

WASHINGTON, D.C. February 3, 2012

TO: NCSJ Leadership and Interested Parties

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

In Brief:

Dear Friend,

In one month Russians will go to the polls to elect a new president. While almost everyone believes Prime Minister Vladimir Putin will become the next president, it's not clear whether he will have to face a run-off or second round of balloting. Currently, polls show him under the 50% threshold to avoid a run-off. Unfortunately, if there is a second ballot required, Putin's opponent will likely be either a communist or ultra-nationalist.

I have written extensively about the obstacles that the Russian government continues to put in the way of its moderate opposition resulting in the Communist party and the Liberal Democratic Party (which is neither liberal nor democratic) making significant gains in last month's parliamentary election. The moderate opposition has sought to make an accommodation with both of these parties.

Today, the JTA published an NCSJ op-ed detailing why the moderate opposition should not allow extreme elements from the right and the left to join their ongoing protests against the government. There is no place for purveyors of anti-Semitism and intolerance in a pluralistic society. The Russian government must clearly articulate this message as well -- something that should have been done a long time ago.

Much of Europe and the former Soviet Union is suffering from one of the worst winters in years. Frigid temperatures may cause a smaller than expected turn-out at the public protest tomorrow in Moscow. Organizers are using social media to encourage people to brave the cold weather. The Russian government has tried to discourage participation by counter programming and warnings of the dangers of prolonged exposure to below zero temperatures.

The Conservative Movement is placing their first Rabbi in the former Soviet Union. Rabbi Reuven Stamov was ordained by the Schechter Rabbinical Seminary in Jerusalem. Rabbi Stamov, originally from Crimea, and his family are returning to Ukraine shortly. For more than 20 years, NCSJ has encouraged the various religious streams to become more visible in the former Soviet Union. We continue to work with all of the different steams of Judaism to connect the FSU Jews with our faith.

There is a particular opinion piece I recommend that you read in this week's update. New York Times columnist Roger Cohen has written a about the effort to equate the Soviet occupation of Eastern Europe and parts of the former Soviet Union with the Holocaust. This is an issue that NCSJ and several of our member agencies have confronted for many years -- particularly in the Baltic States. There is a need for an honest assessment of what occurred during the Soviet period, and to do otherwise is a distortion of history.

Sincerely,



Mark B. Levin
Executive Director



NCSJ WEEKLY NEWS BRIEF
Washington, D.C. February 3, 2012

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#1

Op-Ed: Ultrationalists have no place in Russian protest movement

By Mark B. Levin

JTA, February 2, 2012

WASHINGTON -- A spate of recent media reports has discussed the inclusion of ultrationalists in the Russian protest movement. Jewish organizations, sensitive to the fragility of a newly emergent Russian civil society and Jewish community, need to speak out against this inclusion.

Ultrationalism and xenophobia are not unique to Russia. Every democratic society has its share of extremist fringe groups. However, a successful democratic society is the antithesis of extremism; a successful democracy coalesces around the center. Diverse viewpoints about policy, authority and social behavior must be supported by a core foundation of society's respect for individual human dignity, self-determination and freedom of expression.

These core democratic values have spurred the current protest movement in Russia. In the wake of the tainted results from December's parliamentary elections, protesters have taken to the streets. Faced with another limited electoral choice, the protesters are seeking a different process for the March presidential vote – a process that is fair, transparent and gives meaningful expression to opposition views.

Possibly for the first time in Russia's thousand-year history, protesters are not seeking "bread." They are not illiterate serfs deprived of land and forced to live lives of desperation. They are, by and large, the new urban, educated middle class.

NCSJ, founded 40 years ago to support free emigration for Soviet Jews and a leading advocate for Jews in the former Soviet states since 1991, supports the core values of a democratic state with a strong civil society for Russia.

For the past two decades, the renaissance of Jewish life and communal institutions across Russia has rested on a commitment to the rule of law that assures freedom of religion and respects ethnic diversity. We work with all parts of Russian society that seek to strengthen the rule of law, eliminate popular anti-Semitism and secure the benefits of a free society.

These values are not a part of the Russian ultranationalist fringe. It is a movement that thrives on violence in the name of ethnic purity. It is a movement blind to the strengths and values of a multi-ethnic society, a society that has been the reality in Russia throughout its history.

At no stage of the political process should extremists be part of the mainstream discussion. Extremists will not moderate their positions as part of a broader social coalition. The moderate opposition must make clear that Russia has no place for those who promulgate intolerance.

No one can predict the future of the protest movement in Russia. Conflicts within the ranks of the protesters about including ultranationalists are a reflection of larger cultural tensions within Russia. Organizations with a long history in Russia, like ours, have a special obligation to articulate the democratic values that create respect for diversity and religious freedom. Societies based on these values are good for all ethnicities and religious minorities. They are the road to a more open and prosperous way of life for the 21st century.

#2

Ukraine to get first Conservative rabbi JTA, January 29, 2012

JERUSALEM -- A Ukraine native will be the first Conservative rabbi to serve in the former Soviet republic.

Reuven Stamov, 38, originally from Crimea, on Feb. 3 will be the 82nd rabbi to be ordained by the Schechter Rabbinical Seminary in Jerusalem.

Stamov, with his wife and their two daughters, will return to Ukraine from Israel to serve as the first rabbi from the Conservative movement in Ukraine and the former Soviet Union, according to the seminary.

Stamov had made aliyah in 2003 with his wife, whom he met at a Midreshet Yerushalayim Jewish community school where he was teaching. Soon after he began rabbinical studies at the Schechter seminary.

By the age of 23, Stamov completed his master's degree in mechanical engineering in Ukraine, but could not find a job in his field and instead took a job as a guide in a local Jewish youth club, despite negligible knowledge of Judaism and the history of the Jewish people

He later worked at the Ramah-Ukraine summer camps sponsored by Schechter's Midreshet Yerushalayim Jewish enrichment programs for Jews in the former Soviet Union.

"Campers loved him. He sang with them and piqued their curiosity about Judaism and its vast stores of knowledge," said Gila Katz, director of Midreshet Yerushalayim Eastern Europe, adding that he will do well in energizing those Jewish communities in Ukraine.

#3

Russian Liberals Growing Uneasy With Alliances By Michael Schwartz New York Times, January 28, 2012

MOSCOW — About two and a half hours into a recent strategy session of Russia's new protest movement, someone raised the question that could tear apart the crazy-quilt alliance opposing Prime Minister Vladimir V. Putin's power.

"I'd like to ask on what basis extreme nationalists and ultra-right-wing groups are allowed to participate in this civic movement," said Aleksandr Bikbov, a mop-haired and bespectacled sociologist. "Especially," he added, "if they shout antidemocratic slogans like 'Russia for ethnic Russians' from the stage."

Before he could make his case, Mr. Bikbov was drowned out by a mixture of applause and boos, prompting the moderator to remove his question from the discussion. One audience member called him a “liberal fascist.”

As the nascent opposition movement prepares for its next major day of protest, set for Feb. 4, the tentative embrace of an alliance with nationalists has emerged as a defining step — but the consequences of such a move are far from certain.

For more than two decades, Russian liberals have been warning of the dangers posed by nationalism, often portraying it as a greater threat to freedom and stability in this multiethnic country than the soft authoritarianism of Mr. Putin, Russia’s once and probably future president. In recent years, the nationalist movement has become large and increasingly malignant, responsible for a pattern of racist violence against non-Slavs that includes kidnapping, torture and murder. Nationalists have taken responsibility for several beheadings.

But in the effort to drive out Mr. Putin, the opposition, driven by liberal and middle-class Russians, has nonetheless reached out to nationalists, seeing them as a vital bulwark at a critical moment.

“Without cooperation with the nationalists, this movement would not be possible,” said Anatoli Baranov, a longtime leftist activist and a leading voice in the new protest movement. He credited the nationalists’ long experience in opposition politics, adding that cooperation with groups of all political stripes was paramount at this early stage.

“I understand that there are risks,” Mr. Baranov said. “Certainly, among nationalists, there are those I would not work with for hygienic reasons. But many are reasonable.”

How much influence nationalists will come to exert on the new protest movement is unclear. In their balaclavas and combat boots, they were clearly the black sheep at two huge anti-Kremlin protests in December, where their vocal denunciations of immigrants and calls for ethnic purity were often drowned out by chants of “Fascism will not pass!”

But it is clear that they have become a force in Russia that is politically perilous to ignore. Long before protests became fashionable among members of Russia’s urban middle class, who turned out in droves for the December demonstrations, nationalists had the monopoly on street theater, organizing protests that drew thousands.

Moreover, their ideas have a following that extends beyond the office buildings and hipster cafes of Moscow and into the more conservative Russian heartland, where the success or failure of the protest movement could be decided.

Such is the popularity of nationalism here — often rallying around the slogan “Russia for ethnic Russians” — that Mr. Putin has himself at times played at co-opting the nationalist agenda for political gain.

But recently, Mr. Putin has taken a different tack, most likely seeing a chance to hurt the protest movement. In an essay about the nationalist question published last week, Mr. Putin assailed “provocateurs and enemies” who he said were trying to “rip out Russia’s core with false talk of the rights of ethnic Russians to self-determination and racial purity.”

“I am deeply convinced that attempts to propagate the idea of building a Russian ‘national’ mono-ethnic state contradict all of our thousand-year history,” Mr. Putin wrote in the essay, which was published on his Web site.

With the nationalist presence, an anxiousness has emerged within the protest movement that has become more evident with the fading euphoria of the first demonstrations. Many liberals said they had no choice but to work with the nationalists if only to uphold the democratic nature of the movement.

“We do not have a mechanism for excluding people who are legally allowed to be around us in the protest movement,” said Lev A. Ponomaryov, a veteran human rights activist. “Though it is unpleasant for me and my colleagues that they are there, this is a fact.”

Mr. Ponomaryov said he initially resisted the inclusion of nationalist leaders, but relented when members agreed to sign a pact denouncing xenophobia and racism. A delegation of 10 nationalists will join an equal number of representatives from left-wing and liberal groups and a delegation of the politically unaffiliated in the leadership committee of the so-called Citizens Movement, which will coordinate future actions. There are limits to the liberals' tolerance, however. When an avowed white supremacist, Maksim Martsinkevich, nicknamed the Hatchet, made the top three in an online vote for speakers at the second protest, organizers stepped in, denying him the microphone.

Others have threatened to break away if any of the nationalists are allowed to remain. Several created a Facebook group called "Russia Without Hitler," which has more than a thousand members. One of the group's founders, Konstantin Borovoi, a businessman, has formed a splinter group that plans to hold its own protest on Feb. 4.

For their part, nationalist leaders have been keen to avoid inflammatory statements, describing themselves as political moderates capable of compromise.

"We are trying to maintain diplomatic relations," said Vladimir Tor, a nationalist leader who has taken a leading role in the protest movement. "It is as if we are all in the same life raft, and whether we like it or not we are forced to find rational solutions to this crisis."

He added, "We are not in anyway forgoing our basic values."

The nationalists' agenda has been given a lift by Aleksei Navalny, the anticorruption crusader who is the undisputed leader of the movement. In the past, he has espoused nationalist views, particularly on immigration and the volatile, mostly Muslim North Caucasus region, that make his more liberal supporters perspire. In November, he was criticized for speaking at an annual demonstration of nationalists called the Russian March.

Many liberals insisted that the inclusion of the nationalists was a temporary arrangement that would be adjusted if the movement gained major traction. The question is who would stand to lose most if the nationalists left.

"A portion of society that considered dialogue with radical nationalists unacceptable now views them differently," said Oleg P. Orlov, director of the prominent human rights group Memorial. "Does this mean there will be an increase in support for such groups? This is a danger."

#4

A Rally for Putin, Enthusiasm Optional

By Michael Schwartz

New York Times, January 28, 2012

YEKATERINBURG, Russia — With calls for workers' unity and denunciations of the bourgeoisie, teams of mechanics, welders and heavy-machinery operators gathered here Saturday in subzero temperatures for a Soviet-style rally in support of Vladimir V. Putin. But that does not mean all were happy about it.

The rally here in this Ural Mountain city, just over 1,000 miles from Moscow, was the first major effort by Mr. Putin's supporters to counter a tech-savvy opposition movement built around bloggers and journalists that has challenged his authority ahead of a presidential election in March. City officials said as many as 10,000 people attended the event, which was meant to kick off a series of similar demonstrations across the country in the weeks to come.

But even at an event intended specifically to bolster Mr. Putin, there was a notable lack of enthusiasm — even, now and then, notes of active dissatisfaction with him. It would be hard not to take it as evidence that Mr. Putin faces distinct challenges as he seeks to convince the country that he is fit to return to the presidency for a third term.

“Tell Putin to fulfill all of his promises, not just half of them,” said Sergei V. Verkhososov, 34, a mechanic from the nearby industrial town of Nizhny Tagil, who was bused in for the afternoon by his employer. “He needs to think about the future, and those people who fought for him. Take these words to him.”

Few believe that Mr. Putin will actually lose the election. In fact, many at Saturday’s rally said they were willing to continue to back him — if only in the absence of alternatives.

“I haven’t yet thought about who I am going to vote for,” said Lyudmilla P. Cherepanova, 66, a singing teacher. “Let it be Putin or let it be someone else, as long as they protect the motherland.”

Many at the rally said life had improved significantly under Mr. Putin. Most could now afford cars and maybe the odd trip abroad. But there was little enthusiasm for the status quo, either. Pensions are low and salaries are not as high as many want. Some of the factory workers confessed fears about keeping their jobs as inefficient plants producing obsolete goods shut down in the demand for foreign products.

As in much of the country, support for the Kremlin has been slipping over the past year in Yekaterinburg, a city of 1.4 million that is the capital of one of Russia’s industrial heartlands. In the Sverdlovsk region, of which this city is the capital, United Russia, Mr. Putin’s party, garnered just over 30 percent of the vote in December parliamentary elections, far below the national average.

Up to 6,000 people came to an anti-Kremlin protest in Yekaterinburg on Dec. 10, a relatively large event for the region that was scheduled to coincide with the first of the two huge demonstrations held by the opposition in Moscow.

In an attempt to combat the further spread of opposition sentiment here, organizers of Saturday’s rally tried to stir up class pride, casting the event as a reaction by the rough-hewn working class to what they described as the co-opting of the political narrative by soft-bellied middle managers in Moscow.

“In Moscow they insulted me, they insulted everyone who works honestly for the sake of the motherland,” Igor Kholmansky, a worker at a plant that makes train cars and tanks, said from the stage. “We came here today to say that the workers of the Urals are for stability, for Putin and for Russia.”

Still, few seemed prepared to take up the banner of class warfare against their more well-off compatriots in Moscow.

“I absolutely don’t feel that anyone has insulted me,” said Natalya Solovyova, 35, an economist. Speaking of the protesters in Moscow, she said: “Let them show their point of view. It’s their right.”

One thing most held in common here, however, was antipathy to revolutionary change, and they called on their more energetic countrymen in Moscow, who have frequently been painted as radicals and Western-backed agents, to allow things to evolve gradually.

“We’ve already had our shake-ups when we didn’t have anything and were hungry,” said Lidia G. Chistopolova, a 75-year-old pensioner. “Today, more or less, things are getting better. We can go to the store and buy what we want.”

#5

In Russia, perestroika 2.0?

If so, Vladimir Putin won't be part of it

Washington Post, January 29, 2012

OPTIMISTS IN Russia believe that the ruling party's poor showing in last year's parliamentary elections and the mass anti-government protests that have followed augur a political transformation. "The era of managed democracy is over," liberal presidential candidate Mikhail Prokhorov proclaimed to Reuters. "We now have all

the pieces in place to move very fast to being a real democratic country." Wrote commentator Stanislav Belkovsky in the magazine Sobesednik: "The country has entered the active phase of a perestroika-2."

The only problem is that this news seems not to have reached Vladimir Putin, the man who has managed the Russian political system for the past dozen years. Mr. Putin, who is up for a six-year-term as president in an election March 4, is behaving as if nothing in Russia has changed. Apart from publishing a bland article in a state newspaper, he has done little to promote his candidacy; his aides say that he doesn't have time to campaign or participate in debates.

Mr. Putin's bureaucrats and police, meanwhile, are following the same script of past elections. On Tuesday they said that opposition candidate Gregor Yavlinsky had failed to gather the necessary 2 million signatures to appear on the ballot, even though his party received more than that many votes in the December election. The independent election-monitoring organization Golos, which was harassed before that vote, was suddenly informed that it must move out of its offices in the first week of March.

Meanwhile Russian newspapers are focusing on what they see as the only item of suspense in the election: whether Mr. Putin will be declared the victor in the first round, which would require him to receive more than 50 percent of the vote, or will accept a runoff against his biggest challenger. Only there isn't much suspense: The newspaper Moskovsky Komsomolets reported that the Kremlin had sent out instructions to the regions that the election "must be held in a single round." This despite the fact that even official polls show Mr. Putin with barely more than 50 percent support, following a parliamentary election in which massive ballot-box stuffing failed to push the ruling party above 50 percent.

Some Russian analysts are warning that if Mr. Putin persists in this autocracy-as-usual approach he could provoke an even bigger uprising by Russians, who have already gathered for the largest demonstrations since the collapse of the Soviet Union. But to judge from the official media, if the president perceives a threat, he attributes it to the newly arrived U.S. ambassador in Moscow, Michael McFaul. Mr. McFaul has been pilloried for attending a meeting with opposition activists; it is suggested, darkly, that he has been sent to Russia to foment a revolution.

That's not true, of course; Mr. Putin should know the risk-averse Obama administration better than that. If Russians rise up, it won't be because they were inspired by Mr. McFaul, or President Obama; it will be because their own leader refused to hear them.

#6

Russia asserting itself against West, this time over Syria regime change

By Colum Lynch

Washington Post, January 29, 2012

UNITED NATIONS - With the United States and its allies pressing President Bashar al-Assad to step down, the Arab League last week issued a detailed plan for a political transition in Syria. The plan was welcomed by the Obama administration, and Arab leaders quickly said they would refer it to the United Nations.

And a day later, Russia had its say: Not a chance.

"This is an effort from the Arab League, if I understand correctly, to sort of already put a precooked solution on the table," said Vitaly I. Churkin, Moscow's envoy to the United Nations. "I understand that the attitude of Damascus to that has been negative."

The response doomed any hope of a quick resolution at the United Nations to bring greater pressure to bear on the Syrian government, but it also fell into a familiar pattern by which Moscow has shown a growing willingness to challenge the United States and its European partners on a range of issues.

In recent weeks, Moscow has sought U.N. scrutiny of possible crimes by NATO during its air campaign in Libya, and even called for investigations into organ sales in Kosovo, a close ally of the West. Most notably, Moscow has obstructed any effort to increase pressure on Iran.

Asked in an interview whether Russia would ever support a U.N. resolution imposing economic sanctions on the Islamic republic, Churkin said: "No chance, no chance, no chance. . . . Ever."

Critics say Moscow's tough line at the United Nations reflects what one senior council diplomat described as "the Putinization of Russian foreign policy," on the eve of what many expect will be the return of Vladimir Putin to the presidency. Other analysts say Russia is trying to reassert its authority in the council following a period in which the United States and Europe prevailed in the handling of several major crises, engineering the downfall of former Ivory Coast leader Laurent Gbagbo and, more recently, of Moammar Gaddafi in Libya.

"The Russians looked diminished in the first half of 2011, and the strategy is to show, one, they are prepared to act as a spoiler, but, two, they can also lay out a more proactive agenda," said Richard Gowan, an expert on the United Nations at the New York University Center for International Cooperation.

The United States and its European partners have responded to Russian aims by mounting a campaign to isolate it at the United Nations, and portraying Moscow as an obstacle to the democratic changes sweeping through the Middle East.

This past week, for example, the United States, Britain, Germany and France publicly rebuked Syria's arms suppliers, a veiled reference to Russia, for continuing to sell weapons to Damascus.

"It is glaringly obvious that transferring weapons into a volatile and violent situation is irresponsible and will only fuel the bloodshed," Britain's U.N. envoy, Mark Lyall Grant, told the Security Council.

Russia is coming under mounting pressure to break with Assad from the Arab League, which is sending a delegation to the Security Council on Tuesday to press its case for a political transition that would require that the Syrian leader step aside. Meanwhile, Morocco, acting on behalf of a group of Western and Arab governments, has introduced a draft resolution endorsing the Arab League initiative calling on states to follow the Arab organization's example by imposing sanctions on Syria. The Russians have responded coolly.

The high-level diplomatic gamesmanship is playing out as violence continues to spiral in Syria, forcing the United States to prepare for the possible closure of its embassy and the evacuation of its diplomatic personnel. U.N. officials estimate that more than 5,400 civilians have been killed, mostly at the hands of government security forces, since protesters took to the streets earlier last year.

Russia's stance underscores the strength and depth of its relationship with Assad's regime, which is not only a recipient of Russian arms but also host of a Russian naval base. The crisis in Syria also has provided Moscow with an opportunity to show it is a more reliable ally than Western powers, particularly the United States, which is seen by many in the region as having abandoned one of its closest allies, former Egyptian leader Hosni Mubarak.

"If you have good relations with a country, a government for years, for decades, then it's not so easy to ditch those politicians and those governments because of political expediency," Churkin said. "We are stronger on our allegiances than others."

Tensions between the West and Russia have spilled over into a series of highly personal attacks at the United Nations. Last month, U.S. Ambassador Susan E. Rice derided Churkin's appeal for a new probe into possible NATO killings as a "cheap stunt" aimed at distracting attention from the killing in Syria.

Churkin fired back at the Stanford-educated envoy, saying, "Really this Stanford dictionary of expletives must be replaced by something more Victorian." Rice's media spokesman posted a tweet with a photoshopped picture of Churkin on the head of "the Grinch Who Stole Christmas."

Asked if he was trying to change the subject from Syria, Churkin acknowledged that the Security Council has been the scene of "games of distraction," but he said Russia's concerns about the Libya mission were legitimate, asserting that the killing of civilians during the NATO campaign was "a real issue."

Russia, along with Brazil, China, India and South Africa, believe "it would be extremely dangerous if" the West continues to be "carried away by this regime-change idea," he said.

In Syria, Russia has pursued a complicated diplomatic strategy to shore up the regime, joining China in vetoing the Western-backed resolution threatening sanctions against Damascus, and introducing its own resolution. That resolution, now stalled, sought to focus the Security Council's energy on backing a political settlement between the Syrian government and the opposition, and cutting off military supplies to the opposition.

Under the resolution, Assad's army could still be armed.

Asked if Russia's ongoing arms sales to Assad's government were perhaps undercutting his government's effort to pursue a political settlement, Churkin said: "We are not doing anything which is contrary to international law. Other than that, we don't have to give any explanation to anybody."

#7

Will Georgia's leader 'pull a Putin' or trust his people?

By Thomas de Waal

Washington Post, January 29, 2012

Dealing with an ally is straightforward. So is dealing with an adversary. The most difficult foreign policy challenge is dealing with an unpredictable ally who can do harm as well as good. Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili falls into this category.

Saakashvili presides over a young, dynamic, Western-educated government that provides troops to the allied effort in Afghanistan and has undertaken some impressive reforms. Georgia's crackdown on corruption in public bodies such as the police force and universities is an inspiring example to its post-Soviet neighbors.

But he has also been a high-maintenance and volatile leader. In 2008, he selectively interpreted the messages he was getting from Washington that he had strong U.S. support but should back away from a looming confrontation with Moscow over the breakaway provinces of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, and he led Georgia into a disastrous and unwinnable war with Russia. When his Western allies understandably chose not to intervene to help him fight, Saakashvili complained of betrayal.

For a long time after the 2008 war, the Georgian president was damaged goods - and not received at a high level in Western capitals. But he has worked hard to rehabilitate himself both domestically and abroad. He will be received in the Oval Office this week in large part as a token of gratitude for Georgia's cooperative attitude in striking a deal with Moscow and waiving its right to veto Russia's long-sought accession to the World Trade Organization.

For President Obama, the White House meeting will be an opportunity to speak to Saakashvili's better angel and encourage him to behave responsibly in a year of political transition in Georgia.

Saakashvili's Georgia could be described as a mix of non-Russia and anti-Russia. "Non-Russia" refers to the country's public service reforms, its recent law on the tolerance of religious minorities and its persistent tradition of pluralism. "Anti-Russia" means behavior that, in its extreme defiance of Vladimir Putin and his rule, frequently ends up mirroring them. Such behavior includes inflammatory rhetoric toward Russia (Saakashvili last year described Georgia as "civilization" and Russia as "barbarism") and a worrying concentration of power in a few hands.

Present-day Georgia, as with Russia, is basically a one-party state in which a small group of elites control the executive, parliament, all regional authorities and the three national television channels. The judiciary is less

than free. The dark side of Georgia's campaign against corruption and criminality is that it has empowered a large and unaccountable police force. The country's prisons are bursting with many inmates who should not be there; in 2011, Georgia ranked fourth in the world in the number of prisoners per capita.

Until recently, the governing elite has not faced serious opposition and was cruising toward victory in parliamentary and presidential elections scheduled for later this year and next January, respectively. Last year, however, it faced an unexpected challenge when popular Georgian billionaire Bidzina Ivanishvili announced he was going into opposition politics. His demarche mobilized a large segment of Georgians who are tired of the current administration's economic policies and domination of the political scene.

There are certainly question marks about Ivanishvili, an eccentric businessman who made his money in Russia in the 1990s and who is untested in politics. But the government's reaction to him illustrated its ugliest instincts: Ivanishvili was stripped of his passport on a legal technicality, and the bank he owned was heavily-handedly raided over allegations of money-laundering. The pro-government media crudely portrayed Ivanishvili as a Russian stooge, which is unlikely to be true, given that he chose some of Georgia's most pro-Western opposition politicians as his main political allies.

Saakashvili has so far failed this democracy test. Soon he faces an even bigger one. In 2004, Saakashvili had Georgia's constitution changed to strengthen his own executive powers. Last year, with the end of his second presidential term approaching in early 2013, Saakashvili had the basic law amended again to ensure that, as soon as he leaves office, the presidency transfers most of its powers to a new, and strong, prime ministerial position. The presumption both in and outside Georgia was that Saakashvili was seeking to "pull a Putin" and take the prime minister's job.

Saakashvili has been evasive as to whether he is indeed seeking to make that switch.

Georgia's elite are modernizers, not democrats. They occasionally say that they cannot afford to allow more democracy in their country because that would "stop reforms," opposition politicians would gain power and Georgia would slide backward. It is a seductive message - yet still wrong. Checks and balances and term limits exist to stop elites from putting themselves before their citizens.

So this is Georgia's next big test. If Saakashvili can leave the scene gracefully when his term ends and allow a more pluralistic politics to emerge in Georgia after him, he will set a good example to the rest of the former Soviet Union, Russia included. If not, Washington will have a problematic partner in Georgia.

Thomas de Waal is a senior associate at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.

#8

'The Suffering Olympics'

By Roger Cohen

New York Times, January 30, 2012

VILNIUS, LITHUANIA — The "double genocide" wars that pit Stalin's crimes against Hitler's are raging in wide swathes of Europe and every now and again along comes a gust from the past to stoke them. The 70th anniversary this month of the Nazi adoption at Wannsee of annihilation plans for the Jews provided one such squall.

Yes, the past is still treacherous beneath Europe's calm surface. Memory swirls untamed in the parts of the Continent that the American historian Timothy Snyder calls "Bloodlands," the slaughterhouses from Lithuania to Ukraine that Hitler and Stalin subjected to their murderous whim.

To mark the Wannsee anniversary, over 70 European Parliament members, including 8 Lithuanians, signed a declaration objecting to "attempts to obfuscate the Holocaust by diminishing its uniqueness and deeming it to be equal, similar or equivalent to Communism." It also rejected efforts to rewrite European school history books "to reflect the notion of 'double genocide.'"

All of this was too much for the Lithuanian foreign minister, Audronius Azubalis, a conservative, who blasted the Lithuanian social democrat signatories as “pathetic.” His spokeswoman declared that the only difference between Hitler and Stalin was the length of their mustaches. She said legal qualifications of the crimes they committed were “absolutely the same”: genocide, war crimes and crimes against humanity.

Azubalis’s outburst reflected the rancor in states of the former Soviet Empire over their perception that, in the United States and Western Europe, Hitler’s slaughter of the Jews is amply memorialized while Stalin’s murderous crimes — before, during and after World War II — garner far less attention. Where, they ask, is the U.S. museum memorializing Stalin’s terror?

The Prague Declaration of 2008, signed by various luminaries including the late Vaclav Havel, attempted to address this by insisting that Communist crimes “must inform all European minds to the same extent” as Nazi crimes. It called for the establishment of Aug. 23 (the date of the 1939 Hitler-Stalin pact) as “a day of remembrance” for victims of both Nazis and Communists, just as Europe “remembers the victims of the Holocaust on Jan. 27th.”

We are witnessing what Antony Polonsky, a professor of Holocaust studies at Brandeis University, calls “the suffering Olympics.” As the Middle East tells us, these are a dangerous form of games.

By the time of the Wannsee conference most of the more than 200,000 Jews in Lithuania had already been slaughtered with the active help of Lithuanian police units and others. This was a bloody business beside ditches in forests: Gas chambers were a means to alleviate the emotional strain on overtaxed killers.

Post-Soviet Lithuanian history has then involved sincere but faltering attempts to deal with a thorny question: Were Lithuanians chiefly perpetrators (of Nazi crimes against Jews) or victims (of Soviet crimes against the nation)?

In an interview I asked the Lithuanian prime minister, Andrius Kubilius, this question. He said there had been “some misunderstanding” over Azubalis’s remarks and that, “It’s absolutely clear that Holocaust crimes are unique crimes, terrible crimes.” He added that it was a “very painful and shameful thing” that “some Lithuanians took part in that.”

Kubilius continued, “It’s obvious that Stalinist crimes were also very terrible and painful, although you cannot compare them,” citing Snyder’s estimate that 14 million people were killed between Berlin and Moscow in the 12 years Hitler and Stalin were in power. “A lot of them were Jews,” Kubilius said, “but also a lot of other people.”

The prime minister accused Russia of a “post-imperial syndrome” blinding it to Moscow’s crimes. Asked if Russia should pay reparations to Lithuania, he cited postwar Germany, which “understood its responsibilities.” On whether a formal Russian apology would be a good thing, he said, “Absolutely, not only for us but for Russia, too.” He called coming to terms with the past a “litmus test” for Russia.

In this historical minefield, I’d offer the following seven points. First, the Kubilius government has made sincere attempts to confront Lithuanian Holocaust involvement, passing a law last year offering more than \$50 million in compensation among several other measures. Second, the efforts are inadequate: The Museum of Genocide Victims in Vilnius, which devotes the vast bulk of its space to Soviet crimes against a valiant Lithuanian resistance, broadly reflects a still-skewed national psyche.

Third, the Western appreciation of Soviet crimes is indeed paltry (perhaps because Stalin was a U.S. ally in defeating Nazism) and should be increased. Fourth, the Prague Declaration and other attempts to equate Nazi and Soviet crimes are misplaced: The Nazi ideology that led women and children to be shot into pits and then created Auschwitz was unique in its murderous evil.

Fifth, some Soviet crimes may meet the U.N. definition of genocide — “acts committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group, as such” — but “genocide” risks losing meaning

and gravity through overuse. Sixth, a Russian reckoning with Soviet crimes is overdue. Seventh, bringing Baltic states into the European Union and NATO was an act of diplomatic genius that prevented the ravages of memory exacting a further blood toll.

You can follow Roger Cohen on Twitter at twitter.com/nytimescohen.

#9

Putin Realigns Positions in Writings

By Howard Amos

Moscow Times, January 31, 2012

Prime Minister Vladimir Putin laid out his economic vision in the third of a weekly series of articles titled "Ideas for Russia" on Monday and called for a smaller state presence in business, a fight against corruption, institutional reform and a drive to wean Russia off its oil dependency.

But, while economic experts said the piece's candor was fresh, other commentators lambasted the 5,000-word article, which was published in business daily Vedomosti and on Putin's election website, as being short on detail and little more than a rehash of old ideas.

Putin, who is expected to win Russia's presidential election on March 4, appeared to distance himself from the outgoing president, Dmitry Medvedev.

"Over the last few years on the initiative of President Medvedev we began a whole series of reforms aimed at the improvement of the business climate," Putin wrote, in what was his only mention of Medvedev. "But we have not yet seen any noticeable improvements."

In previous articles published in Izvestia and Nezavisimaya Gazeta, Putin addressed the issue of ethnicity in modern Russia and political questions surrounding the December State Duma elections. Monday's sweeping piece covered the principal financial, commercial and political contours of Russian economic life.

Putin did not shy away from criticizing the structure that he helped entrench during his 12 years at the top of Russian politics.

"The main problem is a lack of transparency and social accountability in the work of state representatives, from the customs and tax services to the judicial and law enforcement systems," Putin wrote. "If you call a spade a spade, we are talking about systemic corruption."

He also quoted a World Bank ranking of the countries with the best business environment that put Russia in 120th place and its neighbor, Kazakhstan, in 47th.

As well as a series of fiscal measures, including pension system reform, a reduction in the budget deficit and tax increases for the rich, Putin said he supported further rounds of privatizations and restrictions on the growth of state-owned companies. "It is essential to change the ideology of state control over business activity and limit its function," he wrote.

The article also included a subsection on innovation - one of the catchwords associated with Medvedev. "The Russian economy is capable of not only buying, it can give birth to innovation."

Speaking Monday at a session of the government commission on technology and innovation, Putin said state-owned companies will spend 950 billion rubles (\$31.2 billion) on innovative programs this year, rising to 1.5 trillion in 2013, Interfax reported. He added that the top managers of state companies will have their salaries tied to indicators of innovative development.

Some analysts said Putin's trenchant criticism of Russia's business climate and use of the innovation tagline appeared to align him with some of Medvedev's refrains.

"I am surprised that Vladimir Putin is so critical of the state of the economy and the investment climate in Russia," Sergei Guriev, president of the New Economic School, told The Moscow Times. There is truth in the idea that Putin's economic article is actually very close to Medvedev - except that the word "modernization" has been omitted, Guriev said.

"I haven't read anything new," said Igor Yurgens, head of the Institute for Contemporary Development, a think tank closely associated with Medvedev, Gazeta.ru reported.

Other commentators said that while abstract goals were plentiful, there were few details on implementation. In a critical editorial accompanying Putin's piece, Vedomosti noted the proliferation of words like "should," "must" and "need" without any indication of responsibility.

The article on Vedomosti's Facebook page received more than 85,000 "likes." One of the most popular comments beneath the piece on the business daily's website expressed disbelief that Putin could so lightly admit serious structural problems. "That's enough of producing slogans," wrote a user identified as AVTor, "Twelve years of autocratic management is more than enough to get some results."

Guriev said Putin did not seem to be addressing his usual audience. "This is not a message for his electorate, it's a message for liberal protesters in Moscow," he said.

After attending the government commission on innovation meeting in Tikhvin outside St. Petersburg on Monday, Putin visited the Bogorodichny Uspensky Monastery. He bowed before a icon of the Virgin Mary, lit a candle and was shown around the site, RIA-Novosti reported.

#10

Putin admits he may face runoff in Russia's presidential election

By Vladimir Isachenkov

AP, February 1, 2012

Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin said Wednesday he could face a runoff in the March presidential vote, his first acknowledgement that he may fail to muster enough support for an outright victory.

Putin's statement signaled he might be willing to accept tarnishing his father-of-the nation image if he fails to win more than 50 percent in the first round on March 4, rather than risk igniting more public outrage through blatant vote rigging.

Evidence of fraud in favor of Putin's party in a December parliamentary election triggered the biggest protests since the Soviet collapse two decades ago.

Putin said at a meeting with election monitors that "there is nothing horrible" about a runoff and he's ready for one, according to Russian news reports.

But he also warned of the dangers of a second round, saying it would lead to a "certain destabilization of the political situation." The need for stability in Russia has been the mantra of Putin's campaign.

Putin won his previous two presidential terms in 2000 and 2004 in the first round. After moving into the prime minister's job due to term limits, he has remained the No. 1 leader, but has seen his support dwindle amid growing public frustration with his rigid controls over the political scene, rampant corruption and rising social inequality.

Opinion polls show support for Putin between 40 and 50 percent. If he fails to get a majority of the vote, he will face a runoff on March 25, most likely against Communist Party leader Gennady Zyuganov.

Putin announced his bid to reclaim the presidency in September and said he would then name Dmitry Medvedev, his protege and successor as president, his prime minister.

The job swap was seen as a show of cynical disrespect for democracy, fueling public anger that spilled into the open during the December protests.

6.

Another mass rally is planned for this weekend. In a sign of the increasingly bold defiance of Putin's rule, opposition activists hoisted a giant "Putin Go Away" billboard to the top of a building across the river from the Kremlin on Wednesday. It took authorities more than an hour to remove it.

Putin initially played down the rallies and derided the participants as U.S. puppets working to undermine Russia. He later took a more conciliatory stance, in an apparent effort to split the opposition.

He promised Wednesday to give government jobs to some of his political opponents if he is elected.

Putin also instructed vote monitors to ensure strict observance of election rules. He previously has ordered web cameras installed in all polling stations in an effort to fend off opposition claims of vote rigging.

He warned local authorities that they would only damage his interests if they tried to manipulate the vote in his favor.

Putin also sought to reach out to young voters, saying that any attempt to impose restrictions on the Internet would make no sense and even promising to consider joining a social network. He said he hasn't had time for that and didn't want his aides making posts for him, but he promised to think about it.

The Moscow protests have been organized largely through social networks, which have been filled with criticism of Putin.

Unlike the iPad-toting, tweeting Medvedev, Putin has shown little visible interest in modern communications technologies and said a few years ago that he doesn't even need a cell phone.

Putin's four rivals have avoided criticizing him directly. Billionaire businessman Mikhail Prokhorov, the only new face in the race, said Wednesday that Putin is "the only man who can somehow control the current inefficient system," but added that he could do better.

Opinion polls put Prokhorov, the 46-year-old owner of the New Jersey Nets basketball team, at the bottom of the list of contenders with support of around 4 percent, but he voiced hope that he could make it into the second round.

"Putin has been at the helm for 12 years and has done a lot of work, but it's time to stop," Prokhorov told a news conference.

#11

The Georgian Paradox

As Georgia's recent experience demonstrates, fighting corruption and building democracy are two different things.

By Christian Caryl

www.foreignpolicy.com, January 31, 2012

Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili is a happy man. Yesterday U.S. President Barack Obama bestowed upon him the privilege of a high-profile visit to the Oval Office. The Obama Administration was rewarding Georgia for its support in Iraq and Afghanistan. Georgia also won points for a recent gesture that has helped to defuse tensions with Russia. (Which perhaps explains why Obama confused the two at one point.)

Today Saakashvili made an appearance at the World Bank's Washington headquarters. The Bank used the occasion to issue a highly complimentary report on Georgia's anti-corruption campaign. When I caught up with President Saakashvili there, he boasted that Obama had singled out Georgia for its recent efforts to improve governance. "He also was talking about Georgia as a role model for reforms for the whole region," Saakashvili said.

There's something to that. Anyone who wants tips on tackling sleaze should take a look at the World Bank study. Georgia has made some impressive progress.

Soon after coming to power after the Rose Revolution of 2003, Saakashvili's government decided to demonstrate its commitment to fighting bribery through a dramatic gesture. One of the peskiest forms of corruption plaguing ordinary Georgians at the time involved the notoriously rapacious traffic police, who made a habit of topping up their meager salaries through a variety of petty shakedowns. Overnight Saakashvili fired the whole force of 16,000, replacing it with a much smaller group of carefully vetted, better-paid police. The reform was backed up by spot checks and other measures to ensure that new recruits stuck by the rule of law. Fines were no longer collected at the scene of the misdemeanor but paid at commercial banks. A 24-hour hotline was set up for citizen complaints about law enforcement.

The measures dried up graft in the police force and smoothed the way for a drastic decline in overall crime. The police reform included measures for cutting the red tape involved in issuing driver's licenses and car registrations. The government set up a series of one-stop shops to streamline applications and prevent artificial delays. Among its other positive effects, that move had the unexpected side-effect of transforming Georgia into a regional hub for the lucrative trade in used cars.

The government didn't stop there. It also embarked on a radical simplification of the tax code that dramatically improved collection while broadening the tax base. Electronic filing options for businesses boosted the transparency and efficiency of the whole process. Similar reforms were applied to the customs service, to university entrance exams, and the municipal bureaucracy.

One of the most dramatic reforms involved the energy sector. By 2000, power generation in Georgia had fallen to half of its 1990 levels. Georgians had become accustomed to rolling power cuts - a result of years of financial mismanagement and ubiquitous corruption. Utility companies and the public officials associated with them charged bribes in exchange for providing reliable electricity.

The new government made state utility employees responsible for cash collections. Thousands of electricity meters were installed to track usage and promote transparency. (Since there weren't enough meters to go around, collective meters were sometimes installed for apartment blocks or groups of houses. It wasn't perfect, but still a vast improvement over the old way of doing things.) Electronic billing systems were introduced. The government demonstrated its seriousness by turning off the power to prominent companies that didn't pay their bills. Safety nets were set up for vulnerable groups who couldn't pay the new rates. The government sold off state utilities, but made provisions to ensure the viability of the overall sector.

The World Bank notes that other countries can extract a lot of useful lessons from Georgia's experience. Georgia, and Saakashvili, clearly have a lot to be proud of. "The place is just astronomically better now than it was 10 years ago, and anyone who doesn't admit that isn't being honest," says Mark Mullen, the Georgia director for the anti-corruption watchdog Transparency International. He points out that Georgia is doing far better on almost every measure than regional rivals Azerbaijan and Armenia.

Yet buried in the World Bank study is also an intriguing cautionary note. As the preface rather cryptically observes, Georgia still faces an "unfinished agenda of institutional reforms, which will be needed to ensure the sustainability of Georgia's anti-corruption results by putting in place a robust system of checks and balances."

Wait a minute. So what's not to like?

It turns out that the anti-sleaze campaign is not the only thing that has been happening in Georgia over the past few years. Corruption has shrunk, but the power of the central government has increased. "Georgia's

human-rights record is poor," no less than The Economist wrote last year, on the occasion of another Saakashvili visit to Washington.

The media are no longer as free as they used to be. Saakashvili's ruling party, the United National Movement, has steadily chipped away at the independence of the press. The national TV channels are firmly under state control, and their news coverage shows it. A few small outlets are still allowed to report more or less freely in the capital, but most provincial newspapers and broadcast stations are firmly under the government's thumb. In the most recent Reporters without Borders survey of global press freedom, Georgia scored 104 out of a possible 179. That ranking put it below Chad, Northern Cyprus, and Gabon. Sure, that's still better than Ukraine (116) or Russia (142). Not exactly a model, though.

Saakashvili's party controls all of the major executive positions in the country and dominates both parliament and the judiciary. As British Georgia-watcher S. Neil MacFarlane noted in a thorough study last year, Georgian courts have an acquittal rate of less than 1 percent. Freedom House, in its last "Nations in Transit" study, gave Georgia an overall score of 4.86 - putting it roughly in the middle of the chart for the formerly communist countries of East and Central Europe.

In our conversation today, President Saakashvili touched upon recent reforms to the electoral system that shift power from the presidency to parliament. Skeptics say that Saakashvili might well "do a Putin" by taking the job of prime minister when his presidential term expires two years from now. When asked about this, he was coy: "The last thing I want to do is to turn myself into a lame duck by speculating about my own future."

And when I asked whether he was worried about the state of Georgian democracy, the president sidestepped again. Instead he chose to riff on the opposition, which he accused of attempting to "undermine the whole political process, either through shortcuts or radical acts or indeed lots of money poured in." He was clearly referring to his prime challenger, Georgian billionaire Bidzina Ivanishvili, whom he accuses of fronting for his archenemies in the Kremlin. But it wasn't Ivanishvili I was asking about. He's not the man with the power in Georgia. So the real question went unanswered.

"If you bury the democratic shortcomings with the narrative of better governance, you're missing the bigger story," says Columbia University's Lincoln Mitchell, author of *Uncertain Democracy: U.S. Foreign Policy and Georgia's Rose Revolution*. After the 2003 revolution, he says, Saakashvili and his entourage revised the constitution to tilt the electoral playing field in their favor. The result is a classic example of a system that has all the trappings of a liberal democracy but little in the way of genuine political competition. "The elections are as good as they can be without giving the opposition a chance to win," says Mitchell. He credits Georgia's progress against corruption. But good governance, he points out, is not necessarily the same thing as vibrant democracy. In some cases, indeed, the two may be at odds. "Georgia's elite are modernizers, not democrats," writes Tom de Waal, a leading Georgia-watcher with the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace in Washington.

Transparency International's Mullen concurs. The problem, he says, is that Georgia's dynamic young rulers "think they know what needs to be done, and the population doesn't." Saakashvili and his team "talk about the need to transform Georgia into a modern country - even if people are kicking and screaming along the way." For the time being Saakashvili's emphasis on good governance has served to keep his approval ratings high among most Georgians even as he has undermined democratic institutions. Yet Mullen wonders how long a patronized citizenry, and an increasingly marginalized opposition, will settle for the trade-off.

It's a good question.

Christian Caryl, a senior fellow at the Legatum Institute and a contributing editor of Foreign Policy, is the editor of Democracy Lab.

#12

Diplomats at U.N. Haggles With Russia Toward a Compromise on Syria

By Neil MacFarquhar

New York Times, February 1, 2012

UNITED NATIONS — Security Council ambassadors on Wednesday began trying to negotiate a compromise resolution on Syria, with the bartering focused in good part on the conditions under which President Bashar al-Assad could be asked to cede power.

Russia has threatened to veto any resolution that does not meet its demands, including that the document not specifically call for regime change. But the commitment to do something, made in speeches a day earlier by numerous foreign ministers flying in from around the world, suggested that there was room for compromise, ambassadors said.

“We have more work to do, but I think it was a constructive session conducted in a good spirit,” said Susan E. Rice, the United States ambassador, after emerging from a three-hour meeting. “Everyone is trying to approach this in a constructive and rational way. That in itself is progress.”

Other points of contention, beyond what happens to Mr. Assad, included the issue of whether the resolution would support arms embargoes or other sanctions by United Nations member countries and how to word the resolution so it makes clear no outside military intervention is being authorized.

The draft resolution presented by Morocco mirrors one passed by the Arab League last month, which calls on Mr. Assad to delegate responsibility to his vice president in order to form a transitional government with the opposition and pave the way toward a new constitution and new elections.

Diplomats present, speaking on condition of anonymity, said that much of the session consisted of the Russian envoy, Vitaly I. Churkin, repeating Moscow’s demands that it would not accept a resolution that endorses regime change or contemplates other outside interference. Russia wants to explicitly sideline the Libya model, in which foreign military intervention helped oust Col. Muammar el-Qaddafi.

Various suggestions about possible language were made that the Moroccans were drafting into a new text to be discussed on Thursday.

“These are tough issues, and there are issues of interest and principle that still divide the Council,” said Ms. Rice, who described the question of how to treat a political transition as “one of the more difficult issues.”

As is frequently the case in such talks, the arguments often break down into semantics.

The Arab League plan calls on Mr. Assad to delegate his responsibilities to his vice president, so the debate in the Council swirled around whether using the word “delegate” actually represents a demand that Mr. Assad step down, according to a diplomat present, speaking on condition of anonymity because of the delicacy of the subject.

The ambassadors also debated how strongly the resolution should endorse the Arab League plan — with the choices being “fully support” or “take note” or “welcome,” said Nestor Osorio, the Colombian ambassador.

Western ambassadors seeking to bolster the Arab League wanted the first choice. But there was some suggestion that Mr. Churkin was trying to “cherry pick” language from the league’s plan, as one diplomat put it, rather than accept it as the blueprint.

Mr. Churkin declined to go into detail about the negotiations, saying only that it had been a “good session.”

Diplomats said that the efforts toward compromise meant it was still possible to hold a vote by Friday, but the debate could easily stretch into next week, given the issues involved and the need for ambassadors to consult with their capitals.

Many ambassadors said that escalating violence in Syria was a key factor driving the desire to find a compromise.

The situation there remained remarkably fluid, with the uprising seeming more like an armed struggle daily.

On Wednesday, activists and residents reported new fighting across the country between government forces and opposition fighters in which dozens were killed. In the embattled city of Homs, soldiers shelled several neighborhoods after rebels attacked an army checkpoint there and commandeered a government tank, they said.

Nada Bakri contributed reporting from Beirut, Lebanon.

#13

Why Russia is so opposed to asking Assad to go

Russia is taking a hard line against a UN resolution asking Syrian President Assad to step down, saying the possibility of military intervention must first be ruled out.

By Fred Weir

Christian Science Monitor, February 1, 2012

Moscow - Russia has warned that there is "no chance" it will allow passage of a resolution on the spiraling domestic conflict in Syria, due to come before the UN Security Council in the next few days, if it leaves even the slightest opening for outside intervention in the crisis.

Moscow's tough line on the issue has put it increasingly at odds not only with the West, but also many Arab states who support a resolution put forward by Morocco that would demand Syrian leader Bashar al-Assad step aside and hand power to his deputy as a first step toward a democratic transition. According to the UN, more than 5,400 people have died in an increasingly brutal crackdown since pro-democracy protesters first took to the streets almost a year ago.

The Syrian government blames the violence on armed "terrorists" affiliated with Al Qaeda, who it says have killed more than 2,000 security personnel since the uprising began.

"This [draft resolution] is missing the most important thing: a clear clause ruling out the possibility that the resolution could be used to justify military intervention in Syrian affairs from outside," Russia's envoy to the European Union, Vladimir Chizhov, was quoted by Russian news agencies as saying Wednesday.

"For this reason I see no chance this draft could be adopted," he added.

Russia is one of five veto-wielding members of the Security Council, so unless it can be persuaded to at least abstain, there seems no chance of survival for any proposal that involves outside political interference, sanctions, a Libya-style no-fly zone, or even a military-backed humanitarian corridor aimed at getting supplies to stricken Syrian civilians.

Syria has been a political partner and key regional client state of Moscow since 1971, and is the last remaining major customer for Russian arms in the Middle East. Over the past year, Russia sacrificed about \$4.5-billion in broken arms deals with Libya, and lost as much as \$13-billion due to UN sanctions against Iran, experts say.

"Moscow is afraid events in Syria will spin out of control," says Alexander Kononov, president of the independent Institute for Strategic Assessments in Moscow. "We have lots of economic interests that we stand to lose, but this is not the main thing. The loss of political influence is more important, because Syria is the last point in the Middle East where Russia has a major role to play.... Russia fears that the US is out to engineer regime change in this strategic region, and Russia is simply not going to play any part in granting authority for that."

Reflexive opposition to foreign intervention

The Kremlin has always reflexively opposed foreign intervention (unless the subject was a Soviet satellite country), which in the past was equated in ideological terms with Western colonialism and imperialism. Post-

Soviet Russia has cooperated occasionally with the West, as it did in the former Yugoslavia in the 1990s, but often came away feeling that its interests were ignored or overridden by the triumphant West.

A year ago, Moscow was persuaded to abstain on Security Council Resolution 1973, which authorized a No Fly Zone over Libya in order to "protect civilian lives," but which Russia now believes was interpreted by Western powers as a license to provide military backing for regime change, ending with the overthrow and murder of Libyan leader Muammar Qaddafi.

"Syria is situated not far from our own borders, and nobody can predict how forceful solutions may play out," says Andrei Klimov, deputy chair of the State Duma's foreign affairs committee. "It may seem easy to advocate and plan these things from the safety of Washington, but we remember the chaos that was unleashed after the US invaded Iraq. The prospects for similar breakdown in Syria are just as great."

On Tuesday US secretary of State Hillary Clinton suggested that Russia may be making too much out of its fears that the "Libya scenario" might be repeated in Syria. "That is a false analogy," Mrs. Clinton was quoted by RIA-Novosti as saying at the UN Security Council meeting.

"Nobody in Moscow takes Western arguments seriously anymore. After all that's happened, we frankly don't think they know what they're doing," says Yevgeny Satanovsky, president of the independent Institute of Middle Eastern Studies in Moscow. "What's going on in Syria is a civil war, one that threatens to turn into a massive bloodbath, many times worse than Libya. Does the US have any plans for dealing with this? And what about Russia's interests? Who will defend those? It should be perfectly obvious why Moscow isn't going to enable any more Western-backed adventures in the Middle East."

Russian officials insist they are not backing Assad, despite the fact that Moscow continues to ship arms to Syria, but that they are standing on the principle of sovereignty and the right of nations to work out their own internal difficulties without external interference.

"We have proposed a resolution based on law and noninterference, but we are told that this is unacceptable," says Klimov.

Russia's favored draft resolution would condemn violence on all sides in Syria's increasingly civil-war-like conflict, and urge peaceful dialogue between the rebels and the government. But it would exclude any form of overt outside support for the anti-Assad insurgents.

"Russia's policy is not about asking someone to step down; regime change is not our profession," Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov said Tuesday, according to the independent Interfax agency.

"We are not friends or allies of President Assad. We never said that Assad remaining in power is a precondition for regulating the situation. Our position is different: we have said that the decision should be made by the Syrian people themselves," he added.

Mr. Lavrov also insisted that Russian arms supplies to Syria were not meant to help the regime overcome its domestic opposition.

"We signed some contracts and contracts must be implemented," he added. "We are arming the constitutional government: We don't approve of what it is doing, using force against demonstrators but we're not picking sides, we're implementing our commercial contractual obligations."

#14
At Moscow Rally, Fighting the Cold and the Kremlin
By Michael Schwartz
New York Times, February 2, 2012

MOSCOW — Like most of those bold enough to have tried a winter assault on the Kremlin, the leaders of Russia's budding protest movement will face a challenge at its next rally that is perhaps far greater than any government force: the weather.

Moscow has been plagued with punishing cold for weeks, and the forecast calls for temperatures to fall to as low as minus 10 on Saturday, the day of the protest. When it is that cold, it can be difficult to breathe, let alone send a Twitter message, and organizers are scrambling to come up with ideas — free tea and coffee, hundreds of Japanese space heaters — to entice people out of their homes and keep them alive long enough to make a political point.

There also have been calls for the political sermonizing to be curtailed and the rally to be kept short.

“Otherwise, many will freeze,” Grigory Chxartishvili, better known as the writer Boris Akunin, said at a meeting of the organizing committee this week. “And afterward our rally will be blamed for causing the flu and pneumonia.”

The severe cold snap, which has caused dozens of deaths in Eastern Europe, is one of the many challenges confronting the movement. Opposition leaders are increasingly divided over how to maintain momentum going into the presidential elections next month. And even if they succeed in sustaining their voice, few believe it will have any effect on Vladimir V. Putin's efforts to return to the presidency.

In December, tens of thousands of mostly affluent Muscovites tapped into a long-hidden well of political energy to pull off two boisterous protests against perceived fraud by Mr. Putin's party in parliamentary elections. But the last rally was six weeks ago, before the long New Year's holiday and the onset of the serious winter cold.

Now it is anyone's guess how much of that energy remains.

“This time around, the drive is partly lost,” said Masha Lipman, a prominent political analyst. “The cause is not quite clear, and the leadership is missing. Plus the weather.”

Of course, when it comes to the cold, Russians have a bit more fortitude than most. Shops and restaurants here in the capital remain open through the nastiest snowstorms, and Moscow schools do not cancel classes until the temperature reaches minus 15. Subzero temperatures are not enough to put off a weekend stroll outside, perhaps with an ice cream cone in hand.

But there are limits, especially for the fashionable types who have been attending these protests. Some would rather freeze, it seems, than wear a frumpy parka.

“If you have to choose between dressing warm or looking pretty, forget about it, dress warm,” Andrei Kozenko, a journalist, wrote this week on the Lenta.ru news portal. Pro-Kremlin activists “will say afterward that you looked bad in the photos, but at least you'll be able to read their comments in the comfort of your office and not in an uncomfortable hospital ward with pneumonia.”

His colleague, Anastasia Karimova, has come down on the other side of the fashion-versus-function debate. In several photographs that have spread widely on Facebook and other sites, Ms. Karimova is seen standing outside in a blue bikini and high heels holding a sign that shows the date of the protest and the slogan “Cold is not scary.”

The authorities have sought to use the weather to their advantage.

Gennady Onishchenko, whose work as Russia's top public health official is often directed against the government's opponents, warned on Thursday that protesters risked getting sick.

“If you go to a protest, wear your grandmother's felt boots and coat, the ones that were a sign of outrageous wealth in the 1980s, if they haven't been eaten by moths yet,” he said in a somewhat bewildering statement.

“It’s better to refrain from this completely and find some other way to participate in the construction of a happier government.”

Officials — apparently not trusting in the cold to keep all protesters away — have come up with other strategies.

Moscow’s education department announced last month that universities and colleges in the capital would hold a citywide open house for schoolchildren on the day of the protest, a move that the Russian Student Union called a “trap.”

The Civic Chamber, a government-appointed watchdog, said that as of Thursday it had received 50 complaints from teachers about being forced to attend a rally in support of Mr. Putin that was scheduled at the same time as the opposition protest. A number of similar complaints have been posted on Russian blogs.

Even Kirill I, the patriarch of the Russian Orthodox Church, evoking past revolutions, called on believers this week to look warily upon the protest movement.

“Remember that the loudest yells, the most piercing words, are not always the proper, true and honest ones,” he said. “Twice our people were seduced in this way, and maybe more in the last 100 or so years.”

The authorities have, nevertheless, agreed to allow protesters to march for about a mile through a wealthy Moscow neighborhood close to the Kremlin and to hold a rally on Bolotnaya Square, an island in the Moscow River where the first protest in December was held. Organizers hope the event will last less than two hours.

On a Facebook group devoted to the protest, nearly 27,000 people have indicated they will attend. The more optimistic have pointed out that Saturday’s protest falls on the anniversary of a rally in 1990 against the Soviet authorities that drew hundreds of thousands of people.

At that protest, however, the temperature was above freezing.

#15 Estonia May Recognize Nazi Veterans as ‘Freedom Fighters’ RIA Novosti, February 2, 2012

Estonia could officially recognize on February 24 WWII veterans who fought against the Soviet Union as “freedom fighters,” Estonia’s Postimees daily said on Thursday.

The list includes veterans from the 20th Estonian SS Division and other Nazi collaborators.

“We are talking about all those who fought for the restoration of democratic Estonia,” the country’s Foreign Minister Urmas Paet told Postimees. “This also includes those who resisted [the occupation] by peaceful means, political prisoners, all.”

The move has been agreed by the ruling coalition parties, which have a majority in the Estonian parliament. Previous attempts to push through a similar bill failed in 2006 and in 2010.

According to Estonian government sources, the text of the draft resolution is still in the works, and the term “freedom fighters” may be replaced by “resistance fighters” or “activists for the independence of Estonia” in the final document.

Russia has sharply criticized the Baltic State for the planned recognition of Nazi collaborators.

“To cover crimes, committed by Estonian Nazi collaborators, to call their activities ‘a struggle for national liberation,’ to justify and glorify them through law is blasphemous and unacceptable,” the Russian Embassy in Tallinn said in a statement.

Estonia denied the accusations, saying the country “has been terrorized by the regimes of Nazi Germany and communist Soviet Union.”

“The fight against Nazi and Soviet totalitarian regimes was a part of the Estonian fight for freedom and the decision of the government to honor the struggle for the restoration of Estonian independence is a natural and unequivocal choice,” Estonian Defense Ministry said in January.

Before entering the war in 1941, the Soviet Union occupied the Baltic States, and many Estonians saw siding with the Nazis as a way to regain the independence the country enjoyed from 1920 and until 1940.

Parades in honor of Waffen-SS veterans and their supporters are held annually in Estonia.