we took responsibility for them. After that, whenever some hanger-on taking over, say, the fisheries sector, starts stealing, then everyone is going to attribute it to the antipopulist course of Gaidar and [Anatoly] Chubais.

Telen: How much are you bothered when people say Gaidar and his team robbed Russia?

Gaidar: I'm not bothered. I remember Shurik's line from "Prisoner Of The Caucasus": "And did I destroy the church, too?"

Telen: And they answered him, "No, it was destroyed before you came -- in the 14th century."

Gaidar: By the time I took over the government, I understood perfectly that Russia had already been robbed. If back then the Central Bank had the reserves that the Central Bank has now, some \$52 billion, the communists would have never ceded power. They ceded power because the reserves were at zero. They had no idea how to pay the debts, how to feed the people.

I am deeply convinced that what we did was correct. I understand the logic of my political opponents who want to lay all responsibility on me. But I don't suffer because of it.

Telen: How do your children react to these charges against "the antipopulist regime of Gaidar-Chubais"?

Gaidar: Each in his own way. I have many children.

Telen: Have they discussed this with you?

Gaidar: No.

Telen: Why do you think that is?

Gaidar: It traumatizes them.

1996

Telen: What were you hoping to achieve when you wrote to President Boris Yeltsin and asked him not to run for reelection? Or were you just making your own political position clear?

Gaidar: I'm not a megalomaniac and I don't think that my opinion could be decisive for the president. But I really did think there was some chance that he, in making that decision, would take my views into consideration.

Telen: How did the president react?

Gaidar: He wrote me a letter.

Telen: Did he get into a debate with you?

Gaidar: It was a personal letter and I don't want to discuss it.

Telen: Do you think that for him the decision to run for reelection was really centered on a desire to continue the reforms, whatever he understood that word to mean? Or was it just a struggle for power?

Gaidar: I don't know the answer to that question. But I have already said that the Boris Yeltsin of today is not the Boris Yeltsin that we knew in 1991 or 1993.

Telen: Maybe it isn't Yeltsin who has changed, but us? We wanted him to be a democrat and that's what we saw in him?

Gaidar: I didn't just watch the president on television. I worked rather closely with him. And I can see that he has changed considerably -- his circle of acquaintances, his style of interacting, the mechanisms for decision making. Some things -- I know for certain -- that were unthinkable then, have become reality today.

Telen: For instance?

Gaidar: The influence of people who have no formal positions in the government on basic decisions in areas where they have absolutely no competence.

Telen: But if Yeltsin and [Communist Party leader Gennady] Zyuganov go to a second round in the election, you won't vote for Yeltsin? Is that question settled for you, as a voter?

Gaidar: Yes, but I won't say exactly how it is decided. I will say that exactly what I will do if [nationalist politician Vladimir] Zhirinovskiy and Zyuganov are in the second round. I will go to the polling station and cross out both their names.

Telen: Say Yeltsin wins reelection. Will he be able to cope with the flood of economic and social problems that will stem from his recent populist decisions as early as in June?

Gaidar: The consequences of those decisions will be felt very soon. In a standard situation, you could count on a lag period of about six months. But in Russia, experience shows, things happen differently. A pro-inflationary policy cannot be politically profitable here even in the short term. We'll feel the full impact of these problems even in May.

Telen: Are you confident that, in such a complex political situation, the government won't give in to the temptation to just skip the election? Many people say such ideas are being considered in the Kremlin.

Gaidar: First, not holding the election is absolutely unacceptable if we want Russia to develop democratically. Moreover, I categorically don't believe that any such gambit would be successful. Some people -- including some intelligent ones -- think there is such a way out. But there isn't. That gambit would result in complete failure that would only make heroes of the communists and open the way for them to return to power without any elections.

Telen: You think a Zyuganov victory in the election would be preferable?

Gaidar: To a Zyuganov victory without an election? Absolutely.

1998

Telen: Is the situation under which the government of [Prime Minister Sergei] Kiriyenko working comparable to the situation in which your government began the reforms?

Gaidar: The conditions in which the current cabinet is working are simply velvet compared to what we faced. Kiriyenko's government, unlike ours, works in a country that actually exists with a financial system that works, with a single, functioning Central Bank that has significant hard-currency reserves. Compared to the problems that we had to solve, the current situation seems perfectly simple to me.

2001

Telen: What is your attitude to wealth?

Gaidar: I know that wealth does not in itself bring happiness. I am engaged in extremely interesting work and would never trade that for a large fortune. There are people for whom it is important to have a lot of money. I'm not one of them.

Telen: The Gaidar government was made up of old and then young specialists who were all more or less the same economically. But that changed quickly.

Gaidar: Some people came up with serious fortunes. Most didn't.

Telen: Did this affect relations?

Gaidar: It would have if I had had complexes. But I don't.

Telen: You didn't go into business out of principle?

Gaidar: I couldn't let myself do that.

Telen: Couldn't?

Gaidar: Even if I earned all my money from my business legally and paid all my taxes, a Gaidar with tens of millions of dollars would have been a reproach to democracy.

Telen: Is it important to you how history views you?

Gaidar: It is important to me how I feel about myself and how my children feel.

2001

Telen: When you headed the government a decade ago, you predicted how things would develop in the country. Have your economic predictions held true?

Gaidar: I didn't make any economic forecasts because I didn't have a basis for any. Prognosis is a sort of model that is based not only on principles, but on facts. If we had had some experience of Russia emerging from 70 years of socialism, then we might have estimated how things would go. But then only short-term problems were clear and we were trying to cope with them.

If you are speaking of my general views, I would say that everything happened more or less as I expected. But everything happened much more slowly than I expected. I incorrectly extrapolated from what we could see then in Poland. I didn't take into account that this history of socialism in Russia was much longer and the distortions much greater and so it took us twice as long to pull out of that as it took the Poles.

Telen: And it wasn't a matter of your own mistakes and miscalculations?

Gaidar: It was a matter of the concrete situation that had evolved by the fall of 1991.

Telen: Why did you leave public politics?

Gaidar: I think I fulfilled my military obligation in public politics. I don't think I was born to be a strong public politician. I have to do those things for which I have clear comparative advantages compared to my colleagues. Which is what I am trying to do. I like what I am doing today.

2007

Telen: Because of the efforts of the authorities, of Berezovsky, and its own activities, the opposition is going steadily downhill. What do you think its chances are?

Gaidar: In the short term, not good. In the long term, normal. Russia has an educated, urbanized population and a per capita GDP of about \$10,000. Such societies cannot be isolated from democracy for long.

Telen: How long are we talking? A year? Five? 10? 50?

Gaidar: After Novgorod and Pskov [in the Middle Ages], Russia had no democratic traditions. But did Taiwan? But when Taiwan reached roughly the same level of development that Russia has today, it turned out that its regime --

which was based on the Stalinist model by our advisers, with the same secret-police system and the same willingness to use whatever violence necessary on the population -- collapsed.

Everything will be normal here too. Will it take time? Yes. Will it take a struggle, and maybe victims? God willing, we can do without that. But at a maximum of 15 years from now, Russia will be a democracy. I'm sure of that.

#17

Yegor Gaidar, the Man Who Killed the Command Economy

By Serge Schmenmann

New York Times, December 23, 2009

It is not surprising that Russian reactions to the death of Yegor Gaidar, the wunderkind who had a meteoric rise, and fall, as Communism fell apart, have been divided along the same lines that have divided the country since the dissolution of the Soviet Union.

His comrades among the reformers of the chaotic, heady and hungry 1990s eulogized a brave and far-seeing hero of "shock therapy" who set Russia on its rocky road to a free market economy. His detractors, including legislators who refused a motion for a minute of silence in the Duma, accused him of serving the West, undermining the Russian state and ushering in all the woes and inequities that have befallen Russia.

In one form or another, this debate has become a fixture in Russia as it has careened among extremes of wealth and poverty, freedom and control, bombast and humiliation. It was bound to surface on the death of so central a figure in Russia's emergence from the Soviet Union.

What struck me was that Mr. Gaidar was only 53 when he died last week. It was another reminder that only 18 years have passed since Mr. Gaidar engineered the fateful "price liberalization" of Jan. 1, 1992, driving a stake through the heart of the controlled economy and breaking one of the Kremlin's most powerful and destructive levers of control.

Mr. Gaidar (pronounced GUY-dar) and the other economists tapped for this task were academics with only a theoretical understanding of capitalism and no experience in management or government. Gaidar was 35, and up to then had worked only in Communist Party institutes and publications. He had joined Boris Yeltsin's government less than two months before the economic reforms were initiated.

Of the other reformers of the time, Boris Fyodorov (who died a year ago at age 50) was 34; Boris Nemtsov was 33; Anatoly Chubais was 37; Grigory Yavlinsky was an old-timer at 40. Their foes dubbed them "the boys in pink shorts." But they were all Russia had.

We are prone to forget what they were up against. The late 1980s and early 1990s were marked by the headlong disintegration of the economy. Russia's foreign-exchange reserves were almost down to nothing. Stores were empty, and the most basic foods were rationed.

Mr. Yeltsin's hold on power was tenuous as he battled increasingly hostile legislators for every scrap of reform. At the close of 1990, the newspaper Kommersant wrote: "The problem is not only the cold and the hunger. Strange as it may seem, almost nobody has any faith left in a better future."

The crisis found its man in an unlikely academic — short, plump and always polite, with an intelligentsia pedigree: his grandfather was a popular children's writer and his father was a war correspondent. He had an unflinching belief that there was no option other than to free prices, both to restore the supply chain and to break the state's grip and so give democracy a chance.

Mr. Gaidar achieved the immediate end: food and goods reappeared in stores. But what followed was also chaotic and often ugly. Prices soared manyfold; people reared in the stifling paternalism of the Soviet system were cast onto the unfamiliar free market. Many suffered, especially the old.

Racketeers and bandits created a multiheaded mafia that remains potent and ubiquitous. Privatization led to the transfer of vast wealth to a handful of oligarchs and to rampant corruption. Under Vladimir Putin, the government is taking back many of the powers and controls that Mr. Yeltsin and his young lieutenants tried to release.

This is what most Russians today associate with the name Gaidar. In a nationwide poll conducted two years ago, only 17 percent of Russians thought well of what Mr. Gaidar did.

In an article for Izvestia shortly after he was ousted by Mr. Yeltsin, Mr. Gaidar wrote about Russia's race for a place in the world: "Through superhuman effort, Russia would manage to catch up and overtake, especially in military technology. Yet the world would unnoticeably but steadily move on, and again after disgraceful and torturous setbacks the country would regroup for a leap and make another lurch, and everything would be repeated."

Mr. Gaidar remained optimistic about breaking that cycle. Two years ago, he was asked about the chances for democracy, he answered: "Short-term, bad. Long-term, O.K. Russia has an educated, practical society with a G.D.P. of about \$10,000 per capita. You can't isolate a society like that from democracy forever." If so, it will be in part thanks to him. If not, at least he tried.

#18

Jobless Total At Highest In 4 Months

St. Petersburg Times, December 23, 2009

Unemployment rose to a four-month high in November and retail sales fell on the month after rising slightly in October, indicating that the economic recovery remains uneven and painful, according to data released Friday.

The jobless rate rose for a second month to 8.1 percent, from 7.7 percent the month before, the State Statistics Service said. The median estimate in a Bloomberg survey of 15 economists was for a rate of 7.8 percent.

The rate, however, still remains below the five-year high of 9.5 percent registered in February.

On the positive side, Russians had more cash to spend last month than in October and completions of housing picked up by about one-fourth on the month.

Russia suffered more than most developing countries during the recent recession, which wiped out a tenth of its gross domestic product in the first half of the year. The economy began showing some incipient signs of revival in the summer, aided by rising oil prices and overall improvement in the global outlook.

There has been a slight spark in activity in some industries and the 23.1 percent monthly rise in housing completions suggests that construction may have left the worst of the crisis behind.

At 19,174 rubles (\$626.7) per month, Russia's average wages are significantly higher than they were a year ago, and those who work seem to have more disposable cash to spend.

"It's not because the government was pushing salaries up or the private sector was increasing salaries; it was the effect of a stronger ruble," Vladimir Tikhomirov, an economist at UralSib, said before the data were released. A stronger ruble also makes consumers less inclined to save, he said.

But uncertainty about the economy's future might curb spending desires, economists said.

Retail sales fell 1.3 percent in November from October, the first monthly decline since April, while falling at a slower pace on an annual basis as a stronger ruble made imports cheaper and encouraged household spending. Sales declined 6.4 percent from a year earlier, compared with a revised 8.4 percent drop in October, the statistics service said.

Disposable incomes rose 1.9 percent last month after growing 9.9 percent in October. Real wages fell an annual 0.7 percent after a 3.5 percent decline the previous month.

"Hopefully, hopefully, hopefully, people were just saving in November for holiday shopping," said Vladimir Osakovsky, head of strategy at UniCredit Bank. "We do have a crisis, and we do have a rising unemployment rate, and we do have some deterioration in retail sales."

Fear of losing work is the biggest concern for 49 percent of Russians, according to a poll by the Levada Center published Dec. 14. That's up from 17 percent in 1997, the year before the country's last economic slump.

The jobless figure contrasts with assurances by Finance Minister Alexei Kudrin last week that the job-cutting "trend has been broken" and indications that the economy may be on the verge of recovery. Output contracted an annual 8.9 percent in the third quarter from a record 10.9 percent in the second as companies restocked inventories and oil prices recovered.

GDP contracted 3.8 percent in November, the economy's best performance this year, but the government does not expect the economy to reach its precrisis growth rate until the end of 2012. (SPT, Bloomberg)

#19

Lawmaker urges NATO to consider arms for Georgia

By Desmond Butler

AP, December 22, 2009

A senior Republican senator is urging the Obama administration and European allies to consider rearming Georgia, an action that would inevitably upset Russia.

The recommendation comes from Indiana Sen. Richard Lugar, a lawmaker who has long cultivated cooperation with Russia. Lugar has been a key ally for President Barack Obama on his pursuit of an arms control deal with Russia that has been the centerpiece of the administration's efforts to improve relations with the Kremlin. He also is leading efforts to win essential Republican votes to ratify the treaty once it has been completed.

During the brief August 2008 war, Russia destroyed much of Georgia's military infrastructure and occupied two breakaway territories. Russia has since recognized both Abkhazia and South Ossetia as independent countries and established military bases close to their borders with Georgia proper.

A report by Lugar's staff, released Tuesday, warns that Georgia's military vulnerability could lead to further instability in the Caucasus amid continuing tensions between Georgia and Russia. It urges the administration to coordinate a strategy within NATO that strikes a balance between Georgia's security needs and NATO's relationship with Russia.

"The Alliance must come to grips with the reality that Georgia will require coordinated security support from America and European nations for some years to come," Lugar writes in a letter accompanying the report.

Lugar's report noted that the destruction of Georgian radar capability and air defenses have left the country vulnerable to further attack and also unable to verify air incursions over its territory.

Following the war, the United States allocated \$1 billion in aid to Georgia for rebuilding, but both the Bush and Obama administrations, as well as European countries, have withheld lethal military aid fearing that it would antagonize Moscow. Meanwhile, European countries have struck important arms deals with Russia that the report says could "upset the military balance."

The report also warns that Georgia's current insecurity could destabilize the country and lead to greater nationalism.

"A continuation of the status quo appears to ensure that Georgia will not only have difficulty providing for its own territorial defense needs but remain susceptible to the internal strife and external manipulation that often accompanies such national insecurity," the report says.