PRESIDENCY
The succession instability quandary
President Putin and his government are widely credited with bringing stability to Russia, especially in contrast to the chaos of the Yel'tsin years. In many ways, Russia is significantly more stable without the political clashes between executive and legislative power centers that marred Yel'tsin's first term, and absent the kompromat and media/oligarch wars that marked his second term. Certainly, the presence of a young, healthy leader in the Kremlin has imparted a more robust air to Russian political life.

The drawbacks of the Putin regime's authoritarian stability, including the emasculation of legislative authority and restrictions on media freedoms, are evident and well noted. There is one strand of the chaos of the Yel'tsin era—a strand traceable throughout Russian history—that Putin has continued and perhaps exacerbated: the succession quandary.

While Putin repeatedly asserts his intention to leave his presidential post at the end of his term in 2008, there are countervailing signs that he might be persuaded to stay. Bearing in mind the state's prominent role in the media, particularly television, recent commentators have ratcheted up their coverage of, and justifications for, a third Putin presidential term across a range of media: Moscow News provided a survey of attitudes toward the presumed successors, Sergei Ivanov and Dmitri Medvedev, along with Putin's opinion poll numbers and concluded that "the chances that Putin will remain for a third term will continue to grow with each week." (1) Writers for the online version of Gazeta.ru
extrapolated from comments made by Duma Speaker Boris Gryzlov ("Vladimir Putin will fulfill the duties of president up until May, at the very least") that Gryzlov did not rule out "the possibility of the prospect of the infamous "third term" for Putin." (2) On radio, Gleb Pavlovsky, while discussing the personnel shuffle that landed Sergei Ivanov in a co-equal position to Dmitri Medvedev, told Ekho Moskvy that "Fradkov, Medvedev and Ivanov are all important, but Putin is the chief. And whatever he is called, and whatever position he holds, he will continue in this position." (3) On NTV Mir, a panel, including former Nezavisimaya gazeta founder Vitali Tretyakov and program host Vladimir Solovyev discussed the succession, with Tretyakov concluding that "A committee is to be founded for nominating Putin for the third term, for an appropriate procedure for the third term. His consent has to be obtained first of all." (4)

More disturbingly, coverage of even the poorly-attended opposition protest in St. Petersburg last weekend (where the once respected former Prime Minister Mikhail Kasianov teamed up in a coalition, "The Other Russia," with National Bolshevik leader Eduard Limonov and United Civil Front head Garry Kasparov to sponsor the event) resulted in the dismissal of a noted journalist. (5) Russkoye Radio correspondent Irina Vorobyeva appeared on Yevgenia Albats' program, Polnyy Albats on Ekho Moskvy, and reported on the St. Petersburg rally of approximately 5,000 protestors. Apparently, when Vorobyeva called her own station to report on the event, she was informed by her superiors that Russkoye Radio would not be covering the event. When they discovered she had appeared on the Albats program to discuss the event, Vorobyeva says, "I was sacked because I had been disloyal to the radio station." (6)

Vorobyeva may consider herself lucky that her job was all that was lost. The recent spate of murders of journalists, and last week's death of Kommersant correspondent Ivan Safronov, raise the question of why Russia has become such a dangerous place for journalists. The answer may lie in the paradox of Putin's succession signals.
The president continues, on the one hand, to reiterate his intention to step down and, in moves reminiscent of Yel'tsin's trademark personnel shifts, places trusted associates in official positions that suggest they are being primed as successors. On the other hand, Putin allows, perhaps even promotes, discussion of a contra-constitutional third term. The result is extreme uncertainty in what 2008 will produce for Russia's political elite. It also heightens apparat rivalry, which operates in a particularly volatile environment, as potential successors vie for advantage, but not so overtly as to offend the president, should he choose to exercise his third term option.

This rivalry, evident nearly from the beginning of Putin's term, and perhaps first noted in the battle that eventually produced Vladimir Ustinov as Procurator-General in 2000, (7) continues in political attacks between the so-called "liberal" and hard line factions within the government. Prime Minister Fradkov, evidently sensing (not necessarily accurately) an upswing in his status, has launched an attack on the Health and Social Development Minister Mikhail Zurabov by first dismissing one of Zurabov's associates, the head of the Health Inspectorate, Ramil Khabriyev. (8) Fradkov's intention to pursue Zurabov was made clear in the Cabinet meeting earlier this week, as he criticized the management of health services. In remarks that Fradkov might do well to note, Putin's comments at the same meeting suggested the Prime Minister should look more closely before he attacks Zurabov: "Dealing with personnel problems is fine and necessary, but if we do not deal with production issues, we cannot solve the problem." (9)

The shifting sands of this succession, even if it ends without a presidential succession at all, provide dangerous ground for both the political players and the journalists who cover their public moves and private finances. A successful candidate for the presidency will have to muster the political goodwill of Putin, maintain a prominent profile through the media, manage a long and regionally diverse patronage tail, and marshal significant financial resources. While the
contenders are in a perilously unstable "campaign" for the presidency, those journalists who cover any aspect of their careers may find themselves in peril, as well.

Source Notes:

(1) "Countdown to the Vote—What People are Saying," by Anna Arutunyan, Moscow News, No 8, 2 Mar 07 via Lexis-Nexis Academic.
(2) Gazeta.ru website, 22 Feb 07 via Lexis-Nexis Academic.
(3) Russian TV and Radio Highlights, 12-18 February 2007, BBC Monitoring 20 Feb 07 via Lexis-Nexis Academic.
(4) "Sunday Night with Vladimir Solovyev," Russian NTV Mir, 1900 GMT, 18 Feb 07; Financial Times Information, BBC Monitoring International Reports via Lexis-Nexis Academic. For more on Tretyakov's remarks, please see The ISCIIP Analyst, Executive Branch, 22 Feb 07.
(5) "Those who disagree march in Petersburg," By Andrei Kozenko and Mikhail Shevchuk, Kommersant, No.34, 5 Mar 07; Russica Izvestiya Information/Russian Press Digest via Lexis-Nexis Academic.
(6) Ekho Moskvy, 0500 GMT, 7 Mar 07; Financial Times Information/BBC Monitoring International Reports via Lexis-Nexis Academic.
(9) Ibid., citing a RIA-Novosti source.

Russian Federation: Domestic Issues and Legislative Branch
Kadyrov-Putin alliance yields stability for Russia?
Ramzan Kadyrov has assumed the post of president of Chechnya officially. His confirmation followed the procedure established shortly after the Beslan terrorist attacks, whereby the presidential representative for the respective region—in this case, Dmitri Kozak—presents Russian Federation President Vladimir Putin with at least two prospective candidates to be selected as head of the region. Once Putin has announced his choice, the appointment then is confirmed by the regional legislature, which can be dissolved if it rejects Putin's candidate more than three consecutive times. No such political high-handedness was necessary for the Kadyrov appointment.

Kozak proposed three presidential candidates: Kadyrov; First Deputy Chief of the Chechen presidential and governmental office and United Russia Chechen organization Head Muslim Khuchiyev; and Grozny district Administration Head Shakhid Dzhamaldayev. The latter two men clearly were space fillers on the proposal list.

As speaker of the Chechen legislature’s lower house, Dukuvakha Abdurakhmanov said, “I am expressing not only my personal opinion, but the opinion of an overwhelming majority of the republican population that there is no alternative to Kadyrov. His merits before the republic in the restoration of economy and the social sphere, in establishing peace and stability in Chechnya are great.” (1)

Putin nominated Kadyrov on March 1; Kadyrov was confirmed by the regional parliament, most of whose members owe their positions to Kadyrov, on March 2. (Kadyrov is a member of Chechnya’s United Russia’s political council and head of United Russia’s Chechen branch, a post he will be allowed to retain even with his recent promotion. Many of the region’s legislators belong to that party.)
confirmation was broadcast on Chechen television accompanied by scenes of crowds celebrating the appointment in Grozny Square. (2)

Kadyrov's appointment marks a signal defeat for the siloviki, many of whom supported former president Alu Alkhanov, particularly for his tractability. Opponents to Kadyrov's advancement included GRU officials, senior military personnel, and key members of the Duma. (3) Another important adversary was Putin's Deputy Chief of Staff Igor Sechin, an influential member of the siloviki contingent within the state apparatus.

The confirmation of Kadyrov's new position has elicited various responses in the Russian media. Some view Kadyrov's appointment as a sign of progress and a signal that the war in Chechnya is, at long last, over. For instance, Kadyrov was described by The Moscow News as "a guarantor that Chechnya is finally on its way to order and stability." (4)

Some analysts have speculated that Kadyrov is the latest pawn in a power game meant to perpetuate Vladimir Putin's dominance in the political arena. As one article put it, "In preparing to appoint Ramzan Kadyrov as president of Chechnya, Vladimir Putin is ensuring that his own influence on Russian politics will continue after 2008. Without Putin, Kadyrov would become another Dudayev. Only Putin can guarantee that there won't be another war in Chechnya." (5) (After all, would there have been the Second Chechen War without Putin?) Perhaps the recent personnel changes permit Kadyrov to position himself as an almost messianic leader of Chechnya, while allowing Putin to solidify his image as the only leader who can promise stability in Chechnya (and, by extension, Russia) because of his personal relationship with Kadyrov.

Kadyrov, who has used the recent and much-lauded amnesty programs to beef up his own security forces, is a risky bet for stability. His troops, and many members of the region's governing bodies, are loyal to Kadyrov as a person,
rather than to the government as an entity. The Kremlin has put all its money on Kadyrov, who is willing work with the Kremlin—for the present, at least—but will not be controlled by it.

Kadyrov’s tenure as Chechen president, however long it may be, will be marked by stability at costly terms for the Kremlin. Already, during his short stint as acting president, Kadyrov has proposed that Chechnya surrender its long-held demand for a treaty outlining division of powers between Moscow and Grozny in exchange for Chechen control of the region’s oil sector. (6)

As for the protection of human rights in Chechnya, based on past performance, Kadyrov probably will set political stability as a much higher priority. Chechen television recently aired a report covering Council of Europe Human Rights Commissioner Thomas Hammarberg’s visit to Kadyrov’s residence while he was in Chechnya for a human rights conference. Typically, the report mentioned only Hammarburg’s comments about the reconstruction of Chechnya and failed to mention any of his criticism of Kadyrov for permitting prisoners to be tortured. (7) However, the report did mention abuses carried out by “federal military and security agencies,” carefully avoiding placing any blame on the region’s over-lauded hero and, at the time, acting president. (8)

The conference was boycotted by many prominent human rights organizations to protest Kadyrov’s recent rise in power within the region. Although the conference was shunned by Memorial, the Russian-Chechen Friendship Society, Amnesty International, and the Moscow Helsinki Group, Putin’s human rights advisor Ella Pamfilova was scheduled to be present. Indeed, given Putin’s unswerving support for Kadyrov despite consistent opposition, it would have been highly unusual for Pamfilova not to attend.

Kadyrov sent a message to the conference by way of chief of the presidential and government administration, Abdulkakhir Izrayilov, in which he stated that he
would make a priority of searching for people who had been abducted in Chechnya (especially, according to the message, those who had disappeared between the years of 1999 and 2001), in addition to addressing the issue of individuals displaced by the region’s protracted conflict. (9)

Kadyrov’s efforts to give Chechnya’s human rights situation a facelift demonstrate an awareness of the pressure the Kremlin has received from international bodies and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) about the situation there. Sadly, these cosmetic changes are merely the stage mask of an authoritarian, if extremely charismatic, personality.

Source Notes:

(1) “Chechen speaker says no alternative to Kadyrov,” 1 Mar 07, TASS via Lexis-Nexis.
(2) “Chechen’s celebrate new president’s endorsement,” 1120 gmt, 2 Mar 07, GTRK Vaynakh TV, Groznyy, in Chechen; BBC Monitoring via Lexis Nexis.
(3) Olga Allenova, “Insurance against the successor,” 26 Feb-4 Mar 07, Kommersant-Vlast; WPS via Lexis-Nexis.
(5) Olga Allenova, ibid. See also Aleksei Malashenko, “Carte blanche—Russian pundit views new Chechen presidency,” 26 Feb 07, Nezavisimaya gazeta via Lexis-Nexis; Anna Arutunyan, ibid.
Russian Federation: Security Services

By Fabian Adami

Politkovskaya murder update: It was the Chechens…honest!!

On 7 October 2006, as she was returning to her Moscow apartment, Anna Politkovskaya was killed in classic execution style, receiving gunshot wounds to the head and chest. (1) Politkovskaya’s death was not wholly unexpected. Her reports on the Chechen war were extremely controversial. Politkovskaya did not shy from criticizing and questioning the official Kremlin line, nor from condemning loyalist Chechen forces. According to her editor at Novaya gazeta, she had been close to submitting a report on torture in Chechnya that could have proved extremely damaging to the government. Moreover, in what surely was no coincidence, her murder took place on President Vladimir Putin’s birthday.

The investigation into her death last fall focused on several former OMON officers, specifically Sergei Lapin, who currently is imprisoned in Chechnya for war crimes. (2)

During the last few weeks, attention apparently has shifted from Lapin and his colleagues to possible Chechen assassins. Early in February 2007, Komsomolskaya pravda, a “pro-Kremlin” newspaper, claimed that “analysis of photographs from military satellites taken on the day of the murder,” allowed authorities to identify, track and arrest two Chechen individuals. (3)

This report evidently was met with such skepticism that Komsomolskaya pravda followed up with an interview with Nikolai Volkov, a “former Space Forces Intelligence Officer,” who confirmed that Russia had this satellite capability,
claiming that “the capabilities of space intelligence in the most advanced countries develop virtually ‘nostril to nostril.’” These nations, he intimated, are able to photograph “a tennis ball from space.” (4) Technological capabilities aside, a number of other questions arise from this claim. Why was a strategic spy satellite over Moscow, conveniently, at the time of Politkovskaya’s murder? Is it possible that the asset was in fact being used to track Politkovskaya, in order to provide up-to-the minute-intelligence to her killers? Finally, the radical shift in focus of the murder investigation bears examination. Why has the center of investigation shifted from rogue, disillusioned ex-security officers to Chechens? Cui Bono?

There are several possible conclusions to these questions. First, colleagues of Aleksandr Litvinenko, the FSB defector killed in London during the winter, have claimed that he was murdered in part due to his investigation into Politkovskaya’s death. Litvinenko, it is claimed, knew who killed Politkovskaya and was planning to expose the perpetrators. (5) If Moscow can “prove” that the latter was killed by Chechens, Litvinenko’s information could be portrayed as tainted, and by extension, the alleged link between the murders evaporates. Secondly, the “Chechen connection” may be used to “re-legitimize” Russia’s involvement in that Republic. In the ultimate irony, Politkovskaya may be portrayed as Russia’s martyr and her death used to trumpet “security concerns” in the run-up to Russia’s State and Duma elections, due to be held later this year.

**FSB strikes again—wag the dog?**

On 22 February, the FSB announced that several individuals from Dagestan, who were attempting to smuggle assault rifles, handguns, silencers, ammunition and cash into Moscow had been arrested. (6) Several days later the agency claimed to have prevented a putative suicide bombing from taking place in Moscow. Apparently, Farid Magomedov, a resident of Makhachkala, was arrested on a bus traveling towards a metro station. He allegedly was carrying an
“improvised mine” made of buckshot and nails, and his pocket contained the remote detonator. (7)

These reports may be true. On the other hand, the individuals traveling to Moscow may have been veterans of the Chechen war engaged in weapons smuggling – a not unknown phenomenon. Equally, in the light of Putin’s directive to the FSB last month that the agency should guarantee Russia’s security during elections, (8) they may be instances of “wag the dog.”

Litvinenko update: Lugovoi, Berezovsky interviewed

There are two countervailing theories regarding the murder of FSB Defector Aleksandr Litvinenko. According to the Kremlin's theory, Boris Berezovsky, the exiled oligarch and opponent of President Putin, ordered Litvinenko’s murder. This theory holds that Berezovsky wanted to have Litvinenko killed as part of a “political” operation, designed to influence British judges, so that they would refuse Moscow’s continued extradition efforts vis à vis Berezovsky. (11)

In contrast, Litvinenko’s colleagues and friends maintain that he was killed in order to silence him. Specifically, they allege that he had discovered the identities of Anna Politkovskaya’s killers and was preparing to unveil them. (10) Litvinenko, according to this theory, was killed because of his betrayal of Mother Russia.

The Scotland Yard investigation into the murder was completed several weeks ago, when the detectives working on the case passed their dossier to the Crown Prosecution Service. Newspaper reports indicated that Andrei Lugovoi, a former KGB and FSB officer was their prime suspect, and that authorities would seek to begin extradition proceedings. (11)

In the last few weeks, both Berezovsky and Lugovoi have participated in several interviews, in which each has endeavored to present their version of events.
Berezovsky gave two interviews (to RFE/RL on 7 February, and Ekho Moskvy Radio on 23 February). In both sessions, he maintained that Litvinenko himself had suspected that Lugovoi administered the poison. He also claimed that he was willing to meet Russian detectives in London in order to be questioned about Litvinenko. In an obvious publicity stunt, Berezovsky also personally offered to finance the “most expensive of lawyers,” to represent Lugovoi, if he agreed to face charges in the UK.

Lugovoi’s interviews focused on his denial of involvement. The former KGB agent claimed that he had spoken with Berezovsky personally, in order to deny any involvement, stated flatly that he was being “hound[ed]” by the media, and finally, that he had received no requests from British police to come to London. Such a request, he hinted, might be entertained under the right circumstances. Most interestingly, Lugovoi claimed he had his own theory on the murder, but could not discuss it due to a non-disclosure agreement signed at the behest of the Prosecutor General’s office.

Finally, in a move that may have been designed as a diplomatic “ratcheting-up” of pressure, Britain’s ambassador to Moscow, Sir Anthony Brenton, conducted interviews with Ekho Moskvy and the BBC on successive days, in which he claimed that “talks” on cooperation over the case would start “soon.” Brenton also insisted that British authorities wanted “to catch the person who committed this crime and see them punished…if that involves extraditing someone from Russia, then we will try to achieve that.”

At this juncture, an “extradition permit” from the Kremlin seems highly unlikely. If handed over, Lugovoi could lose any motivation for maintaining silence. Yet one wonders what concessions the Kremlin will try to exact from Britain in return for Lugovoi, if not the “reciprocal” return of Berezovsky.
Source Notes:

(1) See The ISCIP Analyst, Volume XIII, Number 3 (19 Oct 06).
(2) See The ISCIP Analyst, Volume XIII, Number 4 (9 Nov 06).
(4) “Former Space Forces Intelligence Officer On Spy Satellites Capabilities,” Komsomolskaya pravda, 15 Feb 07; BBC Monitoring via Lexis-Nexis.
(7) “Terrorist Bombing Prevented In Russia, Suspect Detained—Moscow Police,” RIA Novosti, 26 Feb 06; BBC Monitoring via Lexis-Nexis.
(8) See The ISCIP Analyst, Volume XIII, Number 8 (22 Feb 07).
(9) See The ISCIP Analyst, Volume XII, Number 5 (7 Dec 06).
(10) Ibid.
(11) See The ISCIP Analyst, Volume XIII, Number 8 (22 Feb 07).
(13) Ibid.
(15) “Key Witness In Litvinenko Murder Gives Interview To Russian Radio,” Ekho Moskvy Radio, Moscow, in Russian, 23 Feb 07; Financial Times Information, BBC Monitoring via Lexis-Nexis
(16) Ibid.
Who is Serdyukov?

Russian Defense Ministry officials and senior military officers are scratching their collective heads at President Putin’s choice of replacement for Sergei Ivanov in the position of Defense Minister. While the decision to raise Ivanov to the same rank as Medvedev didn’t come as much of a surprise, naming the former director of the Russian Federal Tax Service, Anatoly Serdyukov, as his replacement caught many off guard.

The transfer of Ivanov to First Deputy Prime Minister appears to be aimed at accomplishing a couple of political objectives. First, leaving the Defense Ministry will distance him from the stigma associated with numerous problems in the military. (1) As one of the possible Putin successors in 2008, it may be best for Ivanov to leave the problems of low pay, poor housing, scandalous conscript abuse, and budget misappropriations, to name just a few, to someone else. Additionally, in his new position, Ivanov is now on equal ground with his apparent rival for the presidential succession, Dmitri Medvedev. In positions of equal rank, the two front-runners can now spend the next year demonstrating their potential to succeed Putin. (2)

The unexpected appointment of Serdyukov to lead the Defense Ministry has enraged some and bewildered many. A quick look at his past experience reveals virtually no military experience beyond his mandatory two-year conscription. After satisfying his military obligation, Serdyukov attended the Leningrad Institute of Commerce, where he studied economics. (3) Upon graduation, he worked for
the next 15 years in the furniture business, where he progressed through numerous management levels and eventually became General Director of the St. Petersburg Furniture Market. (4) In 2000, the same year in which he completed his Ph.D. in economics, he was appointed to the number two position within St. Petersburg’s branch of the Federal Tax Service. (5) It was in this position that Serdyukov began to develop his reputation as a tough leader who could get things done. He rose through the ranks of the Tax Ministry, and in 2004 became the Tax Minister and then Director of the Federal Tax Service; he followed in the footsteps of a mentor named Viktor Zubkov who is a member of Putin’s inner circle. (6) This relationship is thought to constitute a significant contribution to Serdyukov’s most recent appointment. Another link to Putin can be traced to Serdyukov’s close friendship with the President’s Deputy Chief of Staff and former KGB colleague Viktor Ivanov. (7)

In typical Putin fashion, knowledge of Serdyukov’s appointment as Defense Minister was kept from the military community until the formal announcement was made. In fact, when Putin did make the announcement and introduced Serdyukov during a recent session of the Defense Ministry collegium, many of the military elite in attendance didn’t even recognize him. (8) In anticipation of what would constitute immediate concern over Serdyukov’s total lack of experience in security or law enforcement, Putin claimed that “In today’s circumstances, organizing the work that entails spending vast amounts of state funding requires a person with some experience in the economic field.” (9)

While Sergei Ivanov’s departure from the Defense Ministry was publicly honorable, his failure to make progress in reforming the military also may have contributed to his removal. The rise in world oil prices and Russia’s resulting economic windfall over the past several years has served to quadruple the defense budget. What was a budget of $8.2B in 2001, when Ivanov took control of the Defense Ministry, grew to $31.3B in 2007. (10) However, even with the bulging budget coffers, modernization efforts, weapons acquisition programs,
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and attempts at social reform have proven extremely disappointing. Ivan Safranchuk, an analyst with the Russian Center for Defense Information said “Bureaucratic logic tells Russian leadership that corruption and fraud are the main reason for the poor progress.” (11) According to Anatoli Tsyganok, director of Russia’s Military Forecasting Center, “one of the first officials to be dismissed under the new leadership] might be Liubov Kudelina, head of the Defense Ministry’s Economics and Finance Service [who] has been unable to explain to President Putin where the money is going. (12)

Notwithstanding Putin’s initial reasoning behind appointing Serdyukov to his new post, the military elite still seems unconvinced. Jokes still circulate saying that at best “the former furniture salesman will be able to supply the barracks with new tables and chairs.” (13) Even though actively serving senior officers are not saying much on the record, anonymously they are appalled at the move. During a radio interview, retired Colonel General Leonid Ivashov, Vice President of the Academy of Geopolitical Problems, said the appointment is a “spit in the face” and the “humiliation of the Army and all servicemen.” (14) The military elite does not seem to place much trust in Putin’s explanation of a new and clearer delineation of responsibilities between the General Staff and the Defense Ministry. Under Yuri Baluyevsky, the General Staff supposedly now will assume much more of the responsibility for military operations while the Defense Ministry will focus on overseeing all financial management aspects of the military. (15)

Despite widespread frustration over the appointment of a second consecutive “civilian” to lead the military, Serdyukov may prove capable of accomplishing some things Ivanov couldn’t. Unlike his predecessor, one of the facts Serdyukov is said to be proud of is that throughout his entire time with the Federal Tax Service, he never gave an interview to the print media. (16) This tendency to avoid the limelight may be viewed as a welcome change and serve to quiet what has been outspoken and unwelcome criticism of the military. (17) He will be judged by his ability to execute existing programs efficiently, rather than
developing and advertising new reforms. Making rapid strides in reforming and modernizing the military may provide another political benefit: with military personnel and defense workers comprising a significant proportion of all voters in national elections, visible improvements for troops could help to ensure a smooth transition of power in 2008. (18)

One thing is certain, and important to understand. With his appointment of Serdyukov, President Putin has shown again that he is in ultimate control of the military. (19) He remains the one true decision-maker and will finish his term, not as a lame duck, but in a position of unchallenged authority.

Source Notes:

(3) Ibid.
(5) Ibid.
(6) Shavlokhova, Madina, “A Person For The Future; Putin Starts Assembling a Team for His Successor: First, a Defense Minister,” 19 Feb 07, Gazeta via Lexis-Nexis Academic Universe.
(8) Kolesnichenko, Alexander, “The Minister is Far Away, But the Garrison is Close at Hand,” 19 Feb 07, Novye izvestia via Lexis-Nexis Academic Universe.
Two birds with one stone
Russia's Chief of the General Staff Yuri Baluyevsky created a commotion in the international community two weeks ago, when he stated that Russia may withdraw from the 1987 Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) treaty, in response to the deployment of US missile defense components in Eastern Europe. (1) He is not the first to make this assertion, since former Russian Defense Minister Sergei Ivanov also called continued compliance with the INF treaty into question, stating that it was a "relic of the Cold War." (2) Although a
small number of Russian military analysts agree with this assessment, the large majority considers abrogating the treaty to be a foolish move that ultimately would hurt Russian national security. (3) So what are the motives behind the Russian military leadership’s actions – is this an idle threat or is there more than meets the eye?

The genesis of the INF treaty began in the early 1980s with the deployment of Soviet SS-20 and US Pershing ballistic missiles to Warsaw Pact and Western European countries, respectively. Both of these nuclear missile systems were classed as “intermediate range,” with an average operational range of 1,000-5,500 kilometers. This resulted in what was a significant military disadvantage for the Soviet Union, with US nuclear missiles being able to reach Moscow in less than ten minutes. With no significant defense against this threat, the situation gave the US the hypothetical ability to launch a disabling first strike from Western Europe. This situation was viewed as unacceptable from the Soviet standpoint. (4)

The result: seven years of negotiation and the signing of the INF treaty in 1987. It was the first treaty between the US and the USSR that eliminated entire classes of nuclear weapons – both intermediate and short range (500-1,000 km) nuclear missiles. Ultimately, the Soviets destroyed more than twice as many missiles as the US, with 1,846 Russian missiles being destroyed and 846 American ones meeting the same fate. All of this was completed by 1991. (5)

The treaty has an indefinite timeline and both the US and Russia have continued to observe it. There is a clause in the treaty, however, which allows either participant to withdraw (with six months notice) if it has “convincing proof” that its security is sufficiently threatened to necessitate the deployment and production of such systems once again. (6)

So what would necessitate a Russian withdrawal from this treaty? Although it is not very recent, the biggest change may have been the US withdrawal from the
Anti-Ballistic Missile treaty in 2001. This, in turn, cleared the way for a US missile defense system, part of which is now planned for deployment in Poland and the Czech Republic. Ostensibly, it is a threat to Russian national security from this US defense shield in Eastern Europe that warrants a withdrawal from INF.

In an interview last week, General Baluyevsky explained the threat as such: “Knowing the potential technical specifications…under certain circumstances, they could have some influence on our deterrence arsenals.” This highly qualified statement certainly seems to describe a much less serious threat than one that would require immediate deployment of Russian intermediate range nuclear missiles. (7) In fact, as many Russian analysts have pointed out, the situation has not changed at all since the 1980s; it remains primarily a question of geography. The US has the luxury of being protected by two wide oceans, while Russia does not.

In reality, the situation would be significantly worse for Russia if the US were to deploy (non-defensive) nuclear missiles to its NATO partners, as the reaction time would be cut in half, assuming the missiles were placed in the Baltic States and Poland. (8) Exacerbating the situation even further, any intermediate ballistic missile production would most likely come at the expense of new ICBM production, as the Russian plant used to produce nuclear warheads chronically misses production goals. (9) Ultimately, scrapping the INF treaty could result in a significantly increased ability for the US to launch a debilitating first strike on Russia, without any increase in Russia’s ability to strike the US directly. In fact, the scenario would be significantly worse than the situation the treaty was designed to eliminate!

Quite possibly, though, it is not Russia’s western border that the generals are worried about, but its borders to the south and southeast. As Ivanov very candidly pointed out, Russia and the US are the only signatories to the INF treaty
— many other countries have developed and deployed intermediate range missiles, including Pakistan, India, and especially China. China has quite a number of these missiles, with many of them presumably aimed at Russia, but Russia has no commensurate ability to counter them. Unless Russia is able to convince China and other INF-equipped countries to sign the treaty (which has not yet been proposed), then there is at least some significant benefit to pulling out of the treaty. In effect, Russia has had its “convincing evidence” for quite some time — in China, not the US. (10)

In addition to countering a significant INF threat from China, withdrawing from the INF treaty also could serve a second purpose: to focus European attention on the proposed US missile defense system. By threatening to scrap the treaty, Russia implies that it will deploy short range nuclear missiles to target US systems in Europe. Once again, Europe will have to confront the idea of becoming a nuclear battleground. At a minimum, this could cause the Polish and Czech populations to object to the US deployment. Moreover, it could cause Western European powers to attempt to intervene in what is now a bi-lateral discussion between the US and its Eastern European partners, as they too would be subject to Russian targeting. (11) In essence, Russian intentions could be very similar to Soviet aims back in the 1980s — to split the US and its European allies.

Ultimately, however, it is most probable that Russia will withdraw from the INF Treaty, and will deploy intermediate range nuclear weapons — not on its European borders but on its southern frontiers. If, by withdrawing from the treaty, Russian military leaders are able to sabotage US plans for missile defense in Eastern Europe, then they get an extra bird for their one stone. But it would be truly foolhardy to give the US an excuse to put offensive nuclear weapons in Europe once again, and to end more than twenty years of relative security due to the significant concessions made under the INF treaty in the first place.

Source Notes:
(1) “Yuri Baluyevski: We Have Invulnerable Weapons,” Rossiiskaya gazeta, 21 Feb 07, pp. 1, 4 via Lexis-Nexis Academic Universe.
(7) “Yuri Baluyevski: We Have Invulnerable Weapons,” ibid.

Russian Federation: Foreign Relations

By Alexey Dynkin

Trade vs. territory in the Far East
Russian Prime Minister Mikhail Fradkov arrived in Tokyo on 27 February for an official two-day visit designed to promote bilateral relations between Russia and
Japan. Referring to the long-standing territorial dispute between the two countries over the four southern islands of the Kuril archipelago, Fradkov essentially urged the Japanese to move on and forget about reclaiming the islands, stating that “this [territorial] issue must not be a source of contention,” and that "a solution must develop as we advance to new levels of cooperation, primarily in trade and economic relations." (1) He thus placed the burden of overcoming the dispute on the Japanese, adding that it is Japanese public opinion which makes Russo-Japanese relations contingent upon a resolution of the dispute. (2) Fradkov's implication is that popular emotion, rather than sober national interest, is behind Japan’s continued official insistence on the return of the southern Kurils; this theme also surfaced in reports that described increased security measures in preparation for Fradkov’s visit as designed to prevent “extreme nationalist” groups from staging “vociferous anti-Russian actions.” (3)

To extend this logic, the only obstacle to full bilateral relations is the political necessity of Japan's government to consider Japanese public opinion; thus, not only is Russia presented as the mature and rational player in the dispute, but the point of contention can be by-passed, if only Japanese public opinion could be muted.

A recent Russian analysis takes the position that the territorial dispute has become all but a formality, and that bilateral relations already have been fully developed, at least in the economic sphere. (4) One reason for such perceptions may be recent statements from Tokyo that hint at a possible willingness to accept a compromise in return for a final settlement. In December 2006, Japanese Foreign Minister Taro Aso made a proposal to partition the territories in question, including actually splitting one of the islands—Itorofu—with Russia. (5) While the proposal never turned into an official offer, it nonetheless appears to have been perceived by the Russian side as a significant concession, as well as a more general policy shift related to the ousting of the conservative government of Koizumi.
The lack of a permanent peace settlement between Russia and Japan is due to the absence of the Soviet Union from the 1951 San Francisco Treaty between Japan and the Allied Powers. In fact, according to Section C, Article 2, Chapter II of the treaty, “Japan renounces all right, title and claim to the Kurile Islands, and to that portion of Sakhalin and the islands adjacent to it over which Japan acquired sovereignty as a consequence of the Treaty of Portsmouth of 5 September 1905.” (6) The basis of the Japanese claim to the four southern islands lies in a treaty signed between the Russian Empire and Japan in 1855 called the Russo-Japanese Treaty of Commerce, Navigation and Delimitation, according to which the boundary between Russian and Japanese interests in the archipelago was drawn between Iturop (Iturofo) and Uruppu. Regardless of the validity of this claim from the Japanese perspective, or of the Soviet occupation of Japanese territory in the first place (as Japan had not once violated the neutrality agreement it had signed with the Soviet Union in 1941), from the Soviet perspective, the failure of the USSR to sign the San Francisco Treaty allowed, on one hand, for Japan to make whatever territorial claims it deemed “just” in return for a settlement, and, on the other hand, for the Soviet Union to continue its occupation of all the territory it had seized without technically being in violation of any agreement it had signed.

The idea of a partition, in fact, has been in the works since 1956, and was first proposed not by Japan, but by the Soviet Union, which offered to return to Japan two of the smaller islands in question—Shikotan and Hamobai, which lie just off the coast of Hokkaido and which Japan claims are not even part of the Kuril chain—in return for a permanent peace settlement. At that point, the reward for Soviet withdrawal from the two small islands would have been Japanese acceptance of its seizure of the rest of the islands. During the Cold War, with Japan a member of the Western alliance, there was little incentive either for Japan to accept the proposal or for the USSR to offer any more concessions. As a result, the 1956 declaration did not lead to any positive change in the status of the islands.
The collapse of the USSR presented an opportunity for the development of mutually beneficial relations between Japan and Russia and these relations have progressed considerably in the economic sphere. In 2005, Japan ranked fourth among countries from which Russia imports goods, with a total of 6% of all imports. (7) At the same time, it is noteworthy that despite Russia’s enormous petroleum and gas reserves (which Putin has called the key to Russia’s re-emergence as a world power) and its relative proximity to Japan, Japan continues to rely mainly on Australia and on the Persian Gulf states to meet its energy needs – both of which require tanker transport over long distances. Indeed, the lack of any major category of imports from Russia to Japan casts doubt as to how far relations between the two really have developed.

Beyond economic opportunities, however, a settlement of the Kuril dispute could offer an opportunity for a strategic partnership, or even an alliance. From the Russian perspective, this could prove very useful in the long term should its current relationship with China take a turn for the worse as China’s influence in the region grows. More broadly, post-Cold War Japan qualifies as one of the world’s independent power centers, according to Primakov’s theory of multipolarity. That being so, Fradkov’s most recent visit demonstrates scant enthusiasm on the Russian side for offering anything in the way of concessions on the status of the islands. The message coming from Moscow is that the ball is in Japan’s court as far as the territorial dispute is concerned. Russia may be able to benefit from increased bilateral ties without having to give anything, if the new Japanese government decides that trade relations with Russia are more important than national pride. The construction of a strategic partnership is unlikely however, without a permanent settlement. As Moscow turns inward for the constitutionally –scheduled presidential succession, there seems scant reason to expect controversial territorial concessions will be offered to Japan to cement relations. Finally, while the Kuril dispute is a long-standing issue in Russian foreign relations, at the moment it appears relatively low on the list of
priorities in comparison to the Middle East, US ABM sites in Eastern Europe, and contentious disputes within the “Near Abroad.” Thus, unless there is considerable initiative, along with a willingness to compromise on the part of the Japanese side, a final settlement of the Kuril dispute is unlikely in the near future.

Source Notes:

(1) RIA Novosti, 27 Feb 07 via Johnson's Russia List (JRL), 2007-47.
(2) Ibid.

Newly Independent States: Caucasus
By Creelea Henderson

Baku-Tbilisi-Kars railway joins, divides the Caucasus
On February 7, Georgian President Saakashvili welcomed President Ilham Aliyev of Azerbaijan, and Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan to Tbilisi for a trilateral summit on strengthening regional cooperation. The meeting was crowned by the commission of a railway line running from Kars to Baku, via Tbilisi. The railway will service a cargo capacity of 20 million tons per year and
provide a trans-Caucasian transport corridor as a complement to the trans-Caucasian oil and gas pipelines already in operation. Construction of the project is slated to begin in June 2007, with completion expected sometime in 2009. Cost estimates for the project run from $422 to $600 million. (1)

Ambitions for the Kars-Tbilisi-Baku (KTB) railway stretch beyond the Caucasus region and entail geo-strategic dimensions; Turkish press reports hailed the “historic” project as a new Silk Road that will someday link China to Europe via the Caucasus. (2) As envisioned by its signatories, the railway will provide a link uniting the Chinese railway system in the east to Western Europe by way of Kazakhstan, Azerbaijan, Georgia and Turkey (perhaps including ferry service across the Caspian). When the railway is completed, Turkish Weekly reported, a passenger will be able to travel by train from London to China non-stop. (3) Initially, however, the line will transport petroleum products, with passenger service added at an undetermined future date.

Us and them
The project’s stated aim is to intensify and expand cooperation among Turkey, Georgia and Azerbaijan by joining the countries’ railway networks. (4) The cooperative rhetoric, however, obscures the contentious debates that shape transport schemes in the region. While the railway network will work to unite the transportation and communication infrastructures of the three countries, it will, by the same measure, push Armenia further into isolation, depriving the landlocked country of its historical role as a transit route for north-south and east-west trade. Already struggling to cope with blockades imposed by Azerbaijan and Turkey, Armenia was an indirect victim of Russian sanctions leveled against Georgia in 2006, when its export corridors effectively were sealed off at the Georgian-Russian border.

The KTB railway project is not a new idea. A proposal for the same route was put forward by Turkey in 1993, only to face opposition in the West, where the
European Commission and the US Congress finally moved to block funding for the project in 2005, following a sustained lobbying campaign from Armenian groups. In its present incarnation, the railway will be an exercise in regional self-reliance, financed by revenues from the sale of oil and gas flowing through the BTC and South Caucasus pipelines. Azerbaijan has agreed to provide $200 million in investment capital to Georgia on generous terms (1% annual interest rate, to be paid back over the course of the next 25 years) to cover its leg of the project. (5)

Armenian authorities claim that the railway will formalize Ankara’s blockade of the country and remove the impetus from ongoing negotiations to reopen the border. They point to the already existing east-west railway corridor connecting Kars and Gyumri as a more economically sound alternative to the large-scale construction of an entirely new railway. The Kars-Gyumri line was closed down by Ankara in 1993, in retaliation for Armenia’s seizure of territory in Azerbaijan. The sustained support of Turkey for Azerbaijan in the wake of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict underlines the dense interconnection of issues that cause tension within the entire region. The decision to bypass Armenia was not an inadvertent development, but a strategic political slight delivered by Azerbaijan and Turkey. Armenia will be kept out of the project, President Ilham Aliyev maintains, pending the resolution of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. “Until Armenia liberates the occupied Azerbaijani territories, all transportation projects will bypass the country,” Aliyev said in a statement delivered 22 January. (6)

Recognizing the hostile political message of the new railway corridor, U.S. and E.U. support for the project has been ambivalent. “If Azerbaijan, Turkey and Georgia decide to go ahead with this railroad we are not opposing it at all, but we are not promoting it actively,” commented US Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for European and Eurasian Affairs, Matthew Bryza. “We’d love to get to that point when the railroad from Turkey to Baku could transit Armenia,” however, he added, “that’s not our decision. We are not investors.” (7)
Important for all three countries involved in the construction is the autonomy afforded by self-financing a major project. Regional cooperation has allowed Azerbaijan, Georgia and Turkey to proceed with the KTB project where international political will was lacking. It also highlights the economic, political and strategic interests of the three countries, both positive and negative. The railway promises to increase the geo-strategic position of Turkey, as the country that joins Europe to the petroleum channels flowing from the east; the same is true for Azerbaijan, which, as an oil and gas producer, is widely supposed to be the primary beneficiary of the export corridor. In addition to a robust economic boost for the Caspian Sea port in Baku, the country’s national railroad company, which will garner tariffs from the new line, will also win. Strategic interests will be served by the project as well: “For the first time, Azerbaijan will get direct railroad access to its most important ally, Turkey,” explained political analyst Rasim Musabekov. (8) Georgia initially was hesitant to sign on to the KTB railway, put off by the prohibitively high cost of the project. However, following Russia’s blockade of the country in 2006, the Georgian government reconsidered. Georgian Economic Development Minister Giorgi Arveladze cited the importance of a transportation corridor that circumvents Russian territory, when he commented on his country’s participation in the railway. “We have to support this project amidst the economic blockade of Georgia from the North,” he explained. (9) While gaining an export route is Georgia’s primary objective, the railway may also serve to transform the country’s role in the region into an important transportation hub for east-west flows.

As Turkey, Georgia and Azerbaijan prepare to launch their transportation independence, collectively, they would do well to consider the consequences for Armenia. By excluding Armenia from a regional transport scheme, it will make the prospect of a settlement of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict less likely and cause the isolated country to deepen its ties with external actors, such as Russia and Iran, to meet its economic and security needs.
Source Notes:
(1) "Turkey-Georgia-Azerbaijan alliance gets stronger," Georgia Today, 23 Feb
(2) “Silk Rail Road,” Yeni Safak, 8 Feb 07 via Lexis-Nexis Academic Universe.
(3) “Turkey to sign Kars-Tbilisi-Baku Railway Agreement,” Turkish Weekly, 6 Feb
(4) “‘The Tbilisi Declaration’ On Common Vision for Regional Cooperation,”
Source: Georgian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, reprinted by Civil.ge, 7 Feb 07 via
(5) "Turkey-Georgia-Azerbaijan alliance gets stronger," ibid.
(6) President Aliyev’s statement reprinted by Eurasianet.org, “Azerbaijan,
Georgia and Turkey: Building a Transportation Triumverate?”, Eurasianet.org, 7
Feb 07 via (www.eurasianet.org).
(7) Interview with the U.S. Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for European and
Eurasian Affairs, OSCE Minsk Group American Co-Chair, Matthew Bryza, 9 Feb
07 available on the Consulate General of the Republic of Azerbaijan via
(http://www.azconsulatela.org/brazaosce.htm).
(8) “Azerbaijan, Georgia and Turkey: Building a Transportation Triumverate?”,
Eurasianet.org, 7 Feb 07 via (www.eurasianet.org).
(9) Ibid.

Newly Independent States: Central Asia

By Monika Shepherd

Kyrgyzstan’s ex-prime minister rejoins opposition, calls for early elections
Feliks Kulov, Kyrgyzstan’s former Prime Minister, left office on 29 January (1)
and not long thereafter traveled to Moscow for “a number of meetings and
consultations,” according to a statement released by the Ar-Namys (Dignity)
Party (opposition party founded by Kulov). It was not specified with whom he
would be meeting, or what the topics of his various “consultations” might be. Upon his return from Moscow, the statement said, Mr. Kulov would be willing to address questions submitted to him on-line. (2)

On 14 February, Kulov held his first press conference, since exiting his post as prime minister, during which he proceeded to dispel any notions that he might continue working with President Kurmanbek Bakiev’s government, announcing instead that he had rejoined the opposition. The former premier was ambiguous about which opposition group he would be working with, stating that his goal was not to support just one party, but “to unite and head various public and political bodies, those who long for positive changes in the country, want to work for the society and not to serve separate political figures and groups.” (3) Mr. Kulov warned that such threats as resurgent organized crime, a political elite divided along regional lines, groups trying to seize state property for themselves, and a television media controlled mainly by one family (he did not specify which family, but it is well-known that the Bakiev family owns a number of media outlets) pose a serious danger to Kyrgyz citizens and that in the face of such threats, he can not sit idly by, but must fight to protect his people and bring about positive change in the government. (4)

Just a few days later, Kulov announced the formation of a new political movement, the United Front for a Worthy Future for Kyrgyzstan, which includes the Ar-Namys Party, (5) as well as Omurbek Tekebaev’s Za Reformy! (For Reforms!) movement. (6) According to the movement’s own statement of purpose, it has been created as a temporary entity, which will disband once its goals have been met. Its two main stated goals are constitutional reform and the holding of early presidential elections, and judging by its harsh criticism of President Bakiev, one also might assume that the President's removal from office ranks as the United Front’s foremost aim. While Kulov refrained, for the most part, from blaming Bakiev directly for the country’s troubles in his press conference, the United Front statement pulls no punches, accusing the president
of abusing his power by seizeing state property for himself and his family, pressuring businesses and the media to do his bidding, and stymieing the process of constitutional reform. (7) Thus far, there is no indication that the date of the presidential elections will be moved up, but if Kulov succeeds in garnering enough support from the rest of the opposition, Bakiev may have to begin taking the United Front’s demands seriously. The question, of course, is whether or not the ex-premier will be able to win over those opposition politicians whom he alienated, and in some cases, severely castigated, during his tenure in the “tandem” with Bakiev. The opposition was already rife with internal divisions and Kulov’s formation of yet another new political movement may only splinter the opposition parties further. A number of Jogorku Kengesh deputies and opposition leaders have given their support publicly to the United Front: MP’s Kubatbek Baibolov, Omurbek Tekebaev, Kabai Karabekov, and Melis Eshimkanov, former Minister of Internal Affairs Omurbek Subanaliev, Deputy Chairman of the Ata-Meken Party Duishen Chotonov, Green Party Chair Erkin Bulekbaev, leader of the German Diaspora in Kyrgyzstan Valeriy Dil and coordinator of Za Reformy! Omurbek Abdrakmanov all signed the new movement’s statement of purpose. However, such prominent figures as Roza Otunbaeva and MP Bolot Sherniazov have not yet lent their support to Kulov’s movement. (8)

The former prime minister has managed to win encouragement from an unlikely source, namely former president Askar Akaev, who praised Kulov while attending a gathering at the Moscow Carnegie Center on 14 February, calling his actions “responsible and brave.” There has been speculation that Kulov met with Akaev during his trip to Moscow, most likely in order to seek backing for his new political venture. (9) It seems that Kyrgyz domestic politics have come almost full circle – Akaev’s former foe, Feliks Kulov, is now accusing his former ally, Kurmanbek Bakiev, of committing the same transgressions for which Akaev was ousted, while simultaneously seeking the support of the ex-president and the anti-
Akaev/now anti-Bakiev opposition – the old adage “the more things change, the more they stay the same” has never rung more true.

There do still seem to be cooler heads in the Kyrgyz opposition – Jogorku Kengesh deputy Bolot Sherniazov criticized Kulov and his supporters for focusing their efforts on yet another presidential personnel change, rather than working toward a change in the system of government, (10) and he is quite right – a revolving door of presidential personalities is likely to create only further political instability and the Kyrgyz government will continue to founder as a result.

Source Notes:

(2) "Kyrgyz Ex-Premier To Visit Moscow 'For Consultations' - Kulov Party," 5 Feb 07, ITAR-TASS; BBC Monitoring International Reports via Lexis-Nexis Academic Universe.
(6) “Opposition Responsible For Calm - Kyrgyz President's Press Office," 20 Feb 07, ITAR-TASS; OSC transcribed text via World News Connection.
Newly Independent States: Western Region

By Tammy Lynch

MOLDOVA

The battle over “peacekeepers”

What are “peacekeepers?” According to the United Nations, which sanctions and/or deploys the vast majority of “peacekeeping operations” in the world, they are “soldiers and military officers, police and civilian personnel from many countries [who] monitor and observe peace processes that emerge in post-conflict situations and assist conflicting parties to implement the peace agreement they have signed.” (1)

Peacekeeping Operations are sanctioned by a vote of the UN Security Council, with the consent of the country or countries that would allow peacekeeping troops on their territory. The troops are multinational, and are either deployed directly from the UN or from regional groups authorized to oversee the operation by the UN (for example, the African Union, NATO or the EU). (2)

On 4 March, Igor Smirnov, the self-styled leader of Moldova’s breakaway republic of Transnistria, lashed out at suggestions that Russian “peacekeepers” be removed from the separatist republic. “The Russian peacekeepers have been helping to preserve peace in the Dniester region for 15 years now,” he said. He went on to thank Russia for its “assistance” and praise his region’s “historical, cultural and economic ties” with Moscow. (3)
These statements follow earlier suggestions from Smirnov that his region should become part of Russia (a suggestion favored by “voters” last year in a highly questionable public referendum), and repeated private meetings with Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov outside the settlement process to determine Transnistria’s status.

Most recently, Smirnov and Lavrov discussed methods for “lowering the level of confrontation between Chisinau and Tiraspol,” according to the Russian Foreign Ministry. (4) Just days before this meeting, Smirnov declined to take part in a new round of negotiations to determine Transnistria’s final status.

The negotiations would have been the first such meeting in over a year, and would have included Transnistria, Moldova, Russia, Ukraine, and the OSCE as well as the EU and US as observers. Just days before the scheduled talks, Smirnov claimed that Moldova had instituted a “policy of pressure” by implementing tougher customs regulations for Transnistria last year and suggested that this pressure made talks impossible. (5) He chose to leave for Moscow, instead of discussing this issue in negotiations.

As negotiations drag on, the separatist conflict remains frozen, which so far has worked to Smirnov’s advantage. There are now approximately 1,500 Russian troops, labeled peacekeepers, in Transnistria. The troops have been cited by organizations like Human Rights Watch for their lack of impartiality.

In late 2005, the Association for the Bar of the City of New York (ABCNY) conducted the most comprehensive examination ever done of the legal situation in Transnistria. After dozens of interviews (including with Smirnov and numerous officials in Transnistria, as well as with Russian representatives in Moldova and the US), the organization severely criticized the actions of Russian troops – officially the Russian 14th Army, formerly the Soviet Union’s 14th Army.
The ABCNY wrote: “The Russian 14th Army played a decisive role in the 1992 War by intervening in the fighting on behalf of the separatists. Despite treaty promises to demobilize and repeated Moldovan requests that Russia remove its troops from Transnistria, the troops remain. Consequently, they prop up the viability of the TMR [Transnistria-Moldovan Republic] and make reintegration more difficult. They also provide materiel, expertise, and other support to the TMR on an ongoing basis.” (6)

Smirnov and the Russian media repeatedly refer to these troops by using the nickname for UN forces, “blue helmets.” But, these troops are clearly not UN peacekeepers. This mission was not sanctioned by the UN; it consists of one country’s forces, and it does not have the consent of both parties involved in the conflict. As noted above, Moldova repeatedly has demanded that the troops leave its territory – most recently in December. (7)

Smirnov’s latest statement of support for Russian troops came amid new attempts by Moldova and its neighbors to create an alternative peacekeeping operation. It appears that Ukraine and Georgia have recommitted themselves to finding support for UN-recognized regional peacekeeping forces in former Soviet republics grappling with separatism.

The idea for regional peacekeepers first surfaced officially last year at the summit of the GUAM regional organization (Georgia, Ukraine, Azerbaijan, and Moldova). At this summit, leaders of the four countries announced plans to form a peacekeeping contingent for possible deployment to Transnistria, the Abkhazia and South Ossetia separatist republics in Georgia and the Karabakh area in Azerbaijan. The leaders also announced plans to invite the EU’s participation.

The idea appeared to have quickly drowned in Ukraine’s domestic political crises and Georgia’s confrontations with Russia. But in early February, it resurfaced at the Munich Conference on Security Policy, when Ukraine President Viktor
Yushchenko underscored his country’s continuing commitment to regional peacekeeping and apparently discussed the issue extensively on the sidelines of the event. During a state visit to Georgia on 27 February, Yushchenko again reiterated his support for Ukrainian peacekeepers as part of internationally-mandated forces in GUAM countries. (8)

One week after the Munich conference, following a meeting with Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili in Brussels, EU foreign policy head Javier Solana suggested that the EU was “ready to help Georgia and participate in such an operation [peacekeeping], if necessary.” However, he noted that "Any peacekeeping missions should have precise and achievable goals.” (9)

In early March, Solana may have gone even further, apparently suggesting that the EU would be open to the idea of joint peacekeeping operations with Russia in Eastern/Central European trouble spots. In an unattributed article on 5 March, German news magazine Der Spiegel explained, “According to Solana, this could mean Russian-European peacekeeping missions for example in Kosovo, but also in Moldova, where Russian troops are currently deployed in the renegade province of Transnistria [sic]. Moscow has responded very positively to this idea in private circles.” (10) Solana’s direct comments are not quoted and are not available elsewhere. Neither he nor anyone in the EU has confirmed that this idea is even under discussion.

The plan undoubtedly would be welcomed by Moldova, Georgia and Azerbaijan, which have long complained about the lack of impartiality of Russian troops. But, the possibility that Smirnov (or other separatist leaders, for that matter) would agree is distant at best.

While in Moscow recently, Smirnov met with the self-styled leaders of all former Soviet separatist republics, and together, the men began formulating a response to renewed suggestions that Russian peacekeepers should be withdrawn. The
leaders affirmed their intention to create their own peacekeeping force and set up a joint information center in Moscow. (11)

One day after returning to Transnistria from Moscow, Smirnov claimed that his region has a "battleworthy army," and is "ready to repel any threats." He continued, "Only Russian soldiers can provide peace and security on the banks of the Dniestr river [Transnistria]." (12)

Smirnov again declined to explain why he viewed a multi-national force as a danger. In the past, he has suggested that any change will bring instability. "Why does everyone want to replace the peacekeepers?" he asked in November 2006. "I said to the British lady ambassador, 'Like you, I am conservative, and … if something works it should not be broken and thrown away'." (13)

Moldova, of course, would disagree. While Moldova certainly has far to go in its reform process, Transnistria hasn’t yet begun and is almost entirely dependent on Russian aid. Moreover, as the ABCNY found, “The TMR has had a poor human rights record including a lack of due process, persecution of religious minorities, and retaliation against political dissenters.” (14) There is no free press and the region has been identified by the EU as a “black hole" of smuggling.

But despite this rhetoric, Transnistrian authorities do not seem overly concerned about the prospect of Russian troops leaving. Following his meetings with Russian officials, the nominal Transnistrian Foreign Minister said he had been told that, despite talks with the EU, “no decisions or changes are expected.” (15) Most importantly, Russia has shown no willingness to accept the "loss" of the territory that its military controls in Transnistria.

Should these latest signs of potential progress come to naught, it would be unsurprising, given the history of Western involvement in the Transnistrian
conflict. Repeatedly, when confronted with Russian intransigence on the troops issue, the West—primarily in the form of the EU and OSCE—has backed down, or has been unable to find the consensus to move forward. In the process, 15 years have passed, with Russian troops, labeled as “peacekeepers,” holding the same territory they held while Mikhail Gorbachev was in power.

Source Notes:

(2) Ibid.
(3) ITAR-TASS, 1337 GMT, 4 Mar 07; BBC Monitoring via Lexis-Nexis.
(4) ITAR-TASS, 1801 GMT, 20 Feb 07; BBC Monitoring via Lexis-Nexis.
(5) Olvia-Press website, 15 Feb 07; BBC Monitoring via Lexis-Nexis.
(7) Moldova One TV, 1700 GMT, 4 Dec 06 via Lexis-Nexis.
(8) Rustavi-2 TV, 1700 GMT, 27 Feb 07 via Lexis-Nexis.
(9) EUobserver.com, 1038 GMT, 27 Feb 07 via Lexis-Nexis.
(10) Der Spiegel website, 5 Mar 07; BBC Monitoring via Lexis-Nexis.
(12) Olvia-Press website, 22 Feb 07; BBC Monitoring via Lexis-Nexis.
(13) Press Conference with South Ossetia’s President Eduard Kokoity, Abkhazia’s President Sergei Bagapsh and Transdniestria’s President Igor Smirnov, Interfax, 1430 GMT, 17 Nov 06.
(14) Thawing a Frozen Conflict, Op Cit.
(15) Olvia-Press website, 1 Mar 07; BBC Monitoring via Lexis-Nexis.