

WASHINGTON, D.C. February 5, 2010



TO: NCSJ Leadership and Interested Parties

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

In Brief: Anti-Semitism in Ukraine Elections; Kazakh FM Visits DC; Russia Nixes JAFI Meeting

Dear Friend,

Polls have indicated that Viktor Yanukovich remains ahead of Prime Minister Yulia Tymoshenko in the race to succeed incumbent President Viktor Yushchenko. Whoever wins will have their hands full in getting the economy moving again and trying to reunite a deeply-divided populace.

As Ukraine goes to the polls this Sunday for this run-off presidential election, anti-Semitism is appearing in the campaign again. Leaflets being distributed throughout western Ukraine accuse Tymoshenko of hiding her Jewish identity. This despicable tactic was also used against candidate Arseniy Yatsenyuk last summer.

NCSJ condemned the anti-Semitic accusations against Yatsenyuk at the time. We also asked all the candidates to denounce these tactics, and to clearly state that anti-Semitism and xenophobia have no place in Ukrainian society – let alone during an election campaign. Ukraine's political establishment, including both Tymoshenko and Yanukovich, must make an unambiguous statement *now* that it will not let hate and prejudice infect the country.

Another controversy in Ukraine is the furor over President Yushchenko's posthumous award to a Ukrainian nationalist accused of killing thousands of Jews during the Holocaust. We have included several stories on this topic in this week's Update, and will keep you informed as the issue unfolds.

Kazakhstan's Foreign Minister visited Washington, D.C. this week to discuss his country's agenda as the new Chair-in-Office of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe. Foreign Minister Kanat Saudabayev met with senior administration officials, including National Security Advisor Jim Jones and Secretary of State Hillary Clinton. He also testified before the Congressional Helsinki Commission, where Members of Congress greeted him warmly. NCSJ supported Kazakhstan's effort to assume the Chairmanship and has worked closely with the Kazakhs on their program for this year. I spoke with the Foreign Minister, an old friend from his days as Ambassador to the United States, at several events.

The Jewish Agency for Israel had planned to hold its February meetings in Saint Petersburg, Russia. Unfortunately, the meetings have been moved back to Jerusalem because the Russian government did not give final approval for the event. Much speculation surrounds the Russian government's actions, including JAFI's registration status in Russia.

Ten years ago, at a much different time in U.S.-Russia relations, JAFI had a similar registration issue with the Russian government. NCSJ worked then with the Clinton Administration, the Israeli government, JAFI, and the Russians to resolve the problem. Now it is important to ensure that this current problem does not lead to any additional complications for JAFI's vital work in Russia. Please see the stories in the Update for more information.

Finally, when I was in Moscow last December, Russians were complaining about a lack of snow and real winter weather. Since my visit, Russians have gotten their full taste of winter, and in the mid-Atlantic section of the United States, so have we. As I write, we are getting ready for our second major blizzard of the season. It seems in 2010, we can experience the Russian winter right here in Washington, D.C.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Mark B. Levin". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large initial "M" and "L".

Mark B. Levin
Executive Director



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

NCSJ WEEKLY NEWS BRIEF
Washington, D.C. February 5, 2010

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#1a

Supreme Court Judges File Lawsuits Against Three Tajik Newspapers RFE/RL, January 29, 2010

DUSHANBE -- Three judges from the Tajik Supreme Court and a Dushanbe court filed lawsuits against three independent newspapers today, RFE/RL's Tajik Service reports.

The judges said three weeklies: "Ozodagon," "Farazh," and "Asia-Plus" printed quotations in their most recent editions from a press conference in which a lawyer accused the judges of issuing unfair punishments.

Two weeks ago, lawyer Solehjon Juraev invited journalists to a press conference at which he said Judges Fakhriddin Dodometov, Nur Nurov, and Ulughbek Mamadshoev had sentenced a group of 33 businessmen from the northern city of Isfara to long prison sentences despite weak evidence of their crimes.

The judges said today the newspapers did not ask them to comment and printed biased statements that have no basis. They asked for 5.5 million somons (\$1.26 million) as compensation for the moral damage caused by the comments in the articles.

Judge Mamadshoev told RFE/RL that he filed the lawsuit as a private citizen because he thinks the newspapers ignored the media law.

Zafar Sufi, the chief editor of "Ozodagon," said the press conference was, of course, one-sided but the newspapers are prepared to also print responses from the judges.

The latest court cases against the newspapers follow two others against independent publications in the last week. Some analysts say the pressure being applied to the media is related to the February 28 parliamentary elections.

#1b

IMF to provide 574 million dollars in loans to Moldova

AFP, January 30, 2010

WASHINGTON — The International Monetary Fund said Friday it would provide 574 million dollars in loans to Moldova to help one of the poorest countries in Europe cope with the economic crisis.

The IMF executive board approved two three-year loans totalling 574.4 million dollars, the Washington-based institution said.

One loan, designed for IMF members in extreme poverty, is interest-free until the end of 2011. The other carries a small interest but is repayable over 10 years with a grace period for principal payments of four and a half years.

The loans were awarded "to support the country's economic program aimed at restoring fiscal and external sustainability, preserving financial stability, reducing poverty, and raising growth," the institution said.

The IMF said 93.2 million dollars would be immediately available to Moldovan authorities, with the remainder available in instalments subject to semiannual reviews.

Moldova has been hit hard by the global economic crisis, slashing gross domestic product, the broad measure of the country's output, by nearly eight percent over the first half of 2009, it said.

The IMF estimated the economy contracted nine percent for the full year 2009.

#1c

Russia Ranks 55th in Report of 60 Globalized Economies

Moscow Times, February 1, 2010

Russia is one of the least globalized countries among the 60 largest economies in the world, according to a report released Friday.

The country ranks 55th on the list, compiled by the Economist Intelligence Unit and Ernst & Young - just above Indonesia and below Ecuador.

Each of the countries was graded by analysts using a 1 to 5 scale on a number of factors, ranging from trade policy to Internet subscribers to migration.

While Russia scored relatively well in categories ranking countries' trade policies and capital restrictions, it ranked much lower in indicators measuring the exchange of technology and ideas, such as the number of Internet users, as well as measures of cultural integration, such as tourism. Russia scored a 1.77 in the technology category and a 2.01 in the cultural category.

Russia's aggregate score in 2009 was 2.77, up only slightly from the 2.51 it scored in 1995.

BRIC countries (Brazil, Russia, India and China) all rank in the bottom half of the list and "none has increased, or is even expected to increase, its globalization progress at anything like the pace of its economic growth rate," the report said. "This may be explained in large part by a greater focus on new opportunities arising in home markets."

Singapore, Hong Kong, Ireland, Belgium and Sweden led the list, while Indonesia, Nigeria, Algeria, Venezuela and Iran brought up the rear.

#1d

Ukraine chief rabbi protests nationalist's honor

JTA, February 2, 2010

Ukraine's chief rabbi said he will give up his own state honor to protest the country's honoring of a wartime nationalist leader.

Rabbi Moshe Reuven Asman has asked attorneys to determine how he can return his Order of Merit honor in protest of President Viktor Yuschenko's granting of the Hero of Ukraine award to Stepan Bandera, the leader of the Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists, on Jan. 22, Interfax news agency reported.

The posthumous honor for Bandera was protested by the Federation of Jewish Communities of Russia, as well as other regional Jewish organizations,

The Ukrainian nationalist forces led by Bandera fought against both the Nazis and the Soviet army in World War II, and led an armed battle against Soviet rule in Ukraine into the 1950s. Bandera and his nationalists were responsible for killing thousands of Jews and Poles.

Yuschenko is running last in the race for Ukrainian president, with elections scheduled for Feb. 7. His honor for Bandera was seen as a way to force the other candidates to take a stand on the nationalist leader.

Bandera was assassinated by a KGB agent in Munich in 1959.

#1e

One Hand Clapping

RFE/RL, February 02, 2010

If you schedule a debate and only one candidate shows up, does it count?

In Ukraine's presidential race, it definitely does -- as an opportunity for Yulia Tymoshenko to level a few zingers at the "empty spot" representing her rival, Viktor Yanukovych.

"The important thing is that this empty spot will not become Ukrainian president," said Tymoshenko during the 100-minute debate-turned-monologue. "And although he is absent, I can sense a smell in this studio. This is the smell of fear. I don't want a banal coward to become the next leader of our nation."

In the western Ukrainian city of Lviv, residents generally agreed that in the war of wits, Yanukovych -- who famously misspelled "professor" on his own candidate application and recently referred to Russian writer Anton Chekhov as a "great Ukrainian poet" -- was coming up short.

"He showed weakness because he refused to debate a woman," said Andriy Shevchuk, a high school student speaking in the concrete-slab outskirts of town. "He's afraid to debate because he's just not smart enough."

"Yanukovych is illiterate," said Bohdan Perelyuk, a pensioner in snowy downtown Lviv. "She's intelligent, and he's a criminal who served two jail terms."

"He's poorly educated. He can only say what's handed to him to read," said Iryna Lipenskaya, a teacher. "And she's educated and cunning."

Lviv is not what you'd call a cradle of Yulia-mania. In the first-round presidential vote on January 17, the city backed incumbent Viktor Yushchenko, with Tymoshenko coming in second.

But this time around, most city residents say they'll probably vote for Tymoshenko, only because she's the lesser of two evils. They say all politicians are corrupt, but that a victory by Yanukovich would hand Russia control over western Ukraine.

#1f

Russian Jewish Institutions Nearing Completion

By Tamar Runyan

FJC, February 2, 2010

In the coming months, three synagogues, an orphanage, an educational campus and two new Jewish community centers will be dedicated in five cities across the former Soviet Union.

A ceremony in Moscow will kick things off this week with the grand opening of the Bet Chaya orphanage, a Chabad-Lubavitch run institution operated under the umbrella of the Federation of Jewish Communities of Russia.

Three weeks later, Jewish community leaders will dedicate a new synagogue and community center in Malakhovka outside of the Russian capital.

Elsewhere, construction is about to wrap up at the central synagogue in historic Derbent, while community members in Minsk, Belarus, are preparing to dedicate their new synagogue and community center.

The coming months will also see the dedication of a new Ohr Avner Chabad educational campus in Baku, Azerbaijan.

#1g

Russia: Railway Bombed

By Michael Schwartz

New York Times, February 3, 2010

A bomb exploded on the tracks beneath a railroad maintenance engine in St. Petersburg on Tuesday, slightly wounding the vehicle's operator, the Prosecutor General's office said in statement. The blast produced a crater over three feet wide, but caused little other damage, the statement said. Anatoly Kvashnin, the head of the regional investigation unit covering transportation, told the Interfax news agency that the bombing was probably a terrorist attack. In November, a bomb exploded beneath a luxury train traveling between Moscow and St. Petersburg, killing over 25 people. Officials have named no suspects in that attack.

#1h

Russia: No Plans for Moon

By Andrew E. Kramer

New York Times, February 3, 2010

The Russian space agency has no plans to fly to the Moon and will not be shifting this position now that President Obama has asked NASA to abandon a second American Moon program, the head of the agency suggested in comments to Interfax. The exploration goals of the two space agencies would "fully coincide" if America drops its Moon program, the director, Anatoly N. Perminov said. "Our near-term program has not included any plan for settlement on the moon," he said. "We shouldn't rush from side to side." No longer rivals, the two space programs are closely entwined through work on the International Space Station and will become more so when Russian rockets will become, at least for some time, the only means of putting American astronauts into orbit if the space shuttle fleet is retired as expected this year.

#1i

**Israeli schoolchildren to study Soviet Jewish immigration
RIA Novosti, February 3, 2010**

A course in the history of Jewish immigration from the Soviet Union has been introduced in Israeli high schools, a spokesperson for the education ministry said on Wednesday.

The new course coincides with the 20th anniversary of the "Great Aliyah," the name for the 1-million-strong wave of Soviet Jews who moved to Israel during the disintegration of the world's first socialist state.

"The phenomenon of the Aliyah of Soviet Jews in the 1970s-90s - its causes, the process and the difficulties of adaptation - was not taught at schools because it is recent history," Gita Rocah said.

The new course will be taught in Grades 11 and 12.

The Education Ministry is currently running teacher training courses in the history of immigration over the past several decades.

Many of the Soviet Jews allowed to leave for Israel chose other destinations, most notably the United States. In 1989, a record 71,000 Jews were granted permission to leave the USSR, only 12,117 of whom immigrated to Israel.

#1j

**Russia says Hamas leader Meshaal to visit Moscow
Talks to focus on resumption of peace talks-Russia; First official visit to Moscow since 2007
Reuters, February 4, 2010**

MOSCOW - Hamas leader Khaled Meshaal will visit Russia next week for talks on ending a Palestinian split and bringing about a resumption of peace talks with Israel, the Russian government said on Thursday.

Hamas, which is backed by Syria and Iran, has been shunned by the West over the Islamist group's refusal to recognise Israel, renounce violence and accept existing interim Israeli-Palestinian peace deals.

"The main topic that will be discussed is the way to end the Palestinian divisions and how to resume the Palestinian-Israeli negotiations," Foreign Ministry spokesman Andrei Nesterenko told reporters in Moscow.

Hamas seized control of the Gaza Strip in 2007 in fighting with Fatah forces loyal to Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas, whom Israel and the United States have been trying to woo back to peace negotiations suspended since 2008.

Talks to reconcile Hamas and Fatah have yielded no results since Egypt began mediation in late 2008.

Meshaal's last official visit to Moscow was in 2007.

Various Hamas officials have at times indicated a willingness to negotiate a ceasefire with Israel, possibly decades long. But Hamas continues to say that it will not recognise Israel officially.

#1k

**Russian newspaper editor jailed for anti-Semitic incitement
World Congress of Russian Jewry, February 4, 2010**

A court in the Russian city of St. Petersburg has found the editor-in-chief of the newspaper 'Orthodox Russia' guilty of incitement to hate against Jews and sentenced him to three years in prison. Konstantin Dushenov is to serve his

sentence at a settlement colony, the court told the 'Interfax' news agency. Two other people accused of the same crime were handed suspended sentences of 18 months and one year respectively.

Dushenov was accused of disseminating the hate movie 'Russia With a Knife in Its Back – Jewish Fascism and the Genocide of the Russian People' and of publishing extremist articles between January 2005 to mid-March 2007. He and the other two co-accused were convicted under a law which punishes "fomenting hatred and enmity toward and humiliation of a person, or a group of people, based on their ethnic background, origin, or religion." The maximum sentence is five years in prison.

Prosecutors had requested a jail sentence of four years for Dushenov. While human rights groups in Russia welcomed the verdict, Dushenov said he would appeal. Dozens of his supporters attended the sentencing holding up Orthodox Church icons.

#2

Clinton Urges Russia To Join U.S. Effort On European Security RFE/RL, January 29, 2010

U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton today recommitted the United States to the defense of Europe -- not from Russia, but with Russia, if Moscow is willing.

Speaking at France's Ecole Militaire in Paris, Clinton said that "important work remains unfinished," including what she called an incomplete transition to democracy in parts of Europe and Eurasia.

Clinton also said decades-old arms-control treaties were "fraying" and noted that in many places, "economic opportunity is still too narrow and shallow."

Security-wise, Clinton said new threats have emerged in Europe since the end of the Cold War that demand a new approach.

"New dangers have emerged such as global terrorism, including cyberterrorism and nuclear terrorism; climate change; global criminal networks that traffic in weapons, drugs, and people; threats to Europe's energy supply, which if exploited, could destabilize economies and stoke regional and even global conflict," she said.

Clinton's message to Europe was that helping keep the continent secure remains "an anchor of U.S. foreign policy." The only change, she said, is that Washington is now inviting Moscow to join that effort.

Reaching Out To Moscow

In the interest of U.S. and Russian cooperation, the secretary called on Moscow to put aside some of its differences with the West, specifically Moscow's objection to a missile shield for Europe, and its proposal to revise the Conventional Forces in Europe Treaty, which governs the presence of foreign troops in the continent.

She also sought to change Russia's mind about how it sees NATO and EU enlargement eastward, to include countries that were once part of Russia's self-defined sphere of influence.

"For years, Russia has expressed a sense of insecurity as NATO and the EU have expanded," she said. "But we strongly believe that the enlargement of both has increased security, stability, and prosperity across the continent and that this, in turn, has actually increased Russia's security and prosperity."

NATO, Clinton said, is looking to expand its own cooperation with Russia, including on missile defense.

Russia opposed the U.S. missile-defense program planned by former President George W. Bush, which called for missile batteries in Poland and radars in the Czech Republic. To Russia's relief, President Barack Obama has scrapped that plan in favor of a naval-based alternative.

Moscow isn't entirely happy with that idea, either, but Clinton said the United States would like it to be on board. "We are very serious about exploring ways to cooperate with Russia to develop missile defenses that enhance the security of all of Europe, including Russia," she said.

The only critical note came when Clinton criticized Russia for its expansionist policies in Georgia, where it has claimed independence for two breakaway republics.

"We have repeatedly called on Russia to honor the terms of its cease-fire agreement with Georgia and we refuse to recognize Russia's claims of independence for Abkhazia and South Ossetia," Clinton said. "More broadly, we object to any spheres of influence claimed in Europe in which one country seeks to control another's future."

Iran Sanctions

During a question-and-answer session after her speech, Clinton was asked about China's reluctance to impose further UN sanctions on Iran for resisting negotiations over its nuclear program. Clinton replied that if Iran becomes a nuclear-armed state, China risks an eventual threat to its supply of oil.

Clinton said she understood Beijing's reluctance to penalize Iran, which is one of China's chief suppliers of oil. But she said that if Iran ever developed nuclear weapons, it would destabilize the Persian Gulf, disrupting oil shipments from the entire region.

The United States, Britain, France, and Russia -- four of the five permanent members of the UN Security Council -- are considering new sanctions against Iran because of what they see as Tehran's persistent refusal to negotiate with them about its nuclear program.

China, the fifth permanent member of the council, has resisted the idea of sanctions. Because of its UN status, China can veto any effort to impose them on Iran.

Clinton said the international community is moving "away from the engagement track [and] forward on the pressure and sanctions track," and predicted that China will be "under a lot of pressure" to realize the risks of allowing Iran to acquire a nuclear weapon.

#3

Holocaust Victims Commemorated in Moscow FJC, January 29, 2010

MOSCOW, Russia – On January 27, the Moscow Jewish Community Center hosted a ceremony in memory of the victims of the Holocaust.

The event, held in the sanctuary of the Moscow JCC's synagogue, was attended by approximately 200 people. Among them were an estimated 40 representatives of foreign countries, including Germany, Poland, Italy, Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, as well as guests from Israel. The ceremony also involved officials from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Russia and the Ministry of Regional Development, members of the State Duma, and representatives from other religious denominations (the Russian Orthodox Church, the Council of Muftis of Russia, the Catholic Bishops' Conference of Russia, and the Associated Russian Union of Christians of Evangelical-Pentecostal Faith), in addition to many leaders from the cultural and social realm.

In his opening remarks, Rabbi Boruch Gorin, the head of the Public Relations Department of the Federation of Jewish Communities of Russia, emphasized to the audience that the ceremony coincided with the anniversary of the liberation of the Auschwitz death camp. According to Rabbi Gorin, the camp was "the symbol of the death machine, killing tens of millions of people." He appealed to everyone to not only remember the victims, but also the many heroes – the people who risked their lives to save others.

Participants viewed film footage of Auschwitz from historical newsreels, after which Chief Rabbi of Russia Berel Lazar read a prayer in memory of the six million Jews who died in the Holocaust and the 50 million victims of World War II.

Six candles were lit in memory of the six million Jews who were murdered. Rabbi Lazar lit the first candle, followed by one each being lit by German Ambassador Walter Jurgen Schmidt, Serbian Ambassador Jelica Kurjak, Polish Ambassador Jerzy Bahr, Secretary General of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of Russia Igor Kovalevsky, and the head of the Associated Russian Union of Christians of Evangelical-Pentecostal Faith, Bishop Sergei Ryakhovsky.

#4

Wiesenthal slams Ukraine award to nationalist

By Yuras Karmanau

AP, January 29, 2010

KIEV, Ukraine -- Ukrainian President Viktor Yushchenko once commanded such respect that hundreds of thousands of protesters poured into the streets of Kiev when he lost a fraudulent election.

But the former hero of the Orange Revolution could hardly have sunk any lower. In his bid for re-election this month, he drew just 5 percent of the vote. And now his posthumous honor for a nationalist leader - who was also, according to some, a Nazi collaborator - has led many to say Yushchenko has disgraced himself in his last weeks in office.

On Friday, the Simon Wiesenthal Center, a leading Jewish human rights group, denounced the Hero of Ukraine award Yushchenko bestowed on Stepan Bandera last week. Bandera was a leader of Ukraine's nationalist movement, which included an insurgent army that sided with Nazi Germany during part of World War II.

The Wiesenthal Center said Bandera's followers were linked to the deaths of thousands of Jews. It also noted that the award came shortly before International Holocaust Memorial Day, which was observed Wednesday.

"It is surely a travesty when such an honor is granted right at the period when the world pauses to remember the victims of the Holocaust on Jan. 27," Mark Weitzman, the Wiesenthal Center's director of government affairs, wrote in a letter to Ukraine's Ambassador to the United States.

The award drew sharp criticism from Russia, as well, where Bandera is viewed as a traitor for fighting against Soviet troops in World War II. Russia's Foreign Ministry called the decision "odious."

In Moscow, the pro-Kremlin youth group Nashi said more than 50 of its activists picketed the Ukrainian embassy Friday.

"We have sent him things that he will be need when has retired: a hot water bottle, an enema, valerian, history books, photos of Stepan Bandera and videos featuring recollections from World War II veterans," the group said on its Web site. Valerian is an herb used as a sedative.

Bandera was assassinated by the KGB in 1959 in Munich.

Yushchenko was unrepentant Friday, decreeing further that the groups affiliated with Bandera be recognized as "fighters for Ukrainian independence."

Yushchenko made establishing strong Ukrainian identity, and pulling away from Russia's influence, a focus of his five years in office - at the expense, some say, of addressing corruption and economic problems.

It has been a long fall for a man once revered at home and abroad. After his supporters protested the vote he lost in 2004, Yushchenko won the presidency in a court-ordered rerun. He drew strong support from the West, which saw him as progressive and democratic.

But he squandered his political capital on infighting and he leaves office to an awkward silence from the West and cold denunciations from Moscow.

And, for some Jewish leaders in Ukraine, the award to Bandera was the last straw.

"Six generations of my ancestors lived in Ukraine, and Yushchenko simply crossed out the memory of them," said David Milman, assistant to the chief Rabbi of Ukraine. "This decision has turned many people away from Yushchenko, while earlier we were loyal to him."

#5

Political Uncertainty Grips a Russian Republic

By Ellen Barry

New York Times, January 31, 2010

MAKHACHKALA, Russia — Last week here in the capital of the southern republic of Dagestan, the wind whipped uncollected garbage in every direction and tens of thousands of citizens lost heat, electricity and water.

The traffic police, fearful of another suicide bombing, sealed off the neighborhood before holding their routine troop reviews. The vice speaker of Dagestan's parliament narrowly escaped an attack with automatic weapon fire from a passing car.

In other words, nothing out of the ordinary.

Pressure has been rising steadily in Dagestan, where clan wars intersect with a growing Islamic fundamentalism and a deepening sense of public alienation. All those threats factor into a question the Kremlin has to answer in the coming days: Who, in the labyrinth of Dagestani politics, will bring peace if he is named president?

Ten years ago, Vladimir V. Putin, then Russia's president, cemented his hold on Russian politics by showing he could bring the Caucasus to heel. The mechanism was force; after a second war against Chechnya's separatists, he installed a strongman, Ramzan A. Kadyrov, as president and granted him the power to crush internal opposition. But a year of rising violence in the region has made it clear that Moscow's control is more tenuous than it seemed.

Nowhere is this more obvious than in Dagestan, where militants have stepped up their attacks while clan groupings have fought, sometimes murderously, over the republic's resources.

"With Chechnya, the main headache is a strong leader who is not controllable, but at least he is in charge," said Pavel K. Baev, a senior researcher at the International Peace Research Institute, which is based in Oslo. "In Dagestan, the problem is that there is a loss of control that is moving toward violence of another kind, which is stronger and stronger, and spiced with Islamic fundamentalism."

"There is no other kind of order," Mr. Baev said. "Only the fundamentalists can present themselves as honest men."

Dagestan, one of the most heavily subsidized of Russia's regions, should be able to support itself. It has oil and gas reserves, like neighboring Azerbaijan, and once lucrative vineyards and fisheries. The sandy coastline itself, stretching 250 miles along the Caspian Sea, should be a moneymaker in a beach-starved colossus like Russia.

But the beaches around Makhachkala (pronounced ma-HACH-ka-la), a city of 466,000, offer a primer in what has gone wrong. Tycoons have chopped up much of the coast for private mansions, and local residents complain that the public beaches that remain are too dirty and ill kept to enjoy. As for tourists, Makhachkala's mayor, Said D. Amirov — who now uses a wheelchair as a result of an assassination attempt — put it this way: "You can't develop tourism when you have a murder every day."

There has always been competition for power in Dagestan, which is cobbled together out of more than 30 ethnic groups, but with the Soviet collapse it turned violent. The first time an official was assassinated, in 1992, people

were so outraged that thousands demonstrated to demand that the killers be punished. Over the next decade, though, killings of officials, religious leaders, lawyers, journalists and police officers became commonplace.

In a republic of 2.5 million people — roughly the population of Brooklyn — armored cars and bodyguards have become so standard that Magomed-Rasul M. Omarov did a double take recently when he noticed the agriculture minister walking down the street without a security detail. It was a sight he had not seen for years.

“He looks like a white crow,” said Mr. Omarov, who works as press secretary for the mufti of Dagestan, whose deputy died from a gunshot to the head last May.

“People have no hope in law enforcement or in other protection or in justice anymore,” he said. “If one case was brought to justice, you could say there was some hope.”

It falls to Dmitri A. Medvedev, Russia’s president, to try to calm the waters. The first term of Dagestan’s president, Mukhu G. Aliyev, ends on Feb. 20. At the time of his appointment, Mr. Aliyev raised great hopes in a populace furious over corruption; a longtime Communist Party figure, he was known for steadfastly refusing bribes and lived, famously, in a modest three-room apartment.

But four years later, Mr. Aliyev’s critics say he has been too weak to control the factions beneath him. It is clear that the calm of his early presidency is gone. Three hundred people died in violent attacks in Dagestan in 2009 — more than in either the nearby republics of Ingushetia or Chechnya — and the number of attacks were more than double the 2008 figure, according to statistics compiled by the Center for Strategic and International Studies.

“Everybody understands that his time is ending,” said Marko Shakhbanov, editor in chief of Novoye Delo, a newspaper that has been critical of Mr. Aliyev’s government. “He is a good person, but a good person is not a profession.”

Mr. Medvedev could reappoint Mr. Aliyev, 69, or choose a new face like Magomed I. Abdullayev, 48, a deputy prime minister who, like Mr. Medvedev, studied and lectured at the law department of St. Petersburg University. Uncertainty over the question has gripped Makhachkala since mid-November, and some complain that it fueled a spike in violence in December and January.

Mr. Medvedev “is making decisions on several governors, but this is one of the most complicated of all,” Mr. Baev, the researcher, said. “In Moscow, they cannot pay much attention to the fact that it’s destabilizing, it’s eroding, it’s getting worse. They don’t know what to do.”

The stakes are great, he said, because public disgust over corruption is driving young people to embrace fundamentalism.

Zaipul S. Osmanov, who works in a Makhachkala employment center, said he has watched in bafflement as his neighbor’s sons — children he has known since they were born — disappeared into “the forest,” as people here refer to underground militant networks. The oldest disappeared for a year. Mr. Osmanov heard he was studying abroad, and when he returned, “the second brother was infected.”

The first was killed in July, and his brother in October — Mr. Osmanov did not know how, but he said he assumed that they were killed in a suicide operation or a police raid. His neighbor has two surviving sons, still in their teens, but Mr. Osmanov expects to hear the same news about them before too long.

“I don’t think they have a way to retreat,” he said. “There is no way back from the forest.”

#6
Kremlin Ties to Orthodox Church Raise Concern
By Peter Fedynsky
Voice of America, January 31, 2010

Human-rights activists say 2009 represented a breakthrough in relations between the Russian Orthodox Church and the Russian government. But they say the closer ties appear to place other faiths at a disadvantage.

Sergei Mozgovoi of the independent Freedom of Conscience Institute told a Moscow news conference Russian lawmakers are rushing through laws to legitimize decisions made earlier by President Dmitriy Medvedev on behalf of Russian Orthodoxy. These include teaching the Orthodox faith to the exclusion of others in public schools and universities and establishment of a military chaplain corps.

Mozgovoi says this represents missionary work for the Orthodox Church, which he claims always supports even the most illegal and harmful decisions of government. He says another factor is the government's economic decisions on behalf of the church about real estate and cultural treasures.

Russian Orthodox Patriarch Kirill met with Prime Minister Vladimir Putin on January 5th to discuss the return of church property confiscated by the Soviet Union and still controlled by the Russian state. The Kommersant business daily reported on the 14th that Mr. Putin called for action on a bill stalled in the Economics Ministry since 2007 that would legalize property used by religious groups.

The RIA Novosti News Agency quotes observers as saying the bill would primarily benefit the Russian Orthodox Church and turn it into a major real-estate holder.

Patriarch Kirill spoke in the Kremlin at the opening of a six-day symposium entitled, "Practical Experience and Prospects for Church-State Cooperation in the Area of Education."

The Patriarch says the forum is called upon to unite social forces in the spiritual transformation of society, which is impossible without engaging the entire education system.

Sergei Buryanov, also with the Freedom of Conscience Institute, says the church and state in Russia have a mutually beneficial relationship. Buryanov says authorities gain a few blessings, because the Orthodox Church enjoys relative authority, while religious organizations get real estate and some direct state financing.

There appears to be concern that growing cooperation between the Kremlin and the Orthodox Church could harm other denominations and branches of Orthodoxy in Russia.

In the city of Suzdal, the Autonomous Russian Orthodox Church is suing for the return of 10 churches it says were illegally transferred by the courts to the mainstream Church. And Jehovah's Witnesses say their members could face imprisonment for public distribution of their magazine, The Watchtower.

Concern is based on Article 282 of the Russian Criminal Code, which prohibits incitement of national, racial, or religious enmity. Many consider the law to be vaguely written and a modern-day version of prohibitions against anti-Soviet agitation and propaganda.

Yaroslav Sivulsky represents the Jehovah's Witnesses Executive Center in Russia. Sivulsky says there is increased pressure nationwide on Jehovah's Witnesses, with the onset of mass detentions, arrests, searches of homes, places of worship, and confiscation of religious literature.

A Central Asian refugees expert at Moscow's Human Rights Institute, Yelena Riabinina, says authorities are exploiting xenophobia and fears of terrorism through arbitrary portrayals of Muslims as radicals. Riabinina says if one considers the repression of people who did not plan, commit, or have any relation to violent acts, but whose version of Islam is not deemed tolerable by Russian authorities, then what you have is a clear case of religious persecution.

Sergei Mozgovoi says authorities do not persecute Buddhists outright, but use a carrot and stick approach to reward those loyal to the state and to keep others at bay. But he says the Kremlin prohibits visits by the Dalai Lama to avoid offending China. Mozgovoi says China and the Russian Orthodox Church constantly exchange experience about ways to pressure free thinkers and members of other faiths in a struggle against so-called sects.

In his Kremlin remarks Monday, Patriarch Kirill said the church-state education effort is aimed at creating an atmosphere of agreement to prevent national and religious hostility. But human-rights activists are calling for tolerance and repeal of government laws that appear to favor the Russian Orthodox Church.

#7

Former Ukrainian President Says Political System Dysfunctional **RFE/RL, February 1, 2010**

As the second round of Ukraine's presidential election approaches, former President Leonid Kuchma says the country's political system has become deeply dysfunctional and needs an infusion of fresh talent.

Speaking to Dmitry Volcheck of RFE/RL's Russian Service, Kuchma said regardless of who wins the February 7 runoff between Prime Minister Yulia Tymoshenko and opposition leader Viktor Yanukovich, Ukraine's political institutions will remain incapable of dealing with the country's pressing problems.

"What is clear is that we need new faces," Kuchma said. "It is also as clear as day that whatever the outcome [of the runoff election], it will not bring political stability or resolve any economic problems in the country."

Kuchma said the promise of the 2004 Orange Revolution -- which saw massive public protests carry Ukraine's first pro-democracy leader, Viktor Yushchenko, to the presidency -- has not been fulfilled, and that the country suffers from a deficit of public trust. He chided Yushchenko and Tymoshenko, the Orange allies who have since become bitter rivals, for "bickering over who had more authority in the country instead of doing their work" over the past five years.

Yanukovich (left) and Tymoshenko will face off on February 7.

"Ukrainians should be ashamed of this situation in the country where none of the branches of power -- neither the president, nor the government, nor parliament -- enjoys the respect of the people," he said.

Kuchma served as Ukrainian president from 1994 to 2005 and is credited with implementing reforms that stabilized the country's post-Soviet economy. But his administration has also been accused of widespread corruption and stifling the nascent free press. Critics allege that he was complicit in the disappearance and killing of opposition journalist Heorhiy Gongadze.

He left office in disgrace following the 2004 Orange Revolution when Yanukovich, his chosen successor, was accused of massive vote-rigging. Yushchenko won a revote following weeks of street protests.

Accented Divisions

But while the Orange Revolution briefly ushered in an era of hope that Ukraine would enact the reforms necessary to join European institutions like NATO and the European Union, it also accented the divisions between the Ukrainian-speaking western regions and the largely Russian-speaking east.

Kuchma claimed that during his presidency, those divisions were not so acute:

"[When I was president], I did not feel that Ukraine was divided into the west and the east. On the contrary, I thought we were beginning to understand each other," he said. "But that [2004] presidential election once again split the country in two. And I don't think that has changed since then. It is clear today that Tymoshenko has more support in the west and Yanukovich has more support in the east."

As president, Kuchma followed what he calls a "multivector" foreign policy, which sought to maintain good relations with both Russia and the West.

He criticized Yushchenko for changing that course and for acting as if "Russia does not exist for us" and that "there is only the West." Kuchma said this naturally elicited a negative response from Moscow. Kuchma added that

regardless of how close Kyiv's relations become with Moscow, there is little risk that it will imitate Russia's authoritarian political model.

"I'm absolutely confident that such fears are groundless. Ukraine is really not Russia and we have a different mentality," Kuchma said. "There are three bosses for every two Ukrainians, that's true, and there is always some struggle at every level. So, I don't think such a threat exists. Moreover, our parliamentary-presidential model protects the country from dictatorship."

#8

Rumors of Yeltsin's Revival Much Exaggerated

By Alexei Pankin

Moscow Times, February 2, 2010

Radio Liberty recently posed an intriguing question: "Will former President Boris Yeltsin's old team return to politics?" It came during a program discussing the stormy public reaction to a blog written by Tatyana Yumasheva (better known by the surname Dychenko), who was not only Yeltsin's daughter and the wife of the head of his administration but also a high-ranking member of Yeltsin's team.

After having disappeared from public view since Vladimir Putin became president in 2000, Yumasheva unexpectedly entered the public scene in December when she published a blog attempting to put a positive spin on the Yeltsin years. Yumasheva's reappearance was followed by the Dec. 16 death of former acting Prime Minister Yegor Gaidar - whom Yeltsin trusted enough to head Russia's first independent government. Shortly after Gaidar was laid to rest, a personality cult around him was born. Journalists now hail him as a great reformer, and his former colleagues want to erect a monument to Gaidar, name a street in his honor and educate Russians about Gaidar's eminent role in post-Soviet Russian history.

What is behind these events? Gaidar's friends and supporters argue that Russia was on the verge of starvation and lapsing into civil war in late 1991. Nobody had the courage to take charge of the economy. There was no alternative to Gaidar's reforms, and they saved the country from collapse.

I remember that the exact same postulates were heard in 1992, when Gaidar and his team had just begun their reforms. You have to agree that today, almost 20 years later, when Russia survives on the industrial potential of the Soviet Union, when the country's population has been declining rapidly and the financial crisis has demonstrated the global fiasco of neoliberal economics, there is something sect-like in that type of blind belief in a bygone dogma. It is as if Gaidar's self-proclaimed disciples had created a fictitious world for themselves. As I see it, that is the reaction of people who realize that they have committed wrongs and are searching for a way to justify their actions - at least in their own eyes.

Two figures with a lot of political clout - Mayor Yury Luzhkov and his predecessor and a member of the first wave of democrats Gavriil Popov - apparently anticipated the threat from a revival of Yeltsinism. It would otherwise be difficult to explain why they published an article in *Moskovsky Komsomolets* casting doubt on Gaidar's legacy even before the customary 40 days of mourning had elapsed. In particular, the authors name a whole list of people who had their own vision of reform in 1991 and 1992 and who were ready and willing to head the government had they been given the opportunity.

Anatoly Chubais, Yeltsin's former privatization chief, called the article "dirty, jaundiced and vicious slander." Hearing that argument, I rejoiced that this is not the Yeltsin era when in 1993 the government's tanks fired on those who disagreed with the economic views of the young reformers.

In any event, there is no reason to fear a revival of Yeltsinism in the near future if for no other reason than the fact that modernization of the economy requires a greater regulatory role by the government and protectionist measures on behalf of domestic industry and agriculture. In short, it entails everything that was an anathema to Yeltsin's young reformers. According to that logic, we are more likely to see a purge of pro-Yeltsin reformers than a resurgence.

Alexei Pankin is editor of WAN-IFRA-GIPP Magazine for publishing business professionals.

#9

Next, the Tactical Nukes

By Carl Bildt and Radek Sikorski

New York Times, February 2, 2010

We hope that we will very soon have reason to welcome a new agreement between the United States and Russia on further reductions of strategic nuclear weapons. It makes no sense for either country to spend billions on weapons systems of such radically diminishing strategic utility.

But as we look forward toward welcoming such an agreement, we simultaneously call for early progress on steep reductions in sub-strategic nuclear weapons - in Europe often referred to as tactical weapons.

While the strategic nuclear weapons are seen as a mutual threat by the United States and Russia, nations like ours - Sweden and Poland - could have stronger reason to be concerned with the large number of these tactical nuclear weapons.

Most of the active sub-strategic nuclear weapons in the world today seem to be deployed in Europe in theoretical preparation for conflict in our part of the world.

The actual numbers are obviously closely held secrets. A recent report by the International Commission on Nuclear Nonproliferation and Disarmament indicates that the United States possesses approximately 500 active warheads - of which approximately 200 are said to be stored in Western Europe; Russia holds around 2,000 warheads, the vast majority in the western part of the country.

Although this is a sharp decline from the height of the Cold War - when the United States held approximately 8,000 tactical nuclear warheads, and the Russians approximately 23,000 - the numbers are still substantial. The focus now must be on deep reductions and their eventual elimination. One also has to keep in mind that according to other sources current stockpiles of tactical nuclear arms are even greater.

As part of efforts to further reduce nuclear weapons in general, as well as to build confidence in a better order of security in Europe, we today call on the leaders of the United States and Russia to commit themselves to early measures to greatly reduce so-called tactical nuclear weapons in Europe. These measures could be the result of negotiations, but there is also room for substantial unilateral confidence building efforts.

We understand that Russia is a European power, but we urge Moscow to make a commitment to the withdrawal of nuclear weapons from areas adjacent to European Union member states. We are thinking of areas like the Kaliningrad region and the Kola Peninsula, where there are still substantial numbers of these weapons. Such a withdrawal could be accompanied by the destruction of relevant storage facilities.

But these measures should only be seen as steps toward the total elimination of these types of weapons. The need for deterrence against rogue nations could amply be fulfilled with existing U.S. and Russian strategic assets.

With some exceptions, tactical nuclear weapons were designed for outdated, large-scale war on the European continent. Their use would have brought destruction to Europe on a scale beyond comprehension and would in all probability have lead also to the destruction of Russia and the United States in a strategic nuclear duel.

One thing is absolutely clear: The time has come to cover sub-strategic nuclear weapons with an arms control regime, which would look like the one that was established long ago for strategic arms.

We still face security challenges in the Europe of today and tomorrow, but from whichever angle you look, there is no role for the use of nuclear weapons in resolving these challenges.

Such weapons are dangerous remnants of a dangerous past - and they should not be allowed to endanger our common future.

Carl Bildt is the foreign minister of Sweden, and Radek Sikorski is the foreign minister of Poland.

#10

Analysts See Notable Differences Between Ukrainian, Russian Elections

By Peter Fedynsky

Voice of America, February 1, 2010

Political observers have praised the recent Ukrainian elections, saying the outcome of Sunday's second round contest between Prime Minister Yulia Tymoshenko and one of her predecessors, Viktor Yanukovich, is not predetermined. That's in stark contrast to neighboring Russia, where the 2008 election of President Dmitri Medvedev was a forgone conclusion. VOA Moscow Correspondent Peter Fedynsky contrasts presidential elections in two former Soviet republics.

About 3,000 foreign election observers declared that, despite a few irregularities, the first round of Ukraine's presidential election on January 17 met international standards for honesty.

Joao Soares, is President of the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly, which facilitates dialogue among members of the Organization for Security Cooperation in Europe.

"This election was a very good election,said Joao Soares. "It was election of high quality. It offered the voters genuine choice between candidates, and it showed significant progress over previous elections."

The OSCE did not send observers to monitor Russia's 2008 presidential vote citing restrictions imposed by the Russian government.

Liliya Shibanova is head of the independent Russian monitoring group, Golos. She says the organization received a steady stream of complaints about ballot box stuffing, false voter registration and use of multiple ballots.

"What we've observed at polling stations is a lack of control, dependence of the election commissions on the authorities, on the election organizers, massive violations of the political competition and of the election procedure on the whole," said Liliya Shibanova.

Media access before the election was a problem too.

During the Russian presidential campaign, Dmitri Medvedev, in his capacity then as deputy prime minister, was featured almost daily on state-controlled news programs but opponents were largely excluded.

The Kremlin's media grip has prompted several prominent Russian journalists to move their programs to Ukraine.

They include Savik Shuster, who now hosts a political talk show from Kyiv.

"Look, the program runs live, all political parties are present, and the lawmakers are talking, arguing, debating," said Savik Shuster.

In Ukraine, presidential contenders Tymoshenko and Yanukovich have been seeking the support of candidates they defeated in the first round, especially Serhiy Tihopko.

The businessman and former Economics Minister finished third with 13 percent of the vote.

Ms. Tymoshenko has offered him the prime minister's job, if she wins, in exchange for an endorsement. Tihopko says he is willing to serve as prime minister regardless of who wins.

Many Ukrainians say the choice is difficult. Tymoshenko opponents express fears of what they perceive as her authoritarian streak and poor economic skills.

Mr. Yanukovich's detractors cite his criminal record and say he would serve the interests of oligarchs. He explains his two prison sentences for assault and robbery as errors of youth more than 40 years ago.

In Moscow, civil servant Yuri Traftov says Ukrainians need not worry.

"Well, what can one say, Ukraine has democracy," said Yuri Traftov. "They are electing a president and this is good. If they are not satisfied, they will elect another one."

No so for Russia.

Russia and Ukraine both prohibit more than two consecutive presidential terms,

Neither Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin nor President Dmitri Medvedev has ruled out another presidential bid.

But Mr. Putin has also said they would decide between themselves who would run.

And whoever it is, hardly anyone doubts he will win.

#11

Tajiks Despair as Soviet-Style Election Looms

By Maria Golovkina

Reuters, February 2, 2010

DUSHANBE - Umida Abdurakhmonova, a Tajik woman selling herbs in a small tumbledown market, looks puzzled when asked about a parliamentary election due in less than a month in her impoverished Central Asian homeland.

"What election? I've absolutely no idea," said the 30-year-old as she rearranged springs of parsley on her stall.

"Of course I won't (vote)," she added with a shrug. "My vote will not change anything."

Abdurakhmonova's view echoes a wider sense of political stagnation in Tajikistan where, as for decades of Soviet rule, stage-managed votes are expected to bring no real change.

Largely devoid of natural resources and perched in a remote corner of Central Asia, Tajikistan is the poorest nation in the former Soviet Union and has featured little in global affairs. It has never held a vote judged democratic by Western monitors.

Yet the West will be watching this vote closely since Tajikistan shares a long strategic border with Afghanistan and lies on a new supply route for NATO forces fighting the Taliban.

Spurred by a deepening economic crisis, discontent has been on the rise -- a fresh worry for Western nations counting on stability in Central Asia as a key element in their fight against the spread of Taliban-inspired militancy.

Fresh violence in Afghanistan, where a record numbers of civilians and foreign troops were killed in 2009, has renewed interest in a country that also lies on one of the main drug trafficking routes from Afghanistan to Europe.

In the February 28 election, President Imomali Rakhmon's allies look certain to win most seats in the lower house of parliament.

There has been virtually no campaigning and only a handful of election posters adorn the streets of the capital, Dushanbe, a city where bleak Soviet architecture contrasts starkly with neighbourhoods of mudbrick huts and donkey carts.

The opposition Islamic Revival party holds only two seats in the 63-seat chamber. The presidential People's Democratic Party and pro-government Communists control the rest.

Western rights groups accuse Rakhmon, elected in 1994, of clamping down on dissent and restricting basic freedoms.

The political scene has changed little in recent years, with Rakhmon tightening his grip on power and drug-related corruption seeping further through Tajikistan's rickety \$5 billion economy.

UNREST

So far there have been no outright signs of unrest in the mountainous Muslim nation of seven million, where public criticism of Rakhmon's policies is not allowed. As in Soviet times, people tend to keep their views to themselves.

"Of course I will not vote. No one goes to vote and then the next day we see in the newspapers that the turnout was 90 percent," said Said, a street vendor, who asked not to use his surname for fear of state reprisals. "They don't care about ordinary people."

Owing to their long, porous border, Tajikistan is a safe haven for Afghan drug lords, making it a hot spot for heroin-related crime and lawlessness.

The Tajik government reported several armed clashes with armed gangs near the Afghan frontier last year and says its southern neighbour is the key source of extremist threats and blamed the latest violence on the Taliban.

Rakhmon, who led pro-Russian forces in a devastating 1992-1997 civil war against an alliance of Islamists and liberal democrats, is worried again.

He has sought closer ties with Iran, with which Tajiks share the Persian language, as well as China and traditional ally Russia, which is home to millions of Tajik migrant workers.

The global economic crisis has hit the nation hard since 2007, eating sharply into its key revenues from aluminium exports and transfers from migrant Tajik labourers.

"The Tajik people both in and outside Tajikistan have already shown their unity," Rakhmon's office quoted the veteran leader as saying in a statement Monday. "We must cement this unity in the run-up to and during the election."

#12

Russians Rally Around a Falling Enclave

By Michael Schwartz

New York Times, February 1, 2010

MOSCOW — The bulldozers came at night, flanked by armor-clad riot police officers, to clear the houses of a small neighborhood here at the behest of Moscow's mayor, forcing residents out into subzero temperatures.

The mayor, Yuri M. Luzhkov, said they were living on the land illegally. But as more and more homes — some stately, some mere shacks — have come tumbling down over the last week and a half, an uncharacteristically fierce backlash has broken out, challenging one of Russia's most powerful politicians. Politicians, human rights activists, media organizations and even nationalist and anarchist groups have come to the defense of the neighborhood, called Rechnik. Legal or not, these critics say, the demolition operation has crossed the line.

"The methods used to resolve this problem were completely unacceptable," Vladimir Lukin, Russia's government-appointed human rights ombudsman, told the Interfax news agency on Thursday. He called on the prosecutor general's office to investigate what he called "gross violations" of Russian law.

On Monday, residents and their supporters blocked the entrance to the neighborhood, preventing crews from resuming demolitions.

More than a dozen homes have now been destroyed, and Moscow officials have told Russian news agencies that the operation would continue throughout the week.

Sergei Mironov, the speaker of the upper house of Parliament, said the city had “discredited” itself.

“I am personally disturbed by the fact that the Moscow government decided simply to throw these people out on the streets despite the minus-20-degree temperatures,” he wrote on his blog, citing the Celsius equivalent of minus 4 degrees Fahrenheit.

Even government-run television channels, typically gushing in their coverage of top officials, have focused their cameras on dumbfounded and teary-eyed residents watching the bulldozers tear their homes apart.

Once a charming neighborhood of about 200 single-family homes, a rare sight in a city dominated by hulking apartment blocs, Rechnik has become a battleground in a long-running fight between the government and homeowners over Russia’s ambiguous land laws.

The Soviet government set aside the plot of land on the Moscow River as a gardening collective in the 1950s. Residents claim that Soviet-era permits, which many bought or inherited from the original holders, give them de facto title over the land that their houses stand on. The city says those permits are invalid, and never allowed for the large mansions and quaint cottages that the residents built.

Mr. Luzhkov, who in his 18 years as mayor has not been given to tolerating affronts to his authority, has stood firm. In an interview published Thursday in the newspaper *Moskovsky Komsomolets*, he called the residents “impostors” squatting on land that he said was zoned to be a park. “These cottages are located in a protected environmental zone,” he said. “The city has been saying for years that construction in this area was forbidden.”

To prove his resolve, he has promised next to send his bulldozers to a luxury housing development neighboring Rechnik, where several government ministers are said to live.

Critics have accused the mayor, whose wife is a billionaire real estate developer, of using ambiguous land laws to acquire prime property and resell it to private interests. Just over a year ago, several dozen similar homes were destroyed in a neighboring community that was in the same nebulous legal situation.

President Dmitri A. Medvedev, who has the authority to remove Mr. Luzhkov, has been silent on the issue, as has Prime Minister Vladimir V. Putin, who appointed the mayor to his current term. After years of threats and legal battles, police officers in black riot gear finally swept into Rechnik around 3 a.m. on Jan. 21, rounding up several dozen residents who had blockaded the entrance with their cars, said Konstantin Shtoiko, one of the residents. “We called the police and they told us that they were conducting a special operation as if we were terrorists in Dagestan,” Mr. Shtoiko, 39, said, referring to the volatile region neighboring Chechnya.

About a dozen homes have been demolished in the last week, and crews began tearing down more on Friday, officials said. Several elderly residents have reportedly been hospitalized with chest pains, as have others who were beaten with nightsticks.

#13

Russia’s Evolution, Seen Through Golden Arches

By Andrew E. Kramer

New York Times, February 2, 2010

MOSCOW — Viktor A. Semenov was growing lettuce on a collective farm outside Moscow in 1990 when a representative of McDonald’s stopped by. The company had just opened a restaurant. Could he sell it a few boxes of lettuce each week?

Mr. Semenov’s assistant turned it down. One restaurant was too small an order.

“I said, ‘My friend! You see how many McDonald’s there are in the West?’ ” Mr. Semenov recalled recently. “I said, ‘Sell them lettuce at any price. It’s our new strategy.’ ”

With that, Mr. Semenov started a company that has all but cornered the market on packaged fresh vegetables in Russia.

With a buy-one-get-one-free deal on hamburgers and a traditional Russian accordion band, McDonald’s celebrated on Monday the 20th anniversary of the opening of its first store in the Soviet Union, a restaurant that drew long lines.

But the company celebrated a different milestone earlier this year by outsourcing the last product — hamburger buns — it had made at a proprietary factory outside Moscow called McComplex. It was built before the chain opened its first restaurant. Nearly everywhere else, McDonald’s buys ingredients, rather than making its own. But in the Soviet Union, there simply were no private businesses to supply the 300 or so distinct ingredients needed by a McDonald’s outlet.

Everything — from frozen French fries to pie filling — had to be made from scratch at a sprawling factory.

McDonald’s is always a good lens through which to view the 118 or so countries where it operates. In the 20 years since McDonald’s arrived in Russia, enough private enterprises have sprung up to supply nearly every ingredient needed to operate one of its restaurants.

Today, private businesses in Russia supply 80 percent of the ingredients in a McDonald’s, a reversal from the ratio when it opened in 1990 and 80 percent of ingredients were imported.

Starting with pickles, which now come from the farm of Anatoly M. Revyakin, every item has been spun off from the nine production lines at McComplex, spawning dozens of new businesses, some now among the most successful in the Russian food catering industry.

Buns and pies are still made at the McComplex site, but by an independent contractor; the building is for sale.

“Our goal is to put the business in the hands of independent suppliers,” Jim Skinner, the global chief executive of McDonald’s, said in an interview.

Mr. Revyakin, a cucumber farmer in 1990, went on to become the Pickle King of Russian processed food after taking over the marinating line from McComplex; he now sells pickles to three restaurant chains and is moving into relish for Heinz.

“We make \$2 million a year selling cucumbers,” he said in a phone interview.

Mr. Semenov’s shredded lettuce business, Belaya Dacha, already accustomed to working with Western companies from the McDonald’s contract, exploded when Western-style supermarkets arrived in Russia in the last decade, bringing coolers capable of displaying prepackaged salads. He now sells 150 types of salad and is the lettuce magnate of Russia.

And after his business success, Mr. Semenov has gone into politics, serving in Parliament with the ruling United Russia party.

Dairy went to Wimm-Bill-Dann, a milk and juice packager that became the first Russian food company to list on the New York Stock Exchange, in 2002.

Just last year, a Russian company, Miratorg, took over supplying Chicken McNuggets. It could hardly have come at a better time for McDonald’s — a trade war is threatening to cut off the importation of chicken into Russia.

Today, frozen French fries are still imported, oddly enough, given that Russians are famous for growing potatoes. The problem, though is finding economy of scale in processing, McDonald’s executives said. Russians still buy raw

potatoes at supermarkets, instead of processed frozen potatoes. Until frozen potatoes catch on, McDonald's alone cannot provide the volumes needed to open a processing plant.

From the day it opened the gates on the \$50 million factory, McDonald's had intended to hand out its functions to other businesses and eventually shut it down, said Khamzat Khasbulatov, the director of McDonald's in Russia.

Arms-length transactions for supplies allow McDonald's to step back from the interaction of franchisees and food-processing companies, sparing them a headache. Russia's 235 restaurants have not yet been franchised.

"We knew from Day 1 that our goal was to outsource all its functions," Mr. Khasbulatov said.

Today the restaurants in Russia employ 25,000 people, a number far eclipsed by the businesses in McDonald's supply chain, which employ 100,000, Mr. Khasbulatov said.

Even as it leaned on the proprietary factory in its early years, the McDonald's Russia operation, quick on its feet out of necessity to keep up with all the changes, has also been on the leading edge of other global business initiatives.

The worldwide pushback against coffee chains, for example, had an early test run here. McCafes opened here in 2003 and espresso-style drinks are available in many restaurants; the concept was introduced in America last year.

For McDonald's, bringing Russia in line with its horizontal business model is more important than ever because the country is an important market and its same-store sales are growing fast. The overseas business is generally leading both in the number of restaurant openings and growth in sales at existing restaurants.

Russian restaurants are on average twice as busy as those in the United States, with 850,000 visitors a year per site compared with 400,000 domestically.

McDonald's plans to invest \$150 million in Russia this year to open 45 new restaurants and refurbish current sites.

And that is good news for suppliers, too; those outlets will need a lot of shredded lettuce.

#14

Ukraine and Russia Trade Spying Charges

By Clifford J. Levy

New York Times, February 3, 2010

KIEV, Ukraine — Ukraine has detained a Russian intelligence officer and expelled four others, breaking up what it said Tuesday was a spy ring that intended to steal military and state secrets.

The announcement came less than a week before a presidential runoff election in Ukraine and might stir new tensions between Ukraine and Russia, which have had a contentious relationship in recent years.

At a news conference on Tuesday, Valentyn Nalyvaichenko, the Ukrainian intelligence chief, said the Russians were detained on Jan. 27 "trying to illegally obtain Ukrainian secrets through blackmail and threats."

"They were caught red-handed," Mr. Nalyvaichenko said, according to Ukrainian news agencies.

The Ukrainian president, Viktor A. Yushchenko, has repeatedly quarreled with the Kremlin. He lost his bid for another term in an election last month. The two candidates vying in the presidential runoff on Sunday — Prime Minister Yulia V. Tymoshenko and the opposition leader, Viktor F. Yanukovich — have promised to improve relations with Moscow.

Espionage cases are often handled without publicity through diplomatic channels, so the Ukrainian disclosure of this one suggested that Mr. Yushchenko's government wanted to focus attention on Russian activities on Ukrainian soil.

The Ukrainian announcement brought an unusual public rebuke from the Russian intelligence agency, the F.S.B., which expressed surprise that its Ukrainian counterpart, the S.B.U., had not sought to resolve the case "through cooperation between special services," Russian news agencies reported.

The F.S.B. rarely discusses spying matters openly, but it said in a statement that it had acted to defend itself because of spying by Ukraine.

The Russian agency said that in October, it arrested a Ukrainian intelligence agent at a Russian military site in a separatist region of Moldova, another former Soviet republic. He was carrying a digital camera and scans of documents marked "top secret."

The man then apparently agreed to work as a double agent and help the Russians learn about Ukrainian spying against Russia, Russian officials said. He was scheduled to meet the Russian agents in the Odessa region of Ukraine to hand over information when they were arrested, the officials said.

#15

Ukraine's Smear Campaign

By Gregory Feifer

RFE/RL, February 3, 2010

LVIV - As the two candidates in Ukraine's presidential runoff escalate an acrimonious war of words, the campaign is showing an even uglier side on the streets. In this western Ukrainian stronghold of support for the Orange Revolution five years ago, circulating leaflets carry a photo of its heroine, Prime Minister Yulia Tymoshenko, under the words "Don't Vote for That Jew!" The leaflet includes an alleged facsimile of Tymoshenko's handwriting that purports to reveal her background as Jewish and Russian and asks how Tymoshenko can call herself Ukrainian.

Another leaflet purports to be a copy of a letter from Tymoshenko's erstwhile Orange Revolution ally, President Viktor Yushchenko, in which he calls on Ukrainians to vote for Tymoshenko's rival, pro-Moscow Viktor Yanukovich.

Although it's not clear who's behind the smears, the leaflets are helping fuel an atmosphere of bitter cynicism ahead of the election. Although many voters here say they'll cast their ballots for Tymoshenko only as the lesser of two evils, some say they'll abstain from voting altogether. Residents say they're disillusioned by the Orange camp's broken promises to clean up rampant corruption and reform the economy. Piles of unplowed snow snarling traffic along the streets of this faded baroque and predominantly Catholic city are blamed on corrupt politicians' absconding with municipal funds.

But the authorities in Lviv have beefed up a contingent of security service officers guarding a statue of Ukrainian nationalist hero Stepan Bandera, reviled as a Nazi collaborator by many in predominantly Russian-speaking eastern Ukraine. Rumors that members of Yanukovich's Party of Regions plan to blow up the statue are competing with others that it's Tymoshenko supporters who want to destroy it to blame the crime on their opponents.

During a campaign stop in his native town of Yenakiyev in eastern Ukraine on January 2, Yanukovich pledged he would fire Tymoshenko and her government in short order if elected.

Each side is accusing the other of preparing to falsify the elections, raising fears neither will accept February 7's results.

UPDATE -- RFE/RL's Ukrainian Service reports that in the eastern Ukrainian city of Luhansk, a Yanukovich stronghold, leaflets are circulating with calls for an election boycott.

The leaflets claim to be from the Communist Party and Natalia Vitrenko, the leader of the pro-Russian Progressive Socialist Party. But Vitrenko claims that the Tymoshenko camp is behind the fliers, which she called a "provocation." She told RFE/RL that her own vote is going to Yanukovich.

The Tymoshenko campaign has rejected the accusations, and Tymoshenko Bloc parliament deputy Andriy Shevchenko said that both the Communist Party and Vitrenko's party have been closely aligned with Yanukovich's Regions Party for several years.

#16

Jewish Agency blames Russia for cancellation

JTA, February 3, 2010

NEW YORK -- The Jewish Agency for Israel has canceled plans to hold its upcoming board meetings in St. Petersburg over concerns that the Russian government would not allow the gathering to take place.

The agency had announced in the fall that it would be holding the meetings there with the intent of showcasing to its 120-member board the projects that the organization operates in Russia. But despite several months of planning, the Russian government recently cooled to the idea, according to a letter the agency sent Tuesday to its board of governors.

"Two weeks ago we were advised for the first time about some outstanding issues regarding the legal status for the Jewish Agency in Russia," the letter said. "We immediately submitted all the required documentation and have since been waiting for an official response. In the interim we have received numerous unofficial messages but no clear answer. Today we heard via the office of the Israeli Ambassador in Moscow that the Russian Foreign Ministry still maintains that our legal status in Russia is not adequate for convening a meeting of the Board of Governors."

The meetings will now take place Feb. 21-23 in Jerusalem.

The decision to change locations comes at a critical time for the agency's operations in the former Soviet Union after having had to slash its programming in the region because of recession-induced budget cuts. The agency's new chairman, former Soviet dissident Natan Sharansky, has made it a top priority to resuscitate funding for projects in the region.

The Russian government, according to a Jewish Agency source, has been focusing on the fact that the Jewish Agency is registered in Russia as a local NGO, but the board of governors meeting is an international convention.

An agency insider dismissed this line of argument.

"It is not as if they didn't know who we were three months ago," the source said. "They put up last-minute, ostensibly bureaucratic, hurdles."

"Apparently they didn't want it to happen," the source said. "The Jewish Agency is Israel's largest nonprofit with diplomatic links to Russia. In an ironic way, this justifies our need to be there."

It is unclear how much the change in venue will cost -- or save -- the agency. The organization had chartered a plane to fly many of the 200 registered participants from Jerusalem to St. Petersburg.

#17

Research Group's Report Urges Radical Changes in Russia

By Ellen Barry

New York Times, February 4, 2010

MOSCOW — A liberal-leaning policy organization that advises President Dmitri A. Medvedev on Wednesday recommended a startling agenda of long-term changes, including restoration of elections for governors, an end to censorship of the news media, Russian membership in NATO and dissolution of the Federal Security Service, successor to the Soviet-era K.G.B.

Igor Y. Yurgens, director of the Institute of Contemporary Development, said at a news conference that unless Russia modernized, it risked losing its brightest young people to the West and aggravating internal tensions to the point where Russia itself could break up. He said the institute's new report, "Twenty-first Century Russia: An Image of the Desired Future," was written to avoid this chain of events.

"We have a very simple choice in Russia," said Yevgeny Gontmakher, one of the report's authors. "Either we can gradually but decisively evolve along the lines that we are suggesting, or we will head into one of the regular revolts that we have had more than once in the last 20 years."

Mr. Yurgens's institute has regularly called for liberal reforms, and it is not considered to have particular sway over Mr. Medvedev, who serves as chairman of its board of trustees. But Wednesday's report contained the group's boldest proposals to date, and drew immediate rebukes from conservative lawmakers who said liberals were trying to take Russia back to the chaotic 1990s and the age of Boris N. Yeltsin.

"The institute's mistake is that it idealizes that time," said Sergei A. Markov, a deputy with United Russia, in remarks on the party's Web site. "That period created all the preconditions for dictatorship. And only the policies of Vladimir Putin, by some miracle, allowed us to escape it."

The presentation came during a week of political debate that was, by Russian standards, unusually raw. Sergei M. Mironov, the speaker of Russia's upper house of Parliament, set off a barrage of criticism on Monday night when he told a television interviewer that the leaders of his party "categorically oppose the budget proposed by Vladimir Putin," now the prime minister, who still dominates Russian politics. Mr. Mironov is the head of Just Russia, an opposition party that nonetheless has close ties to the Kremlin.

Mr. Mironov took care to add that he supported "everything in Putin's foreign policy and certain decisions in home policy," but members of United Russia, which Mr. Putin heads, reacted furiously. In a statement on the party's Web site, one official, Andrei Isayev, called for Mr. Mironov to resign, and said Mr. Mironov "thinks that the situation has become shaky because of the crisis and he is trying to run from the ship like a rat."

Alexei V. Markarkin, an analyst at the Center for Political Technologies, said there were signs of a loosening in Russian public discourse, in which "those questions which were too dangerous to discuss can now be discussed." He pointed to the large protest held over the weekend in Kaliningrad, where complaints about tax increases and high utility costs were sprinkled with calls for Mr. Putin's ouster.

"There is a protest spirit related to the crisis," he said. "Kaliningrad is not a rule, but it is a signal."

#18

People in glass houses shouldn't throw stones

By Rabbi Yaakov D. Bleich

Kyiv Post, February 4, 2010

I cannot remain silent when Ukraine is besmirched because of the action of one person – even if that individual is the president.

I read with great interest the recent statements of my colleague, Chief Rabbi of Russia Rabbi Berl Lazar, regarding the awarding of Stepan Bandera the status of Hero of Ukraine. I write this with greater interest, since the Ukrainian Jewish Community is also very concerned about the rewriting of history.

However, I cannot remain silent when Ukraine is besmirched because of the action of one person – even if that individual is the president, a man who has lost all hope of going down in history as a positive leader and therefore decided to do his best to divide his people at the twilight of his oblivion.

Please let us not minimize the pain and disbelief that a man who purports to champion human rights, who was marketed as a Western-oriented leader, would do such senseless, and yes, stupid things. Something that he didn't have the nerve to do when he still hoped that he might be re-elected!

I have long said that [outgoing Ukrainian President] Victor Yushchenko reminds me of a joke that I heard from a friend of mine who served in the Soviet Army. As the joke goes, a Russian told a Ukrainian serving with him “kill the Jews and save Russia.” The Ukrainian answered, “Your goal stinks, but the means are great.”

I have always understood Yushchenko’s goals to be the building of a proud Ukrainian people, with a history of their own of which to be proud – a pristine goal. But his means stink. And the proof is right there to be seen by all, as it seems that Yushchenko has broken a world record: never has an acting head of state received such a low percentage of votes cast in a re-election! The previous record, they say, was held by the president of Slovakia. He received 8 percent. Yushchenko couldn’t even gain 6 percent!

It is obvious that he was unsuccessful in uniting the country. He couldn’t even unite his own party! And so, therefore, to Plan B: let us divide the country! Let us raise awareness of the “Heroes to some, villains to others” of Ukraine.

I am not even entertaining the debate whether Roman Shukhevych and Bandera are worthy of the title. It is totally irrelevant now. My question is: Why would a sane politician do something that he knows will rile up 50 percent of his country? Is he suicidal? Why can’t we leave this debate to the next generation, when emotions aren’t running so high?

Enter Prime Minister Vladimir Putin’s Russia. It is no secret that Putin dislikes Yushchenko. The prime minister never misses an opportunity to attack Ukraine, as a pretext to attack Yushchenko. Does he do it to glorify the Red Army? How was it terrible that Bandera – following in the footsteps of the Soviet Union – made a pact with the Nazis?

Give me a break! Joseph Stalin, the authoritarian leader of the Soviet Union before, during and immediately after WWII, was one of the first to sign a deal with the devil. Have we ever seen Putin, “champion of human rights,” stand up and condemn Stalin – if not for the murder of millions of Soviet citizens that he had killed, then at least for the destruction of Polish Jewry, which came about as a direct result of the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact?

With one wide-sweeping brush, Rabbi Lazar blames the Ukrainian people for collaboration, using words that would be funny if they weren’t so sad. “The government of Ukraine?” There was no government of Ukraine at that time!

Again, I am not belittling or minimizing the terrible acts that took place, the collaboration of some Ukrainians, even the collaboration of the SS Nightingale unit, or the Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists under Bandera. I am only questioning the moral right of Putin, and the intentions of my colleague Rabbi Lazar.

Whom are you trying to impress by your Ukraine bashing? Let us first examine the collaboration of the Russians. Without comparing, let us examine the glorification of Stalin, and the rewriting of history that has been taking place in Russia over the last decade.

And let us always remember the saying, “People in glass houses shouldn’t throw stones.”

Rabbi Yaakov D. Bleich is the Chief Rabbi of Kyiv and Ukraine.

#19

Campaign gets dirty: Leaflets smear Tymoshenko as ‘Jew’

By Natalia A. Feduschak

Kyiv Post, February 4, 2010

LVIV – Ukraine’s bitter presidential campaign took an ugly turn this week as leaflets accusing Prime Minister Yulia Tymoshenko of being Jewish and encouraging voters not to cast ballots in her favor began to circulate in western Ukraine.

The flyer features Tymoshenko’s photograph with the words “Don’t Vote for a Jew!”

It reprints an alleged facsimile by the prime minister's father documenting his supposed Russian and Jewish background and asks why Tymoshenko is hiding her Jewish ancestry. The leaflet also features purported quotes by four individuals, including former presidential candidate Arseniy Yatseniuk, who claim Tymoshenko is Jewish. The flyer's circulation is listed as two million copies.

It is unclear who is behind the smear campaign. Hryhoriy Nemyria, Ukraine's vice prime minister, however, was quick to point fingers at Tymoshenko's rival, opposition leader Victor Yanukovych.

"Playing to people's basest instincts is just typical of Yanukovych and his camp," Nemyria said in a written statement. "His is a politics where an opponent is not an opponent, but an enemy. And as history has shown, once you start looking and defining one type of enemy in society, you begin to look for more and more. So who knows what group will be next?"

Lubomyr Kozak from Yanukovych's campaign headquarters in Lviv said he had not seen the flyer, but denied his candidate was behind it. "We didn't prepare it and we didn't distribute it," he said. "Tymoshenko has also distributed a lot of dirt...that in the civilized world wouldn't be tolerated."

The leaflets, which were dispersed in residential mailboxes and on the streets, appear to be targeted toward residents of western Ukraine, a region that historically has had a troubled relationship with its Jewish community. Ukrainian and Jewish leaders remain divided over the role Ukrainians played in the destruction of the region's centuries-old Jewish community during World War II. They are also bitterly split over the persona of Ukrainian nationalist leader Stepan Bandera, who many western Ukrainians see as a hero but Jewish leaders view as a Nazi collaborator.

President Victor Yushchenko recently fueled the debate by posthumously awarding Bandera the prestigious Hero of Ukraine award, a move that outraged Jews worldwide.

Oleksiy Ivchenko, leader of the right-wing Ukrainian Congress of Nationalists and one of the people featured in the pamphlet, called it "a provocation."

"Our party has a position, that each citizen, regardless of their ethnic background, has the right to run for president."

The pamphlet appears at a critical time for Tymoshenko. To win the Feb. 7 runoff vote, she will have to carry western and central Ukraine, as well as make a strong showing in the east. Although the prime minister won most of western Ukraine's regions in the first round of elections on Jan. 17, some worry that tapping into historical prejudices at this moment could hurt her with that segment of the population which is easily swayed.

"This might work in the countryside, where people are less educated," said Maksym Palukh, a 23-year-old worker at an upscale Lviv department store. At the same time, he believed such propaganda is unlikely to influence the region's urban voters. "It won't work here," he said. "As for Yanukovych, he is not a possible variant. His image is formed on such a level that people here won't vote for him."

This is not the first time the Jewish card has been played in Ukraine's 2010 presidential race. In an interview late last year, presidential candidate Arseniy Yatseniuk blamed the dramatic fall in his ratings in western Ukraine before the first round of voting on a national smear campaign that also alleged he was of Jewish ancestry. "This country has latent anti-Semitism," he said at the time.

Yatseniuk would not comment on the anti-Tymoshenko flyer, but his press service denied the former candidate was in any way involved with its appearance.

The pamphlet has outraged Lviv's small Jewish community and indicates people are still willing to employ political tactics once used by authoritarian states, one of its leaders said.

"Ukraine is going in a different direction, but the methods used are the same of totalitarian regimes," said Meylakh Sheykhet, the director of the Lviv office of the Union of Councils for Jews in the former Soviet Union. "This is an

example that shows people haven't gotten rid of their totalitarian thinking; they still see Ukraine as a totalitarian state. It shows that Ukrainian independence is still deeply being threatened."

Ivan Mospan, a 60-year-old retiree, said the pamphlet could have opposite the intended effect.

"It is clearly insulting," the resident of Buchach, in Ternopil region, said. "You can't agitate people with that kind of stuff. People will vote for Tymoshenko because she is our one democratic hope. We are voting for her because if we don't, we will lose Ukraine."

#20

With unconventional ways, Moscow rabbi seeks to boost Jewish life

By Anna Rudnitskaya

JTA, February 4, 2010

MOSCOW -- The rabbi sits at the head of a conference table in a central Moscow bank and greets its vice president as he walks through the imposing door.

"Come in, Pavel Nikolaevich, I've got many bones to pick with you," the rabbi says.

On the wall hangs a calendar with a Christmas scene titled "Old Testament Scenes," and on the table rest several small desk calendars bearing the bank's logo and a quote from Confucius: "What you don't like done to you, don't do to others."

"First, would you please put on a kippah when talking to decent people?" the rabbi says to Nikolaevich. "Second, what do these 'Old Testament Scenes' on the wall mean? Do you really think Christmas is an Old Testament scene? And thirdly, who do you think is the author of the phrase, 'What you don't like done to you, don't do to others?'"

"Confucius," says the bank executive, taking a kippah from the table and putting it on.

"You are totally wrong," the rabbi says. "This was said by Hillel, a Jewish man of wisdom, and is considered the essence of Judaism."

Nikolaevich sighs. The rabbi takes the calendar from the wall and turns it around so the Christmas scene is covered.

"Man is not allowed to study Torah if there is anything unkosher in the room," he says.

This is the beginning of Rabbi Yosef Hersonski's weekly "Torah in a bank" lesson.

Held weekly for Jewish businesspeople in Moscow, most of whom are Nikolaevich's partners or bank clients, the class is one of the ways Hersonski, the head of the Jewish community in the Russian capital's Khamovniki neighborhood, is trying to draw the mostly assimilated Jews of Moscow to Jewish life.

Hersonski, 32, was raised in Ukraine, immigrated to Israel with his parents at 13 and came to Moscow in 2002 as an envoy for Chabad-Lubavitch. He supervised a number of Internet projects and was involved in informal Jewish education.

Two years ago, one of his students, Moscow businessman Dmitry Agarunov, head of the Gameland media company, suggested that they organize a synagogue in his home neighborhood of Khamovniki, a central Moscow district with a mix of old Moscow intelligentsia and wealthy newcomers. Hersonski became the rabbi.

"After several years of studying Torah, Dmitry thought it was wrong to drive a car to a synagogue to celebrate Shabbat," Hersonski said. "Having the synagogue nearby was one of the first ideas. Another was to build this synagogue so it would correspond to its members' specific interests."

"As for me, I was also looking for some new perspective in my job at that time. So Dmitry's suggestion fell on fertile ground."

The synagogue was opened in rented office space in September 2008, right before the economic crisis hit.

"We decided to do this long before the recession, but it turned out that opening a synagogue was kind of an answer to it," Agarunov told JTA. "It made me feel a bit more relieved. I prayed for the business to survive, and it worked."

One of the synagogue's first events was a conference called Torah and Crisis, which brought together rabbis and businessmen to talk about how to do business in the new economic climate. The conference was such a success that it was followed by a seminar, Torah and Money, which became a regular feature.

One of the first questions Hersonski was asked, he recalls, was whether it would be kosher for a manager to forcefully take an employee who had been caught stealing out to the forest to have a "man-to-man talk." The rabbi reminded him of the Hillel quote that Nikolaevich had mistaken for Confucius.

While most Moscow synagogues operate with financial aid from major Russian or international Jewish organizations, the synagogue in Khamovniki is run exclusively by the local community. Participants are expected to chip in for synagogue events -- something the rabbi says helps participants feel they are building the community together. The synagogue's slogan is "Among the right guys."

At the moment, about 30 people regularly participate in synagogue events, but another 100 are occasional visitors. The rabbi is trying to attract newcomers in unconventional ways, including using blogs like Live Journal and online social networks like Facebook. He even has started a site in Russian, www.MoyRabbi.ru, where anyone can ask him questions about Judaism.

"I knew that many Jews in Russia are not registered in any Jewish organizations because they are not interested in Jewish life, and I couldn't reach them via traditional resources," Hersonski said. "I wrote a series of provocative posts in my blog trying to make these people show themselves, so that we could at least start a dialogue."

It worked, the rabbi said, but the results were a bit depressing.

"I discovered that most of these people have not only abandoned Jewish values, such as patriotism and religion, but have cultivated strong dislike for them," Hersonski said. "They remained Jews, so I felt it was my task to try and convince them that Jewish nationalism is not synonymous to jingoism, and that religion doesn't mean backwardness but new approaches and upgrade."

Like other Chabad emissaries around the world, called shlichim, Hersonski sees it as his responsibility to bring assimilated Jews back to religion.

"They all are Jews, and I have to lead them out of their Egypt and save them from assimilation," he said.

In describing his bid to attract assimilated yuppie Muscovites to his shul, and to Jewish life, Hersonski mixes business-speak with Jewish-speak.

"I can only present myself to them in a hope that as the Lubavitcher rebbe put it, even a bit of light will drive away much darkness," he said. "Definitely, eight out of 10 won't come back. But that is natural. We don't sell souvenirs; we sell the changing of a life. The number of consumers for this service is limited."

Konstantin Rabinsky, 30, says he joined the synagogue because he knew Hersonski and was looking for the meaning of life. He says that because members are expected to help keep the synagogue going, the level of commitment in the Khamovniki community is high.

“Members of the community are always willing to help each other in any way they can, including assistance in solving business problems,” Rabinsky said. “There are no show-offs, and millionaires and unemployed students are treated on equal terms. And the rabbi is well-educated and open-minded.”

Back at the bank, the Judaism seminar gets started. The topic this time, chosen by the participants, is family values in Judaism. They talk about matchmaking, marriage and divorce. The rabbi answers questions with Chasidic fable and old Soviet tales, some of which are racy.

The conversation flows naturally, spilling over to different subjects. There is much laughter.

“What exactly can be done to convince children to marry Jewish?” Nikolaevich asks. “My son lives among his secular Russian friends, and how can I possibly make him follow these principles you tell us about? He is 20, and he has already changed girlfriends a half a dozen times.”

“If you live like a gentile, don’t be surprised if your children marry gentiles,” the rabbi answers. “What you really need to change is your mind and your lifestyle. So just do it.”