NEWLY INDEPENDENT STATES: CAUCASUS

By Robyn Angley

RUSSIA

New presidential representative dispatched to turbulent North Caucasus

Russian President Dmitri Medvedev has announced the establishment of a new administrative district as part of his efforts to address problems in the volatile North Caucasus region. The new North Caucasian Federal District will be a separate entity from the Southern Federal District, with which it was formerly incorporated, and will include the regions of Dagestan, Ingushetia, Kabardino-Balkaria, Karachayevo-Cherkessia, North Ossetia, Chechnya and the Stavropol' region. (1) The regional administration will be based in Pyatigorsk, Stavropol'.

To head the new federal district, Medvedev has appointed Krasnoyarsk governor Aleksandr Khloponin. Unusually, the regional administrator will hold the post of deputy prime minister, as well as the traditional title of the president's plenipotentiary representative. Medvedev justified Khloponin’s dual position in the government and the presidential administration by emphasizing that Khloponin’s major objectives in the region would deal with the economy, which falls under the purview of the prime minister’s government. (2) In reality, Khloponin’s dual appointment further confirms not only Prime Minister Putin’s preeminent role in Russian official structures, but also his determination to maintain control of Russia’s North Caucasus policy.

Medvedev’s comments as he announced the appointment seemed to indicate that he considered the root of the problems in the North Caucasus to be related to the economy, rather than to issues of security or autonomy. (3) This perspective, while rightly interpreting the lack of jobs and economic development...
as a major cause of popular dissatisfaction, fails to address other causes for rising levels of violence and terrorism in Dagestan, Ingushetia and Chechnya.

Medvedev’s description of the extent of Khloponin’s authority did nothing to allay a suspicion that Khloponin will not be invested with the power necessary to deal with the region’s most pressing issues. “You will be in command of personnel, law enforcement and some other issues,” said the president. (4) Medvedev’s comments failed to specify Khloponin’s relationship with the FSB and other powerful government agencies with a strong presence in the North Caucasus, as well as the extent of his authority over the provincial governments in the region, leading to questions as to whether Khloponin would be able to wield the influence necessary to be effective in his new role.

Khloponin has no previous experience dealing with the clan-based society that characterizes the North Caucasus or with the terrorist activity that has become part of daily life in many of the provinces now falling under his purview. In fact, most of Khloponin’s past work experience has been in business or as a government official. His regional connections lie not in the North Caucasus, but in Siberia, where he developed extensive networks during his tenure as Norilsk Nickel director (1996-2001), governor of the Taimyr region (2001-2002) and governor of Krasnoyarsk region (2002-2010), in which post he succeeded Aleksandr Lebed. Khloponin has close ties to oligarch Vladimir Potanin, not only from his role as director of the Norilsk Nickel company, but from having served on the board of Oneksimbank. (5) One of Khloponin’s major projects as Krasnoyarsk governor was to oversee the integration of the Taimyr autonomous area (okrug) and Evenkia autonomous okrug into the Krasnoyarsk region.

Khloponin’s new assignment to focus on economic projects will be effective only if carried out in conjunction with broader efforts to address the violence and terrorist activity that currently are destabilizing the North Caucasus. Neither Medvedev nor Putin has indicated how Moscow will deal with the region’s
security issues. The appointment of a competent manager to head the new federal district may contribute to the implementation of socio-economic projects with beneficial long-term results. However, if the region’s security issues are not addressed, the North Caucasus will need much more than a good administrator to deal with the political and military ramifications.

Source Notes:
(1) “Khloponin becomes presidential representative to new federal district-2,” TASS, 19 Jan 10 via Lexis-Nexis.
(2) “Russian president urges envoy to focus on socioeconomic projects in Caucasus,” Rossiyskaya gazeta, 20 Jan 10 via Lexis-Nexis.
(3) Ibid.
(4) “Khloponin becomes presidential representative,” ibid.

Newly Independent States: Central Asia

By Monika Shepherd

UZBEKISTAN

Uzbek parliamentary elections veer a few inches off-script

Uzbekistan’s most recent parliamentary elections, which in past years have followed a strict, pre-approved, predetermined script, held a few surprises this time around, including the fact that the participating parties were permitted to criticize each other. Furthermore, a fair number of the contested seats required run-off elections, indicating that there may have been at least a slight degree of competition between the candidates.
The country's four officially registered political parties, the People's Democratic Party of Uzbekistan (PDPU, previously known as the Communist Party), the Adolat (Justice) Social Democratic Party, the Milliy Tiklanish (National Revival) Party, and the Liberal Democratic Party of Uzbekistan (UzLiDeP), (1) fielded a total of 506 candidates for 135 seats in Uzbekistan's lower house of parliament (Oliy Majlis), in the December 27, 2009 elections. The Oliy Majlis actually consists of 150 MPs, but 15 of those positions are automatically allocated to the Environmental Movement (sometimes also translated as “Ecological Movement), which holds a convention to select its representatives. (2) All four of the competing parties are pro-presidential and all four publicly supported the incumbent President Islom Karimov’s political platform and policies in the December 2007 presidential election, although three of the parties were bold enough to nominate their own candidates.

Going into the December 27 parliamentary contest, it was UzLiDeP that had the largest share of seats (it was also UzLiDeP that nominated Karimov as its candidate for the 2007 presidential poll). Much of UzLiDeP's support is reported to come from powerful businessmen and entrepreneurs, (3) many of whom may owe favors to the president and/or his family. The PDPU held the second largest number of seats and, prior to 2004, was considered to be the president’s party. UzLiDeP was created shortly before the 2004 elections, no doubt to lend a slightly greater air of plausibility to President Karimov’s claims that his administration was “building democracy.”

However, the mere existence of multiple, pro-presidential, political parties no longer seems to have satisfied the president’s vision of what democratic development should resemble; this time around, the elections included not just different parties, but publicly aired criticism of one party by the other. The two parties that seemed to be competing most fiercely were UzLiDeP and the PDPU. On 17 December, the Uzbek Television First Channel aired a special broadcast during which two UzLiDeP members took the PDPU to task for prominently
featuring the protection of constituents' social needs as part of its platform, without taking concrete steps to support those needs, in short, accusing the PDP’s members of mouthing “empty slogans” in order to elicit popular support. (4) A December 18 broadcast of the “Axborot” (“News”) television news program included interviews with representatives of both UzLiDeP and the PDPU, in which they criticized each other’s party platforms and initiatives (or lack thereof). UzLiDeP MP Polyante Sveshnikov chastised both the PDPU and Adolat for emphasizing social issues in their platforms without undertaking any projects to address them. PDPU representative Adiba Ahmadjonova, on the other hand, assailed UzLiDeP for supporting the development of the private healthcare enterprises over publicly funded ones. (5) UzLiDeP was also attacked by both the PDPU and Adolat for failing to implement its promises of social reform and even for neglecting to “protect the rights of their own members.” (6) Adolat and Milliy Tiklanish took the fight to a somewhat baser level, accusing each other of unfair and unethical campaign practices by trading barbs in two separate newspaper articles on December 17 and 18. (7)

The fact that Uzbekistan’s media were allowed to air criticisms of the ruling party, the party most closely associated with the president, is significant. Equally notable is the relish with which party representatives responded to the president’s call to distinguish themselves from one other, not only by delineating their own political platforms, but by pointing out the shortcomings in opposing parties’ programs. The “smear campaign” conducted by Adolat and Milliy Tiklanish against each other even bears some resemblance to exchanges between rival candidates in the US.

However, try as it might, as long as President Karimov’s government continues to limit the political field exclusively to pro-presidential parties, whose party candidates are always vetted and pre-approved long before any election takes place, its efforts to portray the election process as “democratic,” much less free and open will come to naught. One of the most basic requirements of any
“democratic,” free and open election process is the participation of independent opposition parties, whose candidates do not first need to receive the government’s stamp of approval.

Unfortunately, criticism of the latest round of Uzbek elections has been somewhat muted in the US and Western Europe, especially at the government level. The OSCE had declared that the election did not meet international standards and therefore did not warrant a full contingent of monitors (8) and its subsequent report of the process reflects the same view. Yet, on the day of the vote itself, Uzbek media outlets had no trouble finding a number of Western election observers, who were willing to describe the election process in glowing terms, principally based on the high voter turnout. (9)

According to Uzbekistan’s Central Election Commission, turnout totaled 15.12 million voters, representing 87.9% of registered voters. (10) UzLiDeP once again was able to win the greatest number of seats (53) and although the PDPU came in second with 32 seats, this time Milliy Tiklanish was close on its heels with 31 seats. Adolat was in fourth position with 19 seats. (11) Thus, the president’s party once again took the lion’s share, as expected, but the PDPU seems to have lost considerable support, whereas Milliy Tiklanish made gains. Whether or not that makes a whit of difference in Uzbekistan’s future politics remains to be seen. Up until now, the president has been loathe to cede even an iota of his power to any other government body, using parliament primarily as a rubber stamp to claim official validation for his policies. Nonetheless, if the new trend of inter-party criticism continues in future elections, there is a faint possibility that the process might slip just an inch or two out of Karimov’s control.

Source Notes:
(1) Bruce Pannier, “Uzbek Elections Mean Little, But More Entertaining This Time,” 27 Dec 09, Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty via
Newly Independent States: Western Region

By Tammy Lynch

UKRAINE
Chaos heading into presidential election

It is just three days until Ukraine elects its new president, and the last few days in the country have been unusually busy – even for Ukraine’s normally chaotic and confusing electoral politics. The country has seen a “foiled” spy plot, accusations of planned disruptions by Western “militants,” claims of “fighters” housed around Kyiv and ready to attack at any moment, a sudden and worrying amendment to the presidential election law, and a threat to stage mass protests in a way never seen, “even in 2004.”

Yes, it is election season in Europe’s newest and shakiest democracy. Unlike Ukraine’s recent parliamentary election, however, there is real concern over what the defeated presidential candidate will do, following the announcement of results. In this second round run-off, as Prime Minister Yulia Tymoshenko faces Viktor Yanukovych, it seems everyone, even the usually staid Security Services, is abnormally jumpy.

Have camera-pen, will travel

On Tuesday, the Ukraine Security Services (SBU) announced that they had “foiled an operation by Russian agents in the region of Odessa” and had expelled four Russian citizens from the country while detaining another. (1)

The spy plot reads like the best of the 007 dramas.

According to Ukrainian officials, four members of the Russian security service (FSB) “were trying to illegally obtain Ukrainian secrets through blackmail and threats.” Moreover, “they were caught red-handed” – with a camera-pen and “other espionage gadgets,” according to the Agence France Presse (AFP). (2)

In a strange twist, Russian officials have confirmed the story. The FSB announced that “an employee” had been detained in Ukraine and complained that Ukraine had made the incident public. “Usually such situations are resolved
through coordination between special services,” the agency said in a statement cited by AFP. (3)

The FSB further claimed that the incident was related to the apprehension of a Ukrainian agent by Russian officials at a military facility in Moldova. According to the FSB, the Ukrainian agent chose to work as a double agent to avoid charges. He had a meeting scheduled with Russian intelligence officials on the day the five Russian agents were detained.

But Russia’s Argumenty i Fakty suggested, “Everything is strange in this story.” The newspaper’s editors could not imagine what worthwhile “technological secrets” Ukraine could possess and could not understand how Ukrainians could have caught the (obviously superior) Russians. Moreover, the editors were perplexed that the story ended up in the mass media, “and that the FSB has reacted to this, and perhaps for the first time in its history has recognized the fact of the detention of its officers.” (4)

Russian analysts have developed a myriad of other complicated explanations for the case. These include one scenario in which the detentions were one presidential candidate’s response to the deportation of friendly Georgian election observers and another depicting the incident as a foiled plot to disrupt the election itself.

While these scenarios seem highly unlikely, it does appear from the FSB’s repeated mention of Moldova, that the agents may have been concerned about a particularly hot-button issue – Ukraine’s sale of weapons to its neighbors. Of course, Ukraine is also a competitor with Russia in the fields of aviation, metallurgical production, and agriculture.

Regardless, it is impossible to know exactly what Russia’s agents were doing and how they were caught. But, the “why?” and “why now?” seem fairly clear.
The Ukraine Security Service (SBU) is under the control of President Viktor Yushchenko’s allies. More than likely, the SBU actions are similar to other recent actions taken by Yushchenko. The President, defeated in the first-round of the election, has used a series of last-ditch efforts to demonstrate his “patriotic” priorities – either as an attempt at a more positive legacy or as preparation for a potential parliamentary election run. This action appears no different than posthumously awarding Stepan Bandera the Medal of Heroes, or making a final push to have the Ukrainian famine recognized as genocide.

Russia, aware of Yushchenko’s imminent departure and happy with both remaining candidates, appears eager not to become embroiled in an international incident. “Russia and Russian special forces must demonstrate restraint,” Duma Deputy Sergei Goncharov said, “so they will be able to restart constructive interaction with the winning candidate after the election.” (5) It appears Russia is doing exactly that.

As they wait, Ukraine’s presidential candidates give the impression that they are preparing for war.

**Militants versus fighters**

On Sunday, PM and presidential candidate Yulia Tymoshenko suggested that her opponent Viktor Yanukovych had filled Kyiv’s downtown hotels with “fighters who are ready to take power using any means.” She continued, “As in 2004, we are going to put [Yanukovych] in his place in a severe manner and he will never get power in Ukraine, whatever the circumstances.” (6) In response, Yanukovych claimed that Tymoshenko was bringing hostile Poles, Georgians and Lithuanians to Ukraine to “destabilize” the election. “It is clear they are militants,” he said, and demanded “the current authorities” take action, “otherwise, there will be a call to arms to show them what the Ukrainian people are.” (7)
Ukrainians have expressed alarm at these statements, although most understand them to be only rhetoric. Still, these statements are nothing compared to the most recent war of words surrounding sudden, unexpected amendments to the presidential election law passed by parliament on Wednesday, 3 February and signed Thursday by President Yushchenko.

**Orange Revolution II?**

As part of those amendments, passed three days before the run-off election, changes were made to the way in which electoral commissions at all levels make decisions. Previously, in order to have a quorum, two-thirds of election commission members needed to be present. Now, only a simple majority (50% +1) is required to make decisions. (8)

The commissions are comprised of representatives from all parties in parliament, with Tymoshenko’s large bloc receiving about 40% of the seats. (9)

Yanukovych’s allies in parliament joined with the Communist Party, the party of the parliamentary speaker and some members of President Yushchenko’s bloc to pass the change in the law. They claimed the change was necessary to stop Tymoshenko’s allies from refusing to attend commission meetings, in order to undermine the tabulation of election results.

However, Tymoshenko called the move was designed to “wreck an honest presidential election, make it false, dishonest, unregulated.” (10) She said the provision could be used to exclude her allies on the commissions, in order to commit fraud by certifying incorrect results. Given the coalition in parliament that passed the change, it is reasonable to assume that a 50% + 1 majority could be gathered without Tymoshenko’s representatives present.

Not long after Yushchenko signed the changes, two Members of the European Parliament (Foreign Affairs Committee)—and longtime Tymoshenko allies—
expressed their dismay. “The decision to change the electoral rules in between Presidential election rounds,” wrote MEPs Elmar Brok and Charles Tannock, “now raises serious concerns about the vulnerability of these elections to violations and fraud which could undermine the final result.” (11)

Tymoshenko herself, languishing at least five points behind Yanukovych in the polls, found a rallying point. “If Yanukovych wants an honest fight, we are ready to compete with him, but if he seeks to cheat, we will be able to rebuff him in a way he has never seen, even in 2004,” she said, with clearly just a bit of exaggeration. (12)

Although Tymoshenko is unlikely to be able to mobilize large street protests in Ukraine’s current environment, she may be able to use this sudden change as legal grounds for electoral challenges and muster protests from her hardcore (and thus most radical) base.
Yanukovych potentially could do the same.

Next week, therefore, will be an unexpectedly interesting one in Ukraine.

Source Notes:
(2) Ibid.
(3) Ibid.
(6) “Ukraine’s Tymoshenko street protests,” Agence France Presse, 31 Jan 10 via http://www.google.com/hostednews/afp/article/ALeqM5i1BH9O87BoZz7hT8hCkyIb1pEk9Q.


(9) Ibid.

(10) “Ukraine election rivals trade barbs,” 0734 GMT, 4 Feb 10 via english.aljazeera.net/news/europe.

(11) Press Release, Dr Charles Tannock MEP and Elmar Brok MEP, by email.