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Russian Federation: Executive Branch

By Susan Cavan

PRESIDENCY

Succession shuffle or razzle-dazzle 'em?

President Putin has been telegraphing the possibility of changes to his government since the first of the year, nonetheless, his announcement that Sergei Borisovich Ivanov would be leaving the Defense Ministry for the post of First Deputy Prime Minister came as a surprise, if not for the move that gave Ivanov co-equal status with Dmitri Medvedev, then for what was left unsaid by the president. Why was Ivanov pulled from the Defense Ministry now? What about Anatoli Serdyukov makes him a viable choice to head the Defense Ministry? Who will lead the Federal Tax Service in Serdyukov's stead? Why was Naryshkin elevated to the post of Deputy Prime Minister and who will head the Government Staff in his place?

In his announcement of the changes, Putin—who was described by one source as "uncharacteristically nervous" as he made the announcement, "pausing often and flipping back and forth through a notebook" (1)—credited Ivanov with accomplishing "well" his task at the Defense Ministry, where weapons and "technical equipment" exports increased substantially, setting "yet another record in this sphere—more than six billion dollars." (2) In his new post, Ivanov will have supervisory responsibility for the military industry and civilian sectors of the economy. (3)

In replacing Ivanov with Anatoli Eduardovich Serdyukov, Putin stressed the economic credentials of the former head of the Tax Service (perhaps best known for his involvement in charging Yukos with astronomical tax bills) and called on
him "to organize effective work [in the Defense Ministry] and to spend the huge...budgetary resources in a rational manner." (4) That is a fairly low bar for a Defense Minister, but these priorities were reinforced when Putin met with senior officials from the defense ministry and collegium. Reiterating that his new civilian minister would be responsible for "economic and financial aspects," Putin proposed a substantial increase in the work of the Genshtab: "the military component, the General Staff, will be more important now than ever." (5) Well, yes, especially if it has to deal with all the military issues.

The most ubiquitous explanation of the change in position for Ivanov concerns the 2008 succession: If one postulates that there will be a constitutional succession in Russia next year, and further presumes that identifying potential frontrunners right now is relevant to the choice of successor in 2008, then moving Ivanov into a formal matching role with Medvedev seems to confirm their positions as frontrunners in this succession race. Putin either has shored up Ivanov's frontrunner credentials or eroded Medvedev's miniscule lead in the opinion polls. In either event, Prime Minister Fradkov is said to be pleased: The two largest snakes in his government (not necessarily the most venomous) have just been set facing each other in a fight for political power. Fradkov surely hopes that they will be too busy trying to devour each other to pay any attention to him...or any of his protégés.

Speaking of which, what prompted Putin to bump Sergei Naryshkin into a deputy prime minister slot? By some accounts, Fradkov was positively giddy and "lorded it over everyone at the cabinet meeting" after the personnel changes were announced. (6) In his announcement of Naryshkin's promotion, Putin did reference input from the Prime Minister, who, Putin claimed, "considers it expedient to increase work in the sphere of foreign economic relations." (7)

There has been some speculation that Naryshkin was chosen by Fradkov personally to join the ranks of deputy prime ministers and represents a Fradkov
faction within the government. Fradkov and Naryshkin have worked together for several years, since September 2004, when Naryshkin was appointed Chief of the Government Staff in the personnel shuffle that saw Dmitri Kozak leave Moscow to oversee the North Caucasus region in the wake of the Beslan tragedy. Naryshkin's background fits comfortably in the Putin paradigm: an employee (and probable KGB agent) of the Soviet embassy in Belgium in the late 80's and early 90's, he went to work in the St. Petersburg Mayor's Office (under Putin's supervision) from 1992-1995. (8) Naryshkin worked in the external economic relations sector in St. Petersburg, before being brought to Moscow to work first in the Kremlin's economic administration and then in the government.

While Fradkov seems to consider Naryshkin as his ally in the snake pit, it is possible that Naryshkin's ties are somewhat more complicated than the Prime Minister may know. He has been referred to as Putin's eyes and ears, initially sent to keep watch over Fradkov in Kozak's absence; he also is described as having close ties to the Kremlin through Igor Sechin, Putin's deputy chief of staff and siloviki whip. (9)

It is clear that Naryshkin would have been vetted for all his Moscow appointments by the Kremlin cadre chief, Viktor Ivanov. Ivanov, who apparently facilitated the entry of not only Putin, but also Sergei Ivanov, into the security services, (10) was rather quietly appointed to head up a new anti-corruption organization earlier this month. (11) The new Corruption Committee, which replaces the old body, headed by Mikhail Kaskanov, likely will have some headline-grabbing reports to reveal later this year, which, of course, will thrust Viktor Ivanov back into the succession ring in his own right.

Putting aside all the personnel changes that set off the succession struggle alarms, perhaps Putin's most telling personnel decision this week involved Chechnya. Putin removed the elected president, Alu Alkhanov, from his position as President of Chechnya, and replaced him with Ramzan Kadyrov. (For details
on this decision and its ramifications within Chechnya, please see Russian Federation: Domestic Affairs.) While Putin made a point to stress that this shake-up in the Chechen government was undertaken at Alkhanov's request, his decision does reflect a willful disregard for both the process of electoral succession and the voice of the electorate itself.

Putin clearly has set himself firmly back in the center of the political whorl, reminding analysts and presidential hopefuls alike that his voice, his choice, in the coming months, and likely years, matters a great deal.

While the succession chatter dominated Russian political analyses, especially after the president's recent shuffle, the issue of extending Putin's presidency for a third term remains an evocative theme. In a televised discussion of the Ivanov promotion, former Nezavisimaya gazeta founder and political analyst Vitali Tretyakov dismissed the talk of successors and appealed to Putin to cut to the chase: "I hope that our democratic country is going to forgive me. I am proceeding from the assumption that Vladimir Putin should remain in office for the third term. This is his historical obligation before the nation, before our country. One may well play these successor games and call them candidates. But this is not fooling anyone in any case." (12)

Putin may well heed Tretyakov's advice, or some variant thereof, wherein he will remain in power beyond 2008. In any event, the succession games underway bring to mind Yel'tsin and his constant shifting of personnel that kept an alternate source of power from emerging during his presidency. They also bring to mind the lyrics of a familiar show tune: "Give 'em the old flim flam flummox, Fool and fracture 'em, How can they hear the truth above the roar? (...) Razzle dazzle 'em, And they'll beg you for more." (13)

Source Notes:
(2) "Beginning of the meeting on economic issues," President Putin speeches via www.kremlin.ru, accessed 21 Feb 07.
(3) Ibid.
(4) Ibid.
(6) Newsweek Russia, No. 8, 19-25 Feb 07; WPS via Lexis-Nexis Academic.
(7) "Beginning of the meeting on economic issues," Ibid.
(8) "Naryshkin appointed Cabinet Chief," Moscow Times, 15 Sep 04; Independent Press via Lexis-Nexis Academic.
(10) "Holding on to Defense," by Pavel Felgenhauer, Novaya gazeta, No. 12, 19-21 Feb 07; WPS via Lexis-Nexis Academic.
(11) "Viktor Ivanov to replace Mikhail Kasianov," by Natalia Melikova, Mikhail Moshkin, Nezavisimaya gazeta, 6 Feb 07 via Lexis-Nexis Academic.
(12) "Sunday Night with Vladimir Solovyev," Russian NTV Mir, 1900 GMT, 18 Feb 07; BBC Monitoring International Reports via Lexis-Nexis Academic.

Russian Federation: Domestic Issues and Legislative Branch

By Robyn Angley

Kadyrov is in
On 15 February, President Vladimir Putin named Chechen President Alu Alkhanov to the post of Russian Deputy Minister of Justice. Prime Minister Ramzan Kadyrov has been appointed acting president in his stead. Alkhanov reportedly requested the transfer. These changes are the culmination of a process that began after the death of Ramzan Kadyrov's father, Akhmad Kadyrov, in May 2004. This process was hastened by comments made by Alkhanov in an interview that he had no desire to seek another term as president of Chechnya. Kadyrov's response was swift and effective.

Following Alkhanov's interview, Kadyrov ordered a complete investigation of all the executive organs and declared that he would make sure that the cases of Chechens who have been detained were brought to court. According to several sources, he then pressured several key officials in the Alkhanov administration into resigning, among them German Vok, secretary of Chechnya's Public and Economic Security Council, on 9 February, as well as Said-Magomed Isarayev, Alkhanov's press secretary. (1) Later, however, on 12 February, Vok gave an interview to Ekho Moskvy in his capacity as the Public and Economic Security Council Secretary in which he proposed that Kadyrov resign. (2) Apparently, it was safer to be Alkhanov's ally outside of Chechnya rather than inside it.

In early February, Presidential Envoy to the Southern District Dmitri Kozak denied knowledge of a plan to offer Alkhanov a different position in order to smooth the way for Kadyrov's appointment as the regional leader. (3)

Alkhanov responded by gathering his (remaining) supporters around him. On 12 February, he declared that his continuation as head of the region depended on "the will of the Almighty and the president of our country" (4) and on 13 February, Alkhanov hosted a meeting of all the bodies that are overseen by the federal government (it is from these organs that he primarily receives support). The local power ministries, which support Kadyrov, were conspicuously absent from the meeting. (5) Alkhanov also published a statement in which he said that
he would not resign and that "the cult of personality and idealization of one man will not result in anything beneficial either for the republic or its people." (6)

On 15 February, the will of the President was made known, and Alkhanov was assigned a new position as Deputy Minister of Justice, with Kadyrov assuming the role of acting president. His confirmation as Chechen President is a virtual certainty, although formally Dmitri Kozak must present Putin with at least two possibilities for Alkhanov's successor. United Russia also has lent Kadyrov its backing, (7) an indication that Chechen affairs mirror developments on Moscow's domestic scene.

Kadyrov has lost little time in assuming his new role. In a speech given just days after his promotion, he stated that Chechnya and Grozny will be completely rebuilt by 2008. (8) He also blamed the current lack of reconstruction on the federal authorities, claiming that 80 percent of the funds designated for reconstruction in Chechnya never make it there because of corruption. (9)

Kadyrov already had considerable support in Chechnya as the region's prime minister under Alkhanov's largely titular supervision. The recent spats between Alkhanov and Kadyrov only mark the death throes of a process long underway. The important question is what Kadyrov will do now that he has both power and the title to go with it. Will he use it to rebuild Chechnya into a place where ordinary citizens no longer experience violent conflict or will he, more likely, continue in the vein of the many human rights abuses he already has to his credit?

As a postscript, the Chechen National Salvation Committee, a human rights organization, reported that a man, woman and infant were shot to death in early February in their Grozny apartment by Kadyrov's men. (10) In other words, during the height of the scrutiny in the struggle over Chechnya's leadership, Kadyrov continued to act without regard to the law or basic human rights, in a
manner that thus far has characterized his ascent to leadership. The prospects for the future of ordinary Chechens look grim.

Source Notes:

(1) "How far my clan has fallen," Novaya gazeta, 12-14 Feb 07; BBC Monitoring via Lexis-Nexis.
(2) "Chechen security chief says PM Kadyrov unfit to be president," Ekho Moskvy, 12 Feb 07; BBC Monitoring via Lexis-Nexis; "Cult of personality exposure," Vremya novostey, 13 Feb 07; WPS via Lexis-Nexis.
(3) "Alu Alkhanov will stay on," Newsweek Russia, No. 6, 5-11 Feb 07; What the Papers Say via Lexis-Nexis.
(4) "Chechen President refutes resignation rumors," Ren TV, 12 Feb 07; BBC Monitoring via Lexis-Nexis.
(5) "Chechen president enlists support of Moscow," KavkazWeb.net website, 13 Feb 07; BBC Monitoring via Lexis-Nexis.
(6) "Cult of personality exposure," Vremya novostey, 13 Feb 07; WPS via Lexis-Nexis.
(7) Carl Schreck, "United Russia now in Kadyrov column," Moscow Times, 19 Feb 07 via Lexis-Nexis.
(8) "Chechen leader stresses funding problems, sets economic strategy," RIA Novosti, 19 Feb 07; BBC Monitoring via Lexis-Nexis.
(9) "Chechen leader stresses funding problems, sets economic strategy," RIA Novosti, 19 Feb 07; BBC Monitoring via Lexis-Nexis.
(10) "Rights body reports killing of Chechen family in capital," Daymohk news agency website, 12 Feb 07; BBC Monitoring via Lexis-Nexis.

Russian Federation: Security Services
By Fabian Adami
FSB to “safeguard” Duma elections, receive increased funding

In December last year, Federal Security Service Director Nikolai Patrushev gave a number of press interviews designed to showcase the FSB and its importance to Russia’s National Security. According to the various interviews Patrushev conducted, the FSB prevented some 300 domestic terrorist attacks, neutralized 40 Chechen rebel bands, and stopped or discovered a significant number of espionage plots. (1)

Late in January 2007, President Vladimir Putin participated in a “taking stock” collegium held by the FSB at its Lubyanka Headquarters. (2) The purpose of the meeting was to assess the agency’s 2006 performance, and to set tasks for 2007. In the presence of SVR Director Sergei Lebedev, Defense Minister Sergei Ivanov and Interior Minister Rashid Nurgaliev, Putin praised the FSB’s record, claiming that the Russian population had “been waiting for the results you achieved last year for a long time,” (3) but emphasized that in future more attention should be devoted to the prevention of economic crimes, as well as to ensuring that Russia’s latest scientific and technological discoveries remained secret.

There were two moments of real interest in Putin’s address to the collegium. First, the President announced that the FSB’s budget (there was no mention of budgets for Russia’s other Security Agencies) is to be increased by 27% in 2007. Employee salaries will be increased by a quarter (double the national pay-increase), while the FSB’s weapons procurement fund—apparently separate from the larger budget—is to increase by 20%. (4)

Secondly, Putin addressed directly the FSB’s role in providing security during the State Duma and regional Parliamentary elections, which are due to occur later this year. The President noted that society should be “safeguarded” from “any attempts at the ideology of extremism…and confessional intolerance penetrating in the public and political field.” With an apparent nod at pluralism, Putin noted
that “elections are a very important instrument for forming state authorities,” and warned the FSB that it should “work strictly within the legal framework,” to ensure national security during the polling period. (5)

President Putin’s remarks must be viewed with some cynicism. The FSB—as recent history shows—hardly has the necessary “transparency credentials” to allow it to safeguard “democracy” in Russia. Moreover, it appears that the FSB itself now is openly crossing into the political realm, making a mockery of the idea of democratic separation of powers. On 26 January, United Russia announced that it had opened negotiations with FSB Director Patrushev over his accession to the party. Apparently, Patrushev’s membership is “a settled matter…No ifs or buts about it.” (6)

According to “sources in the Presidential administration,” other high-level serving officials will follow Patrushev’s lead in joining United Russia in the near future. (7) It is highly unlikely that Patrushev would be permitted to join United Russia without the President’s personal involvement—indeed, it is entirely plausible that the initiative for this move came directly from the Kremlin, rather than from Patrushev or United Russia’s leadership.

President Putin’s motivation in allowing Patrushev to enter the party political realm—and therefore probably win a Duma seat—may be two-fold. First, by allowing members of the "St. Petersburg circle" to enter positions of political significance he probably is preparing a "security blanket" for his eventual departure from office. Secondly, given Defense Minister Sergei Ivanov’s recent “promotion” to First Deputy Prime Minister—a move touted as preparing him for the succession, (8) Putin may be playing his officials off against each other, in order to keep them and worldwide observers guessing as to his true intentions.

**Update: We want Berezovsky**
Late in November 2006, Alexander Litvinenko, a former FSB officer who had defected to Britain died after ingesting a lethal dose of Polonium 210. In the aftermath of his death, several theories as to who had committed the assassination emerged—or were placed in the public eye. Litvinenko’s relatives, friends and his employer—former Russian oligarch Boris Berezovsky—all favored the theory that Litvinenko’s murder had been ordered at the highest levels of the Russian state, and that his former colleagues at the FSB were responsible. Conversely, Kremlin spokespersons intimated that Litvinenko had been killed either by Chechen rebels or by Berezovsky himself, in a twisted attempt to evade continued Russian attempts to gain his extradition to face trial for economic charges. (9)

Scotland Yard’s investigation into the murder was stymied from the beginning, as Yuri Chaika, Russia’s Prosecutor General, stated publicly that British police officers would face restrictions in their Moscow operations, and that no extraditions would be permitted in the case. It seemed evident that Moscow was attempting to use the “carrot” of cooperation with British authorities, in order to force Whitehall to reverse its previous decisions against Berezovsky’s extradition, as well as that of former Yukos officials living in London, who will now be questioned by FSB officers. (10)

This conjecture now has been proven correct. During a meeting early in February 2007 in Moscow between British Trade Minister Alistair Darling and Finance Minister Alexei Kudrin, Russian officials indicated that extradition proceedings against Andrei Lugovoi—Scotland Yard’s main murder suspect, according to the file handed by detectives to the Crown Prosecution Service (11)—would be vetoed unless Berezovsky was returned to Moscow. (12)

Given Moscow’s focus on Berezovsky, it is evident that Litvinenko’s death was not conjured solely to silence his opposition to Moscow. While Litvinenko’s death reaped benefits, it may have been a peripheral element in a Moscow-led scheme
to attack the dissident émigré community, centering around Boris Berezovsky. The question is, what is at stake here for Moscow?

**Gusak: Litvinenko a traitor**

In an interview broadcast on BBC’s Newsnight several weeks ago, Alexander Gusak, Litvinenko’s direct superior in the FSB’s Organized Crime Division, stated that Litvinenko was considered a traitor under Russian law, and as such, would have faced the death penalty had he returned to Russia under Soviet rule. (13) Gusak added that several former colleagues had offered to kill Litvinenko, but that he had not advised them to kill the defector. (14) While Gusak’s statements cannot be read as coming from the Russian establishment itself, they indicate that his former colleagues bore him a great deal of animosity, and that his death was not unwelcome in Secret Service circles.

Sources Notes:

(1) See The ISCIIP Analyst, Volume XIII, Number 7 (25 Jan 07).
(2) “Putin Reminds Russia’s Federal Security Service Of Increased Funding, Wages,” Channel 1 Worldwide, Moscow, in Russian, 2 Feb 07; BBC Monitoring via Lexis-Nexis.
(3) Ibid.
(4) “Putin Calls For More Funds To FSB,” RIA-Novosti, 31 Jan 07 via Lexis-Nexis.
(5) “Putin Urges FSB To Protect Society From Extremism At Polls,” ITAR-TASS, 1 Feb 07 via Lexis-Nexis.
(6) “Chekists Into The Bear's Lair,” Tvoi den, 26 Jan 07; What The Papers Say via Lexis-Nexis.
(7) Ibid.
(8) “Putin Lays Foundation For Succession As He Promotes Former KGB Defence Minister,” The Independent, 20 Feb 07 via www.news.independent.co.uk/europe/article2278049.ece.
Missile defense uproar
American interest in deploying a missile defense system in Central Europe has been the focus of heated discussion and debate in the Russian media recently. Specifically, the US is planning negotiations with Poland and the Czech Republic, both NATO members and former Soviet satellite countries. Lieutenant General Henry Obering, the Chief of the US Missile Defense Agency, explained that the system is designed to counter missiles fired by Iran and other rogue states. (1) The system will be part of a larger security umbrella, which includes similar components already in the early operational stages in Alaska and California, initially designed to keep watch over, and respond to, any possible North Korean activity.

As a preliminary step, on 20 January US officials formally proposed bilateral talks with the Czech Republic to discuss placement of the system’s radar portion on Czech soil. Almost simultaneously, the US expressed interest in beginning a dialog with Polish authorities about deploying ten interceptor missiles in
southeastern Poland. (2) Despite a US invitation for Russia to be involved in the development of the system, these proposals sparked a firestorm regarding what Russia saw as the “real” purpose of placing a missile system in such close proximity to its border. In his recent three and a half hour long annual televised news conference, Vladimir Putin expressed serious concern over the planned missile defense system and described it as a threat to Russia. (3) Claiming that neither Iran nor any other terrorist organizations have the ability to launch ballistic missiles, Putin rejected Washington’s reasoning and argued that the US is upsetting the strategic balance in Europe and starting an arms race. (4) While this argument may be popular with a Russian populace that appreciates an unbending leader, it appears to disregard the need for the US to be proactive in efforts to anticipate future security threats. US officials openly “acknowledged there is currently no long-range missile threat, but…said the United States wants to ‘stay ahead’ of where…a threat might develop.” (5) “In 2005, Defense Intelligence Agency director Vice Admiral Lowell Jacoby told a Senate committee hearing the agency believed Iran would have the technical capability to develop an intercontinental ballistic missile by 2015.” (6) More recently, Polish military attaché Andrzej Lewandowski stated that experts now think Iran will have this capability by 2010-2013. (7) In preparation for this looming threat, the goal of the cooperative Central European effort is to have the defensive system in place by 2011. This timeline should help clarify the purpose of the project.

Russian inflammatory rhetoric toward the US, however, continued as numerous Russian political and military leaders offered their explanations of the situation. The Chief of the Russian General Staff Yuri Baluyevsky shared a view similar to that of General Makhmut Gareyev, who serves as president of the Russian Academy of Military Science. They both claim the United States’ actual purpose behind constructing the system in Poland and the Czech Republic is to enable the US to intercept Russian ICBMs early in their launch phase. (8) In response to these arguments, “General Obering said the US plans in Eastern Europe were clearly not designed to counter Russian missiles, as Moscow contends. There is
no way, shape or form that 10 interceptors can neutralize the hundreds of missiles in the Russian arsenal.” (9)

Despite the fact that preliminary talks are underway, Russia’s concern about the matter appears unfounded. First, US leaders have encouraged active participation by and cooperation with Russia. Additionally, Polish officials recognize that, regardless of how anxious they may be to host the US system, they are not interested in escalating tensions among European neighbors. Boguslaw Majewski, a Polish foreign ministry spokesman, insisted “that any Polish participation had to be squared first with Moscow for fear of creating military tension in the region.” (10) He said “the Americans are working quite hard on this, [but] they need to clear the path with the Russians and reach a consensus before we will move ahead. (11)

Notwithstanding a clear willingness by the US to address Russian concerns, President Putin continues to be a harsh critic. In fact, he has vowed to counter American plans with an “asymmetrical, but highly efficient” response. (12) Interestingly, within a week of this announcement, media sources were all carrying stories of Russia’s plans for a major military buildup. These articles were bursting at the seams with details of strategic nuclear weapons procurements, greatly increased defense budgets, and goals to exceed Soviet-era levels of combat readiness. The common headline was nuclear ICBM acquisition. Defense Minister Sergei Ivanov “told Parliament the military would get 17 new ballistic missiles this year, a drastic increase over the average of four deployed annually in recent years.” (13) The goal is to have 84 new Topol-M missiles deployed by 2015. Additionally, the 5 trillion ruble ($190 billion) weapons modernization program for 2007-2015 includes new tank and motor rifle battalions, six helicopter and six combat aviation squadrons, the overhaul of Tu-160 Blackjack and Tu-95 Bear long-range strategic bombers, and 31 new ships including eight SLBM-carrying nuclear submarines. (14)
Putin, in his “Munich speech,” continued his “asymmetric” response to US actions. Seeming to stop just short of removing his shoe, Putin derided US foreign policy saying it has “overstepped its national borders in every way.” (15) In fact, during the same speech in which he attempted to defend Russia’s sale of missile systems and other military hardware to countries such as Iran and Venezuela, he also claimed it’s the US which is driving the world into an arms race reminiscent of the Cold War. (16)

It’s interesting that just the mention of talks concerning a purely defensive weapon system, still 5 years from its earliest operational capability, has stirred up such indignation from the Kremlin. Perhaps President Putin views the missile issue as a useful diversionary tool that allows him to refocus international attention away from Russian maneuvers, foreign and domestic.

Source Notes:


(11) Ibid.


(16) Ibid.

Russian Federation: Armed Forces (External)

By Daniel DeBree
Russian arms sales in the Middle East

With speculation of a new Cold War brewing, President Putin conducted a quick visit to the Middle East last week to discuss economic, political, energy and military cooperation. In choosing Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and Jordan as the recipients of a first-ever visit from a Russian president, it certainly appears that he is attempting to exploit recent US problems in the region by courting its traditional allies. Although many subjects were on the agenda, the inclusion of Sergei Chemezov, the head of Rosoboronexport, Russia’s sole military export company, (1) was an indication of the importance military-technical cooperation would play in this visit. (2)

The Saudi Arabian visit presents perhaps the most surprising development, with reports indicating that the Saudis are considering seriously the purchase of 150 T-90 main battle tanks. Tests have been conducted over the course of the past year in Saudi Arabia to assess the suitability and reliability of these vehicles in the harsh desert terrain. (3) Although there are no indications of the results of these trials, the fact that the Saudis are even considering the purchase of Russian equipment signals a significant shift in mindset. It is accurate to say that more than 80% of Saudi military equipment currently comes from American manufacturers, with most of the remainder being produced in Western Europe, mainly France. The current Saudi armored force consists primarily of US M-1 Abrams tanks and M-113 armored personnel carriers, with a good number of French AMX tanks. The inclusion of the Russian T-90 in this mix will present some significant logistical hurdles. A country doesn’t accept these challenges without good reason.

Putin's visits to Qatar and Jordan, although they are long-term US allies in the region, do not represent such drastic shifts in policy. Qatar seems to be interested, at least in the military sphere, in some rather small-scale “anti-terrorist” equipment. (4) Nevertheless, this must be taken in light of the
significant US military presence in this very small country. Primarily, the US has its largest airbase in the Middle East, Al-Udeid, only a few miles outside of the capital of Doha. In addition, the Combined Air Operation Center for the oversight of all US air operations in the Middle East is located there, in addition to a significant US army presence.

Jordan, for its part, is interested only in “boosting military cooperation,” and purchasing grenade launchers and “other types of arms.” (5) Although these are low-level and low-budget items, Jordan also provided the avenue for other significant contracts when Putin visited with Mahmoud Abbas, in Amman. Sources close to the Kremlin have reported that the Russians are very keen to provide military assistance to the Palestinians and would therefore like to see closer relations between Hamas and Fatah. (6) Anatoly Mazurkevich, the head of the Russian Defense Ministry’s international cooperation department, stated that Russia was “refraining” from selling arms to the Palestinian administration, although there have been talks on the possible supply of 150 armored personnel carriers. (7)

Although Putin’s stops in Saudi Arabia, Jordan and Qatar represent a Russian foray into traditionally US markets, other more familiar Russian arms purchasers also have been negotiating deals. When Syrian President Bashar Assad visited Moscow in December of last year, he stated that talks were conducted “in the most general nature” on arms deals, however reports since that time indicate that they were anything but. Syria indicated an interest in purchasing at least eight different military weapons systems, to include Kornet anti-tank missiles, S-300, Strelets and Pantsir air defense systems, AMUR-1650 submarines, and MiG-29 fighter aircraft. Finally, perhaps the most controversial item was the discussion of the Iskander-E tactical ballistic missile system. (8)

The sale of the Iskander-E has a long history, beginning in 2004. The Iskander-E has an operational range that would allow it to reach all cities in Israel, were it
deployed on the Golan Heights. Understandably, this aroused significant protest from both the Israelis and the US that caused Russia to cancel the contract in April of 2005, although President Putin indicated that work could continue at some time in the future. (9) The Syrians are anxious to begin work again on this very strategic weapons system, and it seems that “some time” might be now.

Two other systems that may cause the US and Israel significant concern are the Strelets surface to air missile system and the Kornet anti-tank weapon. In the case of the Kornet, which is a sophisticated, shaped-charge weapon capable of disabling the best Western tanks, their fears are well-founded. There already are documented cases of weapons from Syria's arsenal being used to good effect by such parties as Hezbollah or Iraqi terrorists. (10) Similar fears are harbored with the Strelets. If the missile system is sold with the Igla missile, there is a chance that this shoulder-launch SAM also could be used by terrorist organizations, even against airliners. There are some indications, however, that talks are stalled for exactly this reason, as the Russians refuse to sell the Strelets to the Syrians unless they accept an older, less capable missile. (11)

And lastly, there remains Iran, which Russia also courts in the arms trade business. Most significant is the recent Iranian purchase of the Tor-1M anti-aircraft missile system from the Russians. (See February 8, 2007, and November 6, 2006, ISCIIP Analysts for further details.) It seems now that this $700M deal for 29 systems has been completed. (12) Last month Valery Kashin, the head of the Engineering Design Bureau, stated that Russia had “met all its commitments” for this contract by the end of 2006. (13) This was further confirmed by then Defense Secretary Sergei Ivanov, who also acknowledged that all of the missiles had been delivered. (14)

The significant military-technology inroads that Russia has made in recent months in the Middle East may not represent the beginning of a new Cold War, but they surely indicate a small coup. With Russia taking third place for
armament sales in that region, behind both the US and France, it has made significant strides to catch up. (15) Even more alarming to its rivals is that the inroads have been made not only with countries the US still considers to be its strong allies, but also its traditional “enemies” in the region. Flexing his muscles in Munich, President Putin has now started putting them to use in the Middle East.

Source Notes:

(1) “Rosoboronexport Becomes Russia’s Sole Arms Exporter,” RBK TV, 19 Jan 07, 1200 GMT; BBC Monitoring via Lexis-Nexis Academic Universe.
(2) “Preview: Putin to Focus on Arms Sales, Energy Ties in Middle East,” 9 Feb 07; BBC World Monitoring via Lexis-Nexis Academic Universe.
(3) Ibid.
(4) Ibid.
(6) “Preview: Putin to Focus on Arms Sales, Energy Ties in Middle East,” 9 Feb 07; BBC World Monitoring via Lexis-Nexis Academic Universe.
(9) Ibid.
Munich 2007

Vladimir Putin’s speech on February 10 at the Munich Conference on Security Policy evidently was intended to present a significant statement of Russian international views and was received with mixed reviews: US Sen. John McCain (R-Ariz.), who attended the conference, called it “the most aggressive speech from a Russian leader since the end of the Cold War,” (1) while at least one Russian observer compared it to Churchill’s “Iron Curtain” speech in Fulton in 1946, and further characterized Putin’s remarks as “a kind of foreign policy bequest…the declaration of the country’s new foreign policy course which will be implemented after Putin leaves the post of president and whose cornerstone is confrontation with Washington.” (2) An Iranian editorial chose a different historic analogy: A Stalinist reference to capitalism as the biggest threat to human society. (3)

The speech, described by US Secretary of Defense Robert Gates as “very candid,” (4) contains some fundamental analyses of the present global status, along with a number of very specific, and a few veiled, accusations levied at the
US and others. Putin began the substantive part of his address by suggesting that “the problem of international security goes beyond the issue of military-political stability. It is [also] world economic stability, poverty relief, economic security and the development of dialogue between civilizations.” (5) Having thus linked economics and culture with security, Putin proceeded to describe the balance of power that has emerged since the end of the Cold War. Interestingly, he first declared that “the unipolar world…has not been created,” and then almost immediately went on to warn about the dangers of just such a world, stating that “in practice it means only one thing: one center of power, one center of force, one center of decision-making…a world of one master, one sovereign. And in the end, it is destructive not only for those who find themselves within this system, but for the sovereign itself, because it is destroyed from the inside.” (6)

On the topic of international security and stability, Putin said that unilateral decision-making is not conducive to it, but, on the contrary, results in the creation of new conflicts, referring to these conflicts as “human tragedies and powder kegs” (7) —an apparent reference to the ongoing violence in Iraq and increasing tension concerning Iran's nuclear program. In addition, during the question-and-answer session that followed the speech, Putin accused the United States of initiating a new arms race by launching its missile defense program, (8) essentially repeating the objections raised to the Soviet anti-ballistic missile program during the 1960s by the late academician Sakharov, namely, that a missile defense shield creates a situation where the power in possession of the shield may lose fear of retaliation and thus be encouraged to act aggressively. Putin then claimed that, as Russia cannot afford to build its own missile defense system to balance that of the United States, it will instead develop an “asymmetric response,” that is, a missile which cannot be intercepted by an a missile defense system. In his final touch, Putin added, “It’s nothing personal. It’s only a calculation.” (9)
If one accepts the premise that the existence of a single hegemonic power makes for an inherently unstable world system, it follows that Putin’s speech was addressed not directly to that power itself, but to other players on the world scene, particularly those for whom the end of the cold war has presented an opportunity to play a greater role; those who might see American hegemony as the principal barrier to fulfilling that role. Putin mentioned China, India, Brazil and Russia explicitly as growing economic powers whose geopolitical clout is bound to increase with their growing economic strength. (10)

Putin also challenged the moral consistency of countries that refuse to apply the death penalty even for dangerous criminals, yet participate in conflicts in which “hundreds, thousands of innocent people are killed,” (11) no doubt a reference to EU member states that participate in US-led military operations in Iraq and Afghanistan. And, when questioned about the transfer of advanced weapons systems to Iran, Putin replied defensively that most of Iran’s weapons don’t even come from Russia (taking care to mention Iran’s F-14 fighter jets and their spare parts that were only recently declared illegal to sell), and further, that the recent delivery of defensive missiles (presumably the Tor-M1) was intended to keep Iran from feeling “cornered...so that [Iran] knows that has a channel for communication, that it has friends it can trust.” (12) Thus, in one statement he casts the United States, rather than Russia, as the main arms distributor in the world, and at the same time reaches out precisely to one of the regional powers that seeks to expand its relative global (or at least regional) role at the expense of the United States.

Whether intended or not, Putin’s speech has made an impact in some unlikely places. Thus, for example, the speech helped trigger a public debate in the Czech Republic between the ruling party and the opposition on the question of permitting the installation of a missile defense system on Czech territory. (13) In Turkey—another major player whose orientation has grown more ambivalent in recent years—an editorial recently appeared in the moderately Islamic daily
Today’s Zaman, raising the possibility of a future Turkish-Iranian-Russian rapprochement, noting that the Munich speech was posted on the Turkish chief of general staff’s Web site. (14) A second editorial in the same publication praised the speech and echoed Putin’s statements about the dangers of US unilateralism. (15) There has been no policy change in Turkey; however, the appearance of the speech on the chief of staff’s Web site may be an indication that those in higher circles are at least paying attention.

Is Putin’s speech really a declaration of a new Cold War, as some have suggested, or merely an affirmation of an already existing state of affairs? Certainly the tone was unusually blunt and aggressive. However, most of the content appears to be more or less in line with Russian policies of the past several years. The idea of promoting “multi-polarity”—the Primakov doctrine—has been a major element in Russian foreign policy since the late Yeltsin period, when Russia pursued relations with China and India while engaging in nuclear cooperation with Iran and arms deals with traditional Soviet client states like Syria. That being the case, the question is: why now?

Why, for example, if the US missile defense system is perceived as a threat to the power balance, can’t Russia just build its asymmetric response quietly while maintaining civil relations—as it has attempted to do (and not just with its strategic weapons) in the past? Perhaps it is meant to counter the crisis that has been brewing and may yet erupt over the Iranian nuclear program. That is, by stating more or less explicitly where Russia stands, Putin can oppose the United States with a “clear conscience,” and justify the basis of Russia’s support for Iran. The fact that Putin scheduled his tour of the Middle East right after the speech suggests that he intended the message to be heard by all potentially interested parties by the time of his visit—including traditionally pro-American Middle Eastern states such as Saudi Arabia and Jordan—and positions him to clarify any questions his remarks may have produced.
Finally, the confrontational response to the proposed deployments of missile
defense systems to former East Bloc countries may be intended as a warning
against the possible future inclusion in NATO of Ukraine and Georgia; that is, if
NATO can be persuaded that any expansion of the alliance might entail a return
to the Cold War, there might be a reluctance to accept new members for fear of
encountering a hostile Russia on top of already existing problems. Whatever the
reason, Putin’s Munich address certainly accomplished one thing: it gave the
Russian president a forum in which he could present an aggressive version of
Russian foreign policy.

Source Notes:

(1) “Putin accuses US of inciting arms race,” by Slobodan Lekic, Associated
Press, 10 Feb 07 via
(2) Nezavisimaya gazeta, 12 Feb 07, “Cold War Without Excessive Politesse;
Moscow and Washington Switch from Strategic Partnership to Confrontation,” by
Yulia Petrovskaya, OSC translated excerpt via World News Connection.
(3) “Footsteps of cold war,” by Amin Ali Abolfath, Tehran-e Emruz, 19 Feb 07 via
Lexis-Nexis.
(4) “Putin accuses US of inciting arms race,” ibid.
(5) Presentation and commentary on the Munich conference on questions of
security policy, 10 Feb 07 via
http://www.kremlin.ru/appears/2007/02/10/1737_type63374type63376type63377type63381type82634_118109.shtml Note: my translation from the Russian text.
(6) Ibid.
(7) Ibid.
(8) Ibid.
(9) Ibid.
(10) Ibid.
(11) Ibid.
NATO or subordination to Moscow?

Georgian foreign relations in February 2007 could be caricatured handily by the image of President Saakashvili with an angel whispering in one ear and a devil whispering in the other. One of the creatures would look like Jaap de Hoop Scheffer, Secretary General of NATO, whispering, “NATO, 2009!;” the other like Vyacheslav Kovalenko, Russian ambassador to Georgia, who would be whispering, “Normalized relations with Russia!” Which is the devil and which the angel depends entirely upon the artist’s political persuasion.

In the past two weeks, Georgia has been presented with two broad appeals from two parties, Russia and NATO. The appeals, it must be said, are very different in kind; the Russian proposal, laid out by Vyacheslav Kovalenko in a news conference on February 6, is a list bristling with particulars regarding relations between the two neighbors. The NATO plan delivered by Jaap de Hoop Scheffer at the Munich Security Conference is more like a series of phrases, each beginning with “I would like to see…” that amount to a seductive catalog of ambitions for the organization’s 60th anniversary in 2009. (1) The hope held out by Scheffer to Ukraine and Georgia was slender, particularly when compared to

Newly Independent States: Caucasus

By Creelea Henderson
the preceding comment about seeing Serbia “firmly on the road to NATO membership.” His exact words in reference to the post-Soviet states were “I would like to see us coming closer to honoring the ambitions of Ukraine and Georgia.” (2)

Undeterred, President Saakashvili hailed the comments as a substantive proposal of NATO membership, set within a two-year timeframe; he confidently asserted that Scheffer’s speech “is further evidence that nothing can prevent Georgia from joining NATO.” (3) His enthusiasm echoed in the halls of Georgia’s parliament, where Chairperson Nino Burjanadze called the Secretary General’s words “historic,” adding, “the goal on which we have been talking and working for so [long] is now becoming real.” (4) Her statement underlines the fact that the Georgian government has chosen to treat the spectral language of NATO spokespersons as corporal fact, real enough to kindle intense public debate on the merits of NATO membership. While the president’s ruling National Movement Party treats membership as an imminent and beneficial step toward alliance with the West, members of opposition parties are warning that accession to NATO will imperil Georgia’s sovereignty over its breakaway regions. Irakli Melashvili from National Forum, an opposition party formed last November, posed the ominous question, “if Georgia becomes a NATO member without at first solving separatist conflicts, what that would mean? Does it mean that we will have Russian militaries and NATO forces standing on our soil simultaneously, which would be equal to splitting the country into several parts with Abkhazia and South Ossetia?” (5) Givi Targamadze of the ruling party dismissed Melashvili’s argument and accused the National Forum of being a puppet of Moscow, paid to sabotage Georgia’s efforts at joining the western alliance.

Opposition to NATO is an unpopular stance in Georgia, where, according to a recent poll, 83% of the citizenry support membership in the alliance. Blunt talk of the real obstacles facing the country on the path to membership can elicit dark allegations of conspiracy, such as those being circulated by the Georgian
government-backed NATO Information Center, headed by Tornike Sharashenidze, who told Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty that Georgia has seen attempts by “certain political forces” to split public opinion on the issue of NATO. (6) Voices that raise doubts about the likelihood of Georgia’s accession run the risk of being tarred with the same brush as the pro-Russian National Forum Party or simply of being marginalized. Salome Zourabichvili, Georgia’s former foreign minister and leader of the opposition party Georgia’s Way, is among the minority that has accused the government of lying to the public about chances of joining NATO. Zourabichvili pointed out recently that all statements of support coming from NATO members have been made in informal contexts, and as yet remain unsubstantiated by the concrete terms of a prerequisite Membership Action Plan. She is joined by New Generation Initiative, a Georgian NGO that issued a statement to the effect that the government is deliberately misconstruing the likelihood of Georgia’s accession to NATO. “It is the right of a party or of an individual to voice a position on NATO, but it is absolutely unacceptable to distort facts intentionally or unintentionally,” read the statement as reported by Civil Georgia. (7)

The Saakashvili government has chosen NATO as its polestar, however, leaving scant room for public discussion of the country’s actual potential for membership. To deny the inevitability of the process is to fall into line with demands set by Moscow, something Tbilisi has been loath to do. When Ambassador Vyacheslav Kovalenko laid out steps toward normalization of Georgia-Russian relations, he stressed the desire by Moscow to see its southern neighbor as an independent, sovereign and neutral country. Postal and transport links would be restored, he promised, along with the restoration of accredited Russian-language schools and Russian visas, but certain reciprocal measures would be expected of Georgia in return, including the squelching of anti-Russian rhetoric that dominates public discourse in Tbilisi. In effect, Moscow offered a return to the status quo, with Moscow as the prime mediator in Georgia’s frozen conflicts in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, and Georgia as a client state.
The full significance of the ambassador's insistence upon Georgian neutrality was revealed the following week by President Putin's incendiary speech at the Munich Security Conference, where he railed against NATO encroachment toward Russia's borders. Overlooking the fact that membership is voluntary by countries, such as Georgia, seeking to ensure European security, he retorted, "on the contrary, it represents a serious provocation that reduces the level of mutual trust. And we have the right to ask: against whom is this expansion intended?" (7) Moscow clearly paints the organization as an aggressor, and Georgia's membership, however improbable, as anathema to Russian interests. NATO is described as the thorn in Moscow's side that Tbilisi is determined to keep in place, at any cost.

Thus far into his presidency, Saakashvili's soaring optimism has buoyed his country through civil war in the breakaway regions and recession brought on by Russian embargoes. Should the government allow its campaign for complete independence from Moscow to blind the Georgian public to the unlikelihood of early NATO membership, however, the tactic could backfire.

Source Notes:

(1) Speech by Jaap de Hoop Scheffer, delivered before the 43rd Munich Conference on Security Policy, 10 Feb 07 via http://www.securityconference.de/konferenzen/rede.php?menu_2007=&menu_konferenzen=&sprache=en&id=184&.
(2) Ibid.
(3) "A cautious invitation to join the alliance," Nezavisimaya gazeta, 14 Feb 07 via Lexis-Nexis Academic.
(4) "Scheffer's Remarks Boost Georgia’s NATO Hopes, Amid Debates," Civil Georgia, 12 Feb 07 via www.civil.ge.
(5) Ibid.
Turkmen elections produce expected, and unexpected, results
As expected, Gurbanguly Berdymuhamedov, Turkmenistan’s acting president and former deputy prime minister and minister of health, won the 11 February elections quite handily, garnering 89.23% of the vote, according to Central Election Commission (CEC) Chairman Myrat Garryyew. (1) Official figures cite total voter turnout at 98.65% of all those eligible, with high participation not only in the capital, but in all five provinces, as well, (2) a claim disputed by a number of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty correspondents, who reported that turnout in Ashgabat and in the provincial capital Lebap seemed light. (3)

One OSCE official, Spanish MP Jesus Lopez-Medel, went so far as to call the election a fraud, stating “The Turkmen presidential election was rather like a play than an election, a farce instead of the citizens’ real participation in the electoral process.” (4) Due to time constraints, the OSCE was unable to send an observer mission, but instead sent a support team to help the OSCE’s Ashgabat office follow election developments, as well as to meet with election organizers. (5) OSCE officials were not allowed to be present during the vote counting, causing Mr. Lopez-Medel to conclude “everything was decided in advance and the voting was nothing else than a mere appearance.” (6) His comments were echoed by
fellow team member Jose Soares, who deemed the elections neither free nor fair. (7)

Hudayberdi Orazov, leader of the Turkmen opposition party Watan, also criticized the election results and even questioned their legitimacy, stating that according to his sources, only 10-12% of voters had participated in the election. (8) Turkmenistan’s laws require that at least 50% of eligible voters participate in a presidential election, in order for it to be considered valid. (9) Nurmuhammed Hanamov, chairman of the Republican Party (also an opposition party), called the election so predictable as to be “pure insolence.” (10)

Turkmenistan’s first post-Niyazov elections undoubtedly were neither free nor fair and did not allow for any real debate among the candidates over the country’s future. President Berdymuhammedov and his supporters in the CEC and security services managed to exclude all of Turkmenistan’s opposition parties from the campaign and the polling process itself was most likely riven with voter fraud, producing highly inflated turnout figures. However, in spite of his heavy-handed manipulation of the CEC and People’s Council, in order to ensure his succession, President Berdymuhammedov’s first two weeks in office have yielded rather surprising results – he has begun implementing his campaign promises. One of the new president’s first acts was to sign a decree on 16 February which reinstated the ten-year secondary school curriculum, which is to be come effective starting 1 September 2007. The same decree increases the standard university curriculum to five years and now requires six years of study at medical institutions and at some arts institutions. (11) In another surprising turn of events, two Internet cafes opened in the center of Ashgabat, each equipped with five computers. Cafe administrator Jenet Khudaikulieva promised that no web sites would be blocked from public access and an Associated Press reporter was able to visit both international news and opposition party sites, without any trouble. The biggest obstacle to the public’s use of the Internet cafes will undoubtedly be the price – one hour of use costs US$4.00, which is more
than a day’s wage for most of Turkmenistan’s citizens. President Berdymuhammedov has pledged to provide public schools with Internet access, as well as to permit more Internet cafes to open in other regions. (12) He also ordered that a commission be established to hear the public’s complaints regarding the behavior of law enforcement personnel. Berdymuhammedov will chair the commission himself, perhaps in an effort to increase his oversight of law enforcement organs. (13)

Thus, it appears that a very mild thaw is underway in the Turkmen government’s attitude toward political freedom and the general welfare of its citizens. Although President Berdymuhammedov continues to make only positive remarks about the late Turkmenbashy’s policies and vows to honor them, in fact, he already has begun dismantling Niyazov’s domestic initiatives. He still has miles to go and has yet to address some of his greatest challenges, such as unemployment, agricultural reform and reform of the healthcare system, however, his recent actions could be interpreted as a sign that his commitment to improving the lives of his constituents is real.

Source Notes:

(1) “Turkmen Election Chief Declares Berdimuhammedow President-Elect,” 14 Feb 07, Turkmen TV Altyn Asyr channel; BBC Monitoring International Reports via Lexis-Nexis Academic Universe.
(2) “Turkmen TV Reports Over 98 Per Cent Turnover In Presidential Polls,” 11 Feb 07, Turkmen TV Altyn Asyr channel; BBC Monitoring International Reports via Lexis-Nexis Academic Universe.
(4) “OSCE Official Describes Turkmen Presidential Poll As "Farce" - Opposition Site,” 12 Feb 07, Gundogar website; BBC Monitoring International Reports via Lexis-Nexis Academic Universe.
(5) “OSCE is not observing nor monitoring the election in Turkmenistan,” 2 Feb 07, The Times of Central Asia via Lexis-Nexis Academic Universe.


(9) “New Turkmen Leader Pledges Reforms In Inaugural Speech,” 14 Feb 07, Turkmen TV Altyn Asyr channel; BBC Monitoring International Reports via Lexis-Nexis Academic Universe.


(12) “In Turkmenistan, Internet cafes open,” 16 Feb 07, AFX – Asia/Associated Press; via Lexis-Nexis Academic Universe.


Newly Independent States: Western Region
By Tammy Lynch

UKRAINE

Yushchenko awards medal to disgraced prosecutor
With so many “big” news stories in Ukraine—energy issues, the fight for political control, questions over foreign policy—it’s easy to miss the smaller items. But sometimes, these smaller items send very large signals.

For example, on 16 February, President Viktor Yushchenko awarded former Ukrainian Prosecutor General Mykhailo Potebenko the Order of (Kyivan) Prince Yaroslav the Wise. Yaroslav introduced the first book of laws in what was then Kyivan Rus’ during the 11th century and is credited with expanding both the principality’s territory and culture. The medal was created in 1996 for “distinguished service to the state and people of Ukraine,” and it recognizes, among other things, “wisdom” and “honor.” (1)

According to President Yushchenko’s decree, Potebenko was awarded the medal “for his great personal contribution to the creation of a law abiding state, the strengthening of legality and law and order, and his long-term work on the occasion of his 70th birthday.” (2)

The decree probably would have been missed by most Ukraine-watchers in the West were it not for long-time Ukraine analyst Taras Kuzio, who found the three-line decree and publicized it on his blog. (3) This is fortunate, since the small decree speaks volumes about President Viktor Yushchenko.

Kuzio termed the awarding of this medal to Potebenko “shameful,” and it is possible that others may find this an understatement.

Potebenko became well-known internationally in 2001 when he led two major high-profile investigations as Ukraine’s Prosecutor-General – the examination of the murder of journalist Georgy Gongadze and the prosecution of Yulia Tymoshenko.
The Prosecutor-General’s “investigation” of the Gongadze case was roundly criticized by just about every international organization looking into the matter, leading eventually to calls from the Council of Europe, Reporters Without Borders and then US Ambassador Carlos Pasqual for him to resign. Potebenko was accused of stymieing the investigation in order to protect state officials, including President Leonid Kuchma, who appeared to be implicated in Gongadze’s death.

In 2005, after months of evidence collection, the European Court of Human Rights satisfied a number of complaints from Georgiy’s widow, Myroslava Gongadze, including her charge of a “failure to investigate the case.” The court found that the prosecutor's office had ignored repeated requests for assistance from Georgiy Gongadze in the weeks before his death, when he reported being followed by state law enforcement officials. “The response of the GPO was not only formalistic,” the court wrote, “but also blatantly negligent.”

Moreover, following the recovery of Gongadze’s headless body, the court said, “The State authorities were more preoccupied with proving the lack of involvement of high-level State officials in the case than discovering the truth about the circumstances of the disappearance and death of the applicant’s husband.” (4)

Mikhailo Potebenko was the Prosecutor General during these events. Not only did he apparently conduct little investigation, but he denied that the body recovered was Gongadze’s in spite of numerous DNA tests to the contrary and then refused to accept as evidence secretly recorded tapes of President Kuchma implicating him at least in Gongadze’s disappearance, and probably his murder.

The European Court of Human Rights wrote, “The fact that the alleged offenders, two of them active police officers, were identified and charged with the kidnap and murder of the journalist just a few days after the change in the country’s
leadership, raised serious doubts as to the genuine wish of the authorities under the previous government to investigate the case thoroughly." (5)

As Potebenko and Kuchma were being criticized internationally, and facing increasing protests domestically, the Prosecutor-General announced that he was investigating then Deputy Prime Minister Yulia Tymoshenko for a variety of offenses, including embezzlement during her time as head of the gas intermediary Unified Energy Systems. Although Tymoshenko sat in government, her refusal to drop a number of anti-corruption measures that affected the president’s supporters had led to considerable tension between the two.

Eventually, she was fired, arrested, and held in prison for 40 days before being released by a court for lack of probable cause. Yushchenko, who was prime minister at the time, called the arrest “political persecution.” (6) Persecution, then, by the same Potebenko recently awarded a medal by Yushchenko.

Despite years of attempts, Potebenko (and his successors) were never able to prove in court any of their charges against Tymoshenko, who then perhaps had the best revenge by being named the first prime minister after the Orange Revolution.

At the very least, Potebenko’s work on Tymoshenko’s case was shoddy and unprofessional. At the worst, it was designed to do nothing more than to persecute an opponent of the president. Or perhaps it was designed simply to take the attention away from the Gongadze case, which was creating such problems for him, Kuchma and the country.

This is the man, then, to whom President Yushchenko last week awarded a medal for “service to the country,” “wisdom,” and “honor.”
In 2004, during his presidential campaign and the Orange Revolution, Yushchenko vowed to prosecute those who had ordered the murder of Gongadze. It was, he said, “a matter of honor.” (7) The organizers have not been arrested or prosecuted, however, and at this point—seven years after the murder and over two years after Yushchenko took office—it is unlikely that they ever will be.

In fact, many observers and politicians have suggested that Yushchenko struck a deal with Kuchma during the revolution – Yushchenko would ensure Kuchma’s freedom and Kuchma would not stand in the way of the rerun presidential election that brought Yushchenko to power. While no one can ever truly know why the organizers of the Gongadze murder have not been arrested, the possibility of a compromise agreement fits well with Yushchenko’s nature of deliberation and conciliation.

Repeatedly throughout his political career, Yushchenko has chosen compromise over confrontation. In the last year, Yushchenko blessed the return of his defeated presidential opponent Viktor Yanukovych to the premiership, and then gave in to Yanukovych’s pressure to replace Foreign Minister Boris Tarasyuk instead of fighting for his longtime ally.

And now, the President has done his best to rehabilitate the career of Mykhailo Potebenko, a man Yushchenko himself once condemned, and a man who remains disgraced internationally.

One wonders what Yaroslav the Wise would have thought.

**Mrs. Tymoshenko goes to Washington**

On 26 February, Ukraine’s parliamentary opposition leader and former Prime Minister Yulia Tymoshenko arrives in the US for a five day visit that will include stops in New York City and Washington DC.
The majority of her time will be spent in Washington, wooing US officials, political leaders, journalists and business representatives. The visit comes just two months after a similar jaunt by Prime Minister Viktor Yanukovych, whose inability to provide firm answers to questions failed to impress officials.

Tymoshenko’s time in the US capital is expected to be capped off by meetings with both Vice President Dick Cheney and Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice. Cheney’s decision to see Tymoshenko is somewhat of a coup, given the Vice President’s usual hesitance to meet politicians not holding state positions.

The planned meetings demonstrate Washington's keen interest in Ukraine, and the Bush administration’s desire to continue to support a country viewed by many as having real potential as an example of a successful transition from (semi) authoritarianism to democracy.

The transition has not gone nearly as smoothly as the US had hoped. Although defeated by Yushchenko in the presidential election, Yanukovych fared well in last year’s parliamentary elections, used division among the “democrats” in parliament to return to his previous position of Prime Minister, and then used recent constitutional amendments to consolidate his power at the expense of Yushchenko.

The Prime Minister’s most recent tenure has included an imposition of grain export quotas in order to control prices manually—resulting in storage bins of rotting grain—agreements with petrol companies to control prices outside of market mechanisms, and a suggestion that the country was negotiating with Russia to “merge” their pipeline system.

However, unlike every other country in the former Soviet Union (excluding the Baltics), Ukraine can boast of a real, strong, independent opposition. According
to Tymoshenko’s top foreign policy advisor and the deputy head of her bloc, Hryhoriy Nemyria, while in Washington, Ukraine’s opposition leader will “speak to both sides on Capitol Hill,” in order to “take away some positive lessons and see how they may be applied to ongoing reform efforts in Ukraine.” (9)

In addition, Tymoshenko suggests that one of the primary messages of her meetings will be to underscore the “deep transition” that her country is now undergoing, and the need for support and understanding as it does so. (10)

BELARUS

What will Lukashenko do now?

It has been a difficult couple of months for Belarusian President Alyeksandr Lukashenko. The year started with Russia forcing his country to agree to a doubling of the price paid for natural gas in order to avoid a shut-off. The agreement, by world market standards, still was generous – from $50 per 1,000 cubic meters to $100. This puts the price Belarus pays for Russian gas well below both Western European prices, which reach $260 per 1,000 cubic meters, and the prices paid by other former Soviet Republics, which range from $130 (Ukraine) to $235 (Georgia). But for Belarus’ unreformed economy, $100 is likely just as bad.

Even more, as part of the deal, Lukashenko also was forced to relinquish 50% ownership of state pipeline operator Beltransgaz to Russia’s Gazprom.

Just days later, Russia announced that it would impose a $180 per ton custom’s duty on oil exported to Belarus. This would have increased the price of oil from about $40 per ton to $220. Belarus refused to pay and demanded a transit fee from Russia.

In a rambling television address, Lukashenko said, “If they are drowning in petrodollars and other currency income and have decided … to place us in
conditions worse even than Germany and other European countries, then let’s ask this rich Russia to pay us for our services.” (11)

His demands were largely pointless. Russia quickly turned off the tap. Several days later, a final duty of $53 was agreed, for a price per ton of under $100. But again, the price has more than doubled.

Russia also announced its intention to immediately begin building a pipeline bypassing Belarus. Russia’s pipeline operator Transneft said that it had already begun work on a “spur from the Belarus border to the Russian Baltic Sea port of Primorsk.” The work, it said, would take less than 18 months, thus quickly eliminated Russia’s need to use Belarus as a transit state – and eliminating Belarus’ only leverage with Russia. (12)

The increase in oil prices will be particularly difficult to absorb for Belarus, which imported bargain price oil and then exported the same oil to Western Europe for market prices. In this way, Lukashenko maintained his hold on his largely bankrupt country.

Russian President Vladimir Putin recently suggested that Russia would now subsidize Belarus directly with over $3 billion in payments, in order to lessen the impact of the oil price increase. Thus, Belarus becomes, in a sense, a beggar, dependent on Russian cash handouts to maintain its most basic functions. Previously, Lukashenko largely did what he wanted with the exported oil funds. That likely will no longer be the case.

But where can Lukashenko turn for support? Belarus’ president has become a pariah in Europe, thanks to the hard work he has done to earn the title, “The last dictator in Europe.” Independent media are gone, his political opponents have been imprisoned or persecuted, and some have simply disappeared. There is no
freedom of assembly. Religion is strictly controlled. The country is the very
definition of an authoritarian state.

But Lithuania—long one of Belarus’ most consistent critic—has thrown a small,
fragile lifeline.

Last month, Lithuania sent a new Ambassador to Minsk, and he came with a
message. Following the spat over oil transit fees, Edminas Bagdonas said, “We
could become your advocate in Brussels and in a dialog with the EU.” The
Ambassador was cautious, however, suggesting that his country “is waiting for
specific proposals from the Belarusian side.” (13)

Specifically, Lithuania has proposed to Belarus and Ukraine to create a new oil
distribution network, which would supply oil from Lithuania’s Klaipeda terminal
directly to Kyiv and/or Minsk. The oil would be jointly purchased at the
Rotterdam oil exchange and brought to Klaipeda in tankers. The system,
according to Lithuanian President Valdas Adamkus, would not replace Russian
oil, but would provide “guarantees against an oil blockade by Russia.” (14)

Ukraine immediately accepted the proposal, while Lukashenko said he is
studying the issue.

The EU also opened a very tentative crack in response to Belarus’ problems with
Russia. “If there is even the slightest chance that the Belarusian regime is ready
to conduct an honest dialogue with Europe, then the EU should, in the exclusive
interest of democratizing the country and liberating its oppressed populace, seize
the opportunity, but set strict conditions from the beginning,” said Hans-Gerd
Pöttering, the president of the European Parliament.

It is likely that Lukashenko has no intention of meeting any of the conditions that
may be set by the EU. In the last month, he has ordered 10 Americans deported
for singing religious songs and distributing spiritual literature from an unrecognized religion (evangelical Protestantism), signed a new “defense agreement” with Iran, announced an increase in bilateral relations with Sudan, arrested 10 individuals for holding a march in support of EU integration, threatened to stop the publication of the cultural journal “Arche,” and introduced new laws that require internet cafes to keep logs of sites accessed by their customers. Reading “banned” sites, like the human rights organization Charter 97, for example, could result in arrest and prison for both the reader and the cafe owner. (15)

It is therefore unlikely that Lukashenko’s recent anger at Russia will result in anything more than loud proclamations and increasing attempts to stifle dissent.

Source Notes:

(5) Ibid.
(6) Eastern Economist Daily, 17 Apr 01 and ITAR-TASS, 20 Apr 01 via Lexis-Nexis.
(7) UNIAN news agency, 1130 GMT, 23 Feb 05 via Lexis-Nexis.
(8) Author interview with Tymoshenko, 23 Dec 06, Kyiv.
(9) Email correspondence with Hryhoriy Nemyria, 18 Feb 07.
(10) Author interview with Tymoshenko, 23 Dec 06, Kyiv.
(11) Associated Press, 2059 GMT, 3 Jan 07 via Lexis-Nexis.
(12) International Oil Daily, 14 Feb 07 via Lexis-Nexis.
(13) Kommersant, No. 24, p. 10, 15 Feb 07; Russian Press Digest via Lexis-Nexis.
(14) International Oil Daily, 16 Feb 07; UPI, 15 Feb 07; and Kommersant, op. cit. via Lexis-Nexis.

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