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Russian Federation: Executive Branch

By Susan Cavan

The START of Putin's presidency

In a stark turnabout from past experience, the Russian parliament has handed the president several significant victories to mark the beginning of his term. President Putin was bolstered by the Duma's ratification of the START II treaty just as he set out for his first trip abroad, to visit British Prime Minister Tony Blair. The swift passage of the treaty by the Duma followed a direct appeal by Putin, who appeared before the Duma with the "nuclear suitcase" ostentatiously on display.

The Duma's decision to ratify, followed by ratification in the Federation Council, did manage to garner laudatory foreign press, and, perhaps more significantly, diverted attention from Chechnya. While Blair made a point of raising concerns about Chechnya, Putin readily agreed to yet another human rights commission, Russian-composed, to investigate allegations of abuse and rights violations in the region. With Western criticism thus mollified, Putin accepted international compliments for achieving an arms control victory -- a success denied to Yel'tsin for years.

Putin's foreign trip did raise an important domestic issue as well. Prior to his election as president, Putin had refused to travel abroad while holding both the posts of prime minister and acting president. The rationale was that the Russian constitution outlines no further succession beyond the prime minister, in the event of the death of the president. Theoretically, foreign travel would pose too great a risk of plunging Russia into a succession crisis. President-elect Putin's decision to visit Blair in England, before naming a prime minister, suggests two
possible motives. He likely sensed a need to score an early international success in light of criticism over Chechnya, and he also may have wanted to highlight the need for constitutional reform in Russia, an issue he has raised on several occasions, even before his ascent to the presidency.

The parliament has certainly demonstrated its willingness to work with the new president. In addition to the START II treaty, the Duma ratified the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty, another foreign policy coup for Putin, and the Federation Council finally agreed to remove the pesky, Kremlin-investigating, suspended Prosecutor General Yuri Skuratov. The removal of Skuratov signals at least temporary relief for several Yel'tsin "Family" members, but perhaps none more so than former Kremlin Economic Manager Pavel Borodin.

Putin, in fact, seems intent upon insuring the security of Borodin, his former boss. Just in case the position Putin personally secured for Borodin, as secretary of the Belarus-Russian Union Council, does not provide immunity from prosecution, the Kremlin is now leaning on the magistrates involved in investigating Borodin and the Mabetex case. One of the magistrates, Ruslan Tamaev, has asked to be removed from the investigation, claiming pressure from the Kremlin. According to the newspaper Vlast, Tamaev made his request to resign "under duress."

(RAGENCE FRANCE PRESSE, 1120 PDT, 18 Apr 00; via C-afp@clari.net)

Russia's government organ, Rossiyskaya gazeta (31 Mar 00; FBIS-SOV-2000-0403, via World News Connection), also waded into the issue of Borodin's alleged corrupt involvement with Mabetex by mocking press accounts of a Swiss warrant for his arrest. The Rossiyskaya gazeta item claims to have investigated the existence of a warrant and found no substantiating evidence for it, even from the Swiss authorities, who publicly claimed to have issued it. While the article does not affix blame for the creation of the story specifically, it does denounce the whole affair as an attempt to play "a very big bluff."
Cult of personality?

It was a truism of this year's presidential campaign that the state-run media were heavily skewed toward Putin as a candidate. It may be worth noting, however, that the doting coverage of the now president-elect has not stalled; if anything, there are examples of an intensification of the praise heaped on Putin. The government's own Rossiyskaya gazeta (5 Apr 00; FBIS-SOV-2000-0405, via World News Connection) ran a long piece, apparently in partial response to a negative story in Zavtra, in which it assesses Putin's character and achievements. On Chechnya, the article denounces the tactics of former Defense Minister Pavel Grachev in 1994 and notes that the earlier defeat led "certain Moscow politicians" to believe the Chechens were invincible. This combination (defeat and fear) made Putin's decision to eliminate "the bandit and terrorist enclave in Chechnya" all the more "momentous." By the way, the article also claims that former President Yel'tsin granted Putin wide-ranging authority over the Chechen campaign, and that the chief of the General Staff and the defense minister reported directly to the then prime minister.

When the article moves beyond celebrating Putin's achievements in Chechnya, it takes up his character. Citing a psychologist's assessment of Putin, the paper claims he has the "ability to be unnoticed and indispensable at the same time." He is also "a hero with an original manner." Moving on to solicit opinions from an actual acquaintance of the president, the article cites Aleksandr Golovkov, who describes Putin as having a "certain magic that happens not straightaway but some time later in a conversation." Golovkov further pronounces that Putin is a "tried-and-tested warrior" who is "cautious" and doesn't like to stand out, a habit which developed from his history of "carrying out highly complex and delicate duties." (ROSSIYSKAYA GAZETA, 5 Apr 00; FBIS-SOV-2000-0405, via World News Connection)

For those anxious to read more about the KGB-warrior president Putin's publisher, PublicAffairs, has announced that his translated memoirs, First
Illarionov named presidential adviser
Andrei Illarionov, head of the Institute for Economic Analysis, has been appointed, by presidential decree, to the position of presidential adviser on economic affairs. Illarionov has gained the reputation of an ultra-liberal on economic reforms. He previously served in the Yeltsin administration, and in 1993 he worked with Sergei Vasiliev to draw up the government's economic program. (MOSCOW NEWS, 19 Apr 00; via lexis-nexis)

In 1994, Illarionov resigned from the then Chernomyrdin-led government, claiming in his resignation letter "that 'the government has fallen on its knees' before industrial and regional lobbies." Chernomyrdin claimed, however, that Illarionov had been fired for "absenteeism." (MOSCOW TIMES, 19 Apr 00; via lexis-nexis)

As head of the Institute for Economic Analysis, Illarionov currently spearheads the project that is reportedly developing the president's economic policy. The appointment does little to shed light on what relations will be like between the government and the Kremlin once the new government and Kremlin staffs are in place. It could be that Putin wants the main architect of his economic program at hand in the Kremlin to advise him if the government goes astray. It may also signal that the president's staff will have the primary role in developing policy, while the government is left with the task of simply carrying out Kremlin commands. Putin has denied claims that the government will be a merely "technical" organ. "Let the Government work and bear its share of the responsibility," Putin responded to a press conference questioner in London. (INTERFAX, 1725 GMT, 17 Apr 00; FBIS-SOV-2000-0417, via World News Connection)
SECURITY SERVICES

Nikitin acquitted

Despite the best efforts of the Federal Security Services (FSB), Russia's Supreme Court ruled on 17 April that former submarine Captain Aleksandr Nikitin was not guilty of espionage. (THE GAZETTE (Montreal), 18 Apr 00; via lexis-nexis) Nikitin -- who was arrested in 1996, spent 10 months in jail, and whose case was sent by the courts for "reinvestigation" four separate times -- is said to be headed to Canada to join his wife and family. The initial charges against him stemmed from his expose of illegal nuclear waste dumping in the Arctic Ocean.

Russian Federation: Foreign Relations

By Chandler Rosenberger and Sarah Miller

For an elected leader, preparing a foreign policy legacy is a messy business. There are the usual obstacles -- an opposition party in the legislature, the troublesome checks and balances of the constitution. Top these with an obstinate opponent in a foreign capital and achievements can slip the grasp of even the most assiduous administration. How much easier to work with a hard-nosed man in Moscow willing to meet you halfway.

In April, some politicians were willing to criticize Russia's vicious behavior during the Chechen war. Safely ensconced in the obscurity of their toothless offices, however, the mandarins of Europe's multinational bodies were free to put actual concerns about Russia ahead of their places in history. British Prime Minister Tony Blair and American President Bill Clinton, on the other hand, appeared to think their legacies lay in helping Russia run roughshod over its present towards its bright future.

Never mind that Russian politicians seemed once again to hold Western leaders in contempt whether they criticized the Kremlin or praised it. A hard-liner atop
Russia makes "involvement" and "engagement" the stuff of history; if Vladimir Putin is tough enough to kill others, he's surely strong enough to "reform." And never mind that the means Putin uses undermine democratic rule so much that the end of democracy is abandoned from the start. Who cares if parliamentary integrity is questionable at best, so long as pet arms control treaties are passed?

**The mandarins take their stand**

After eight months of watching Moscow pursue its savage war, the talking shops of Europe were finally scandalized out of their silence. In condemnation of the war in Chechnya, the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe voted on 6 April to suspend Russia's voting rights. Lord Judd had blocked sanctions against Russia before leading a fact-finding mission to Chechnya in March, but had apparently been shaken enough by what he had seen to change his mind. "The situation I saw in Chechnya was grave," Judd told reporters after the assembly's vote. "This is not a time for gestures." (REUTERS, 0417 ET, 6 Apr 00; via lexis-nexis)

The assembly also voted to ask the foreign ministers of the council's 41 member governments to vote to expel Russia at their next meeting in May. In the unlikely event of a unanimous vote to remove the Russian delegation, the expulsion would be the first in the council's 51-year history. The assembly also recommended that member governments take Russia to the European Court of Human Rights to prosecute Russian soldiers for atrocities committed against civilians.

**Cruel Britannia**

Fortunately for the elected leaders who have staked their reputations on working with Putin, the Kremlin was clever in preparing the new president's first foray to the West. Since Putin's assumption of power on New Year's Eve, both Blair and Clinton had proven willing to ignore the debacle in the Caucasus in exchange for a fresh start with the Kremlin's new master. There was no longer any need to
hold back on gestures, however insubstantial, that the Western leaders appeared to crave, and no reason to make threatening noises about Russia forging anti-Western alliances.

With allies in the Russian Duma on a short leash, the Kremlin was able, for example, to ram through passage of the START II nuclear weapons treaty without any serious opposition. "Ratification of the START II Treaty is becoming a farce," Gennady Zyuganov, leader of the Duma's Communist faction, complained. "The State Duma is being made to take a crucial decision without being allowed to get into the essence of the issue." (INTERFAX, 0733 GMT, 14 Apr 00; FBIS-SOV-2000-0414, via World News Connection)

Armed with passage of the treaty, Putin was able to reward the Western leader who had stood by him most firmly -- Britain's Tony Blair -- with his first visit outside the territory of the former Soviet Union. During the 16 April visit, Putin was also able to portray himself as a peacemaker in full control of his state, and to dismiss criticism of Russia's war as a family argument among European powers, many of whom did not understand the work Russia was doing on their behalf.

"We have seen European countries and European leaders not able to support the Russian fight because they are afraid of a reaction among the Muslim inhabitants of Europe," Putin told a press conference after his meeting with Blair, "but that's the wrong conclusion. Western Europe could pay heavily for this."

Putin's robust defense of his country's war, combined with his success passing START II, left Blair offering only the meekest of criticism amid high praise. "I believe that Vladimir Putin is a leader who is ready to embrace a new relationship with the European Union and the United States, who wants a strong and modern Russia and a strong relationship with the West," Blair said. (LONDON PRESS
Setting up America

Blair has not merely upstaged Clinton in winning Putin's favor first; he has also built himself up as the key European player in upcoming negotiations between the United States and Russia over the future of nuclear arms control. Britain's role in the talks, Blair said, would be "to try to build an understanding of respective points of view." (REUTERS, 1056 ET, 17 Apr 00; via lexis-nexis)

While in Britain, Putin hinted at "concessions" Russia might be willing to make on the development of an American missile defense system. Russia had passed the START II treaty on the understanding that America would continue to adhere to the 1972 Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty banning the development of a strategic missile defense. But Russia also made a clear distinction between "strategic and non-strategic defense," Putin said. "In this very context we are ready to conduct a dialogue." (REUTERS, 1056 ET, 17 Apr 00; via lexis-nexis)

What might be the shape of such a compromise? American columnist Charles Krauthammer feared that hasty arrangements to send Clinton to Moscow in June were not merely driven by the need to play catch-up in relations with the new strongman of Moscow. Of two plans for a missile defense system, Krauthammer wrote, the Clinton administration seemed prepared to pursue a fixed, land-based system of antiballistic missiles in Alaska, and abandon a less expensive, more flexible system of placing ABMs on ships. (THE WASHINGTON POST, 21 Apr 00; via www.washingtonpost.com) Because the land-based system in Alaska could not defend the entire territory of the United States, it could be presented as a "non-strategic" defense aimed solely at the threat North Korea poses.

Having linked its passage of the START II treaty to maintaining the ABM restrictions, the Russian government is now threatening to allow the arms control
negotiations to unravel if America builds an antimissile defense. "Everyone should be aware," Russian Foreign Minister Igor Ivanov wrote in The New York Times, "that the collapse of the ABM treaty would have a destructive domino effect for the existing system of disarmament agreements." Russia is, however, "prepared to cooperate with America and other countries in creating systems of nonstrategic antimissile defense that are not banned under the 1972 ABM treaty."

As an alternative, Ivanov proposed that the United States and Russia jointly develop a system of non-proliferation of nuclear and missile technologies. (THE NEW YORK TIMES, 24 Apr 00; via www.nytimes.com) Former US Senator Sam Nunn and Harvard Professor Graham Allison weighed in the same day with their recommendation that President Putin "would be receptive to a bold proposal for a joint Russian-American initiative to prevent terrorist theft of nuclear weapons and weapons-usable nuclear materials." (THE WASHINGTON POST, 24 Apr 00; via www.washingtonpost.com)

Leave aside for the moment that a half-century of efforts at non-proliferation have not prevented the nations of the world from building nuclear weapons, or that serious threats of nuclear blackmail come from countries, such as Iran and Iraq, that are a long way from Alaska. The Ivanov proposal is an attempt to turn the poor state of Russia's arsenal to Moscow's advantage. With fewer functioning missiles than START II allows, Russia had nothing to lose in signing the treaty. By portraying the treaty's passage as a noble gesture to limit the spread of nuclear weapons, Moscow can attempt to force the American administration to adopt the kind of antiballistic system it likes.

Will the White House fall for such a crude ploy? That depends on whether the administration is more interested in building an effective system of defense, or in merely securing the kind of arms control agreements that were the stuff of the Cold War. The White House's rush to embrace the Russian version of arms
control suggests, as Krauthammer put it, that President Clinton longs for "a lavish signing ceremony in Moscow and a run at a Nobel."

There is, after all, that legacy to consider.

**Lest you think Russia's Asian ambitions are fading...**

Think again. Russian President-elect Vladimir Putin's much-publicized trip to England last week may have captured everyone's attention, but when haven't Russian relations with the West claimed top billing in the international arena? Ever since Putin made the decision to travel to Britain prior to his inauguration, questions have arisen about how this will affect Russia's Asia relations. But, while Putin was having tea with the queen, Russia was exhibiting multiple signs which suggest that, Western relations aside, Moscow sees Asia, and particularly China, as a significant part of its foreign policy plans.

Putin may have not made China his first foreign visit as the Kremlin had previously suggested he would, but China is certainly Russia's priority in Asia. In a hotline conversation with Chinese President Jiang Zemin the day after his election, an invigorated Putin seemed to push Russian rhetoric toward China up a notch when he said that he expects "all-around development" in Russo-Chinese relations. (XINHUA, 1041 GMT, 27 Mar 00; FBIS-EAS-2000-0327, via World News Connection) These comments follow the general direction of Russo-Chinese relations over the past few months, especially during the last quarter when contacts between the two countries abounded. But the most substantive indication to come out of the meetings between various high-ranking political, economic, and military officials was Russia's apparent intention to focus on expanding the relationship beyond the typical military-technical agreements. Deputy Foreign Minister Ilya Klebanov's journey and a subsequent trip by Russian energy ministry officials confirmed that the energy sector would receive the most emphasis. With newly appointed Asia specialist Alexander Losyukov leading his foreign policy team in the region, it appears that Putin has no
intention of skimping on Asian contact. (ITAR-TASS, 1615 GMT, 27 Mar 00; FBIS-SOV-2000-0327, via World News Connection) In fact, a series of meetings between now and July will provide several opportunities for Russia to pursue "all-around" development with China.

Despite Putin's trip to Britain, he will have at least two opportunities to meet with President Jiang prior to the G-8 Okinawa summit in July. The first meeting, which has already been confirmed, is scheduled to take place on the sidelines of the Dushanbe Shanghai-5 presidents' summit in May. At this meeting the presidents will reportedly discuss the decision taken by the Russian and Chinese defense ministers in March to "pool efforts" to fight terrorism, among other issues. (ITAR-TASS, 1512 GMT, 29 Mar 00; FBIS-SOV-2000-0329, via World News Connection) Interestingly, in this late March communique, the Shanghai-5 defense ministers pledged that they would "by no means allow any country to interfere in other country's internal affairs under the pretext of human rights..." only two weeks prior to US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright's trip to Central Asia. (XINHUA, 30 Mar 00; FBIS-EAS-2000-0330, via World News Connection) Thus, it seems unlikely that Russian regional cooperation with China will wane either. The second chance for Putin to meet with Jiang will come in July on the way to Okinawa, but reports remain unclear about whether he will take this opportunity to conduct a formal summit in Beijing. Even if the formal summit doesn't materialize until after the G-8 meeting, however, it seems unlikely that Russo-Chinese relations will suffer greatly for it.

'Old friends' meet in Moscow

For the past year, Russia has been more than a little negligent in its relations with Japan. But with a summit upcoming in St. Petersburg on 29 April between President Putin and incumbent Japanese Prime Minister Yoshiro Mori, former Russian President Boris Yel'tsin and former Japanese Prime Minister Ryutaro Hashimoto made a timely decision to "renew their friendship" over the 21-23 April weekend in Moscow. (KYODO, 20 Apr 00; via lexis-nexis) With the informal
summit so close, it seems more likely that the two will attempt to sort out the as-yet-unratified peace treaty and Kurile Islands territorial dispute. As Prime Minister Mori’s new chief aide on foreign policy, Hashimoto is a good selection for the talks, since he and Yel’tsin have a history of successful summits on these issues. However, after pledging to make a decision on the issues by 2000 at their 1997 meeting, the sides were unable to resolve the territorial issues, in large part due to domestic politics. Although government sources have not yet revealed the contents of the talks, and the Japanese have said that Hashimoto would not hold a press conference after his meeting with Yel’tsin, the timing of the meeting suggests a last-minute Russian attempt to feel out the Japanese position prior to next week’s meeting.

Unfortunately, the situation only seems to have been complicated by the Russian border guards’ attack on an unidentified Japanese fishing vessel reportedly entering the Russian economic zone on 21 April. Based on Japanese and Russian press and government sources, a Russian patrol boat detected the Japanese fishing boat with its name and number concealed in the Russian economic zone. A pursuit reportedly ensued during which the Russian boat fired on the Japanese boat after it had left the Russian economic zone. (DEUTSCHE PRESS AGENTUR, 21 Apr 00; via lexis-nexis) It remains unclear if the boat was in the Japanese economic zone or in neutral waters at the time of the attack, but the Russian boat proceeded to take possession of the Japanese boat, dragging it back into Russian waters where it remains in Russian control. Although many instances of illegal Japanese fishing in Russian waters occur each year and Japanese boats have fallen under fire from the Russian patrol boats before, the possibility that the Japanese boat was captured outside Russian waters complicates the issue.

This incident has transpired at a delicate juncture in Russian-Japanese relations. Russia has just received another $100 million tranche of a Japanese loan, and there are rumors that Japan has offered the economically ailing Russia a very
large sum for the Kurile Islands. If this dispute is not resolved quickly, the sides might decide to call of the Putin-Mori meeting on 29 April, putting off further discussion of the chief impediments to Russian-Japanese relations.

Russian Federation: Media

By Jonathan Solomon

The noose tightens
The first few days of April were not kind to Vladimir Gusinsky and Media-MOST. On Sunday, 2 April, ORT broke the news that the natural gas monopoly Gazprom was calling in full payment of a $280 million loan to MOST. MOST spokesman Dmitry Ostalsky attempted damage control the next day, saying that "none of our creditors have any claims on the company," and denying that the loan had been called due. (MOSCOW TIMES, 4 Apr 00; via www.themoscowtimes.com)

But the other shoe dropped two days later. After the newspaper Kommersant published what it claimed to be a 14 March Gazprom document requesting that MOST "transfer the ruble equivalent" of the debt to Gazprom "very soon," MOST turned around and admitted that the loan had been called in after all. An anonymous MOST official went so far as to say that Gazprom had been granted a 14-percent share of the media empire in order to cancel the debt, and that negotiations for this transaction had been underway for months. For its part, Gazprom officially denied acquiring any shares in MOST, though company spokesman Anatoly Babaev did say that negotiations over the settlement between the two companies were "ongoing." (MOSCOW TIMES, 5 Apr 00; via www.themoscowtimes.ru)

All year, MOST has decried what it claims to be pressure from the Kremlin upon MOST-shareholder Gazprom to clamp down on the media empire for the adversarial reporting of its outlets, notably NTV. The situation became grimmer in
February, when Gazprom chairman Rem Vyakhirev took the unusual step of publicly denouncing NTV's coverage of the Chechnya campaign. This had no visible effect on NTV's reporting style. Thus, Vyakhirev's statement and the events of early April, coupled with the anti-oligarch rhetoric of the Putin presidential campaign and the lack of any overt moves against the oligarchs by the president-elect, lends credibility to MOST's claims. It makes sense that Putin is waiting to be sworn into office before he acts one way or the other, and that the Kremlin seeks to damage and discredit Gusinsky in the interim to make whatever Putin eventually decides to do that much easier to carry out. So long as Putin's apparent policy of maintaining his honeymoon with Western leaders continues or MOST's existence does not endanger his primary interests, he probably will not move formally against MOST, lest he risk being branded a free-speech-loathing despot by the West. Heaven forbid!

However, of special note are the media outlets that revealed MOST's current dilemma. Both ORT and Kommersant are owned by Berezovsky. It should then come as no surprise that they broke the story, most likely in an attempt to win another round in the uneven media war between the two oligarchs. If anything, the report served to embarrass MOST and highlight Gusinsky's weakness vis-a-vis Berezovsky. The Kremlin and Berezovsky have the same interest in removing Gusinsky from any position of power, but different motivations. The Kremlin wants to "sterilize" the press and limit dissent to the government's policies, not to mention revelations of its shortcomings. Berezovsky merely wants to finish off his historical competitor for influence in government. Putin probably could not care less what Berezovsky's motives are; he just wants to see Gusinsky under fire and is willing to let Berezovsky do some of the dirty work for him.

After eliminating Gusinsky, though, Berezovsky will not be much stronger than he already is. It is not likely that the Kremlin would ever let him absorb any major spoils from a divided-up Media-MOST, as it is not in Putin's interest to let Berezovsky gain any more power or media than he has now. The great
Berezovsky-Gusinsky media wars for government influence hit their peak last year between midsummer and the December Duma elections, which pitted Primakov's OVR against the Berezovsky-backed Unity movement. Since then, it has been clear which oligarch won, and anything now is almost anti-climactic.

MOST outlets have seized upon the "press sterilization" argument by claiming that Putin is more interested in eliminating dissenting oligarchs with media assets rather than all the oligarchs. Putin has doubts about continuing to allow a free press in Russia, according to Alfa Bank president and oligarch Pyotr Aven in MOST's Segodnya newspaper, but the paper did not dwell much on that point. Instead, the paper assessed to whom Putin made the comment. "The paper is surprised also that Putin, who has proclaimed the principle of equidistance from all oligarchs, discusses his possible approach to oligarchs with one of them. This confirms the apprehensions that some oligarchs are 'less equidistant' from him than others." The paper went on to suggest that the alleged statement by Deputy Presidential Chief of Staff Vladislav Surkov that "they [Berezovsky and Gusinsky] are like germs living inside a rotten body" leaves out mention of other key oligarchs, such as Berezovsky ally Roman Abramovich. Segodnya pointed out that Abramovich owns no major media outlets, so he is no threat to Putin, unlike Gusinsky. It also observed "the Kremlin flogs controllable Berezovsky to devastate uncontrollable Gusinsky." (SEGODNYA, 31 Mar 00; Russian Press Digest, via lexis-nexis)

No doubt Segodnya's analysis is true for the time being, but despite Berezovsky's public optimism about Putin (See THE NIS OBSERVED, 4 Apr 00), it is not likely that Putin wants to share power with anyone, let alone someone with a private media empire. Is the tender of ORT in May a minor "spanking" of Berezovsky to satiate the Russian public, or is it doubly a small first step towards cutting off the oligarch's media voice? Does Berezovsky wonder if he is being used? Does he wonder if, after defeating their mutual adversary Gusinsky, Putin will try to turn on him? We shall see.
Moskovsky komsomolets sells out

Do you really need to ask how bad the situation has become for even the non-oligarch-aligned independent press in Russia? No clearer indication could possibly be sent than the one the muckraking Moskovsky komsomolets did on Friday, 21 April.

The front page headline was "Who Benefits by Holding Back Your Money?" However, it did not lead into an article on financial corruption, let alone anything even remotely journalistic. It was the header for an advertisement. MoneyGram, an American money transfer company in partnership with Avtobank, paid what was no doubt a huge sum for the prime advertising space.

Staff morale at Moskovsky komsomolets was said to have crashed as a result of this questionable deal. One employee, who declined to be named, stated that the editors had "let them down" with their decision to accept the ad. Even the paper's advertising department was allegedly shaken. An employee there related that the deal would likely embarrass the paper, and that personally it had "left a bad taste in her mouth." (MOSCOW TIMES, 22 Apr 00; via www.themoscowtimes.com)

Moskovsky komsomolets has been a thorn in the Kremlin's side. Officially an independent media outlet, it has nonetheless received subsidies from the city of Moscow in the past. As recently as the end of last year, the editorial staff was considered to comprise loyal supporters of Moscow Mayor Yuri Luzhkov. Its star investigative reporter, Alexander Khinshtein, recently became a target for his constant revelations of corruption at the highest levels of the federal government, not to mention less-than-flattering reports on Interior Minister Vladimir Rushailo's ally, Berezovsky. Attempting to intimidate him into silence, the interior ministry accused the reporter of having concealed a mental disorder when he applied for a driver's license back in 1996. In January of this year, the ministry attempted to remove him from his home and inter him in a psychiatric hospital "for testing."
This reminded some in the Moscow media of the Soviet-era practice of committing such dissidents "for their own good." (MOSCOW TIMES, 16 Feb 00; via www.themoscowtimes.com)

The significance of Moskovsky komsomolets' decision to sell off its front page for a day is clear. It is increasingly difficult, if not nearly impossible outside of Moscow itself, for "opposition" media to obtain enough funding to stay alive. With the Kremlin attacking the "unfriendly" press using tax levies and possibly other means (See THE NIS OBSERVED, 21 Mar 00) and, in the case of Media-MOST, pressure brought to bear upon key investors, some members of the independent press are becoming increasingly willing to do anything necessary to keep publishing. The fact that Moskovsky komsomolets "sold out" can be linked to Luzhkov's recent move to support Putin, which suggests that any media outlets once tied or loyal to the Moscow mayor are finding themselves "hung out to dry" in exchange for Luzhkov's political survival.

There is irony, too, in a statement made on 22 April by Kommersant's advertising department that it would never accept such an advertisement as Moskovsky komsomolets did, unless it was for "a lot of money." (MOSCOW TIMES, 22 Apr 00; via www.themoscowtimes.com) As a Berezovsky mouthpiece, Kommersant need not worry about its finances at all. Of course it would only accept ads in exchange for a big payoff, for whenever it prints the news with a Berezovsky spin added, that is exactly what it is doing!

Russian Federation: Domestic Issues and Legislative Branch

By Michael Thurman

FEDERAL ASSEMBLY
Federal Assembly ratifies START II, accepts Skuratov's suspension

Spurred on by an Era of Good Feeling between legislators and President-elect Vladimir Putin, the Federal Assembly dispensed with several issues with which the Yeltsin administration had been unable, or unwilling, to deal.

In a bit of house cleaning, the Federation Council finally approved the removal of Prosecutor General Skuratov, who had offended Yeltsin by initiating an investigation into a potential kickback scheme involving his family and a Swiss construction firm, and some questionable credit card use abroad by Yeltsin's wife and daughters. Under the Russian Constitution, the Federation Council has to approve the president's removal of the prosecutor general, which it routinely refused to do until now.

Putin also managed to get the second Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty, otherwise known as START II, through both houses of parliament. The Duma passed the treaty 288-131, with most of the opposition coming from the Communists and their allies. The Federation Council passed the treaty 122-15. The Federal Assembly also ratified the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT).

(AGENCE FRANCE PRESSE, 0420 ET, 20 April 00; via lexis-nexis)

After seven long years of being unable to pass START II, why now? Several answers seem credible. Perhaps the most important reason is Putin's desire to portray Russia as the world's champion of nuclear restraint -- even as it sells such technology to states with questionable motives. This not only challenges the American claim to the title. The UN Non-Proliferation Treaty meeting in New York approaches, and Russia wants to be able to bludgeon the United States with the latter's own queasiness over globalized military treaties and conventions, such as the US Senate's refusal to ratify the CTBT.

But no doubt a more important effect is intended. The START II treaty did not pass through both houses unadorned. Attached was a rider linking Russia's
adherence to START II with American adherence to the 1972 Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty (ABM). This cleverly allows Moscow to condemn the United States, should Russia perceive of an American violation (defined by Russia alone) while simultaneously allowing it to withdraw from treaty obligations because of American "transgressions." In other words, it would be America's fault that Russia defaulted on its promises.

Clearly Putin is more wily than his predecessor and the West had better take care not to be hung by a diplomatic noose of its own making. START II does more for Russia than the United States, and so would a START III, which Putin is now trumpeting as the next "logical" step. This is the same Putin who told the world he would use nuclear weapons offensively. It is one thing to have a Russian bear bumbling about the diplomatic stage in a vodka-induced haze, it is quite another to have one alert and ready.

**Federal Assembly is hopping mad at the Council of Europe**
The Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE) withdrew the Russian Federation's right to vote within the body and initiated a discussion with its committee of ministers on expelling Russia over its conduct in Chechnya.

Federation Council Chairman Yegor Stroev said that "The language of ultimatums against such a great country will not work." Showing an amazing ignorance of history, he further claimed that, "Nobody has used such language with Russia for centuries." Stroev also threatened a new Cold War and said the blame would lay with the Council of Europe. "This is why what they did can be regarded as stupidity of immense proportion in relations between countries," he said. The chairman also suggested that Russia's brutalization of Chechnya was not for Russia alone, but to "protect European countries from the spread of that pest [terrorists]." (INTERFAX, 0837 GMT, 7 Apr 00; FBIS-SOV-2000-0407, via World News Connection)
Mikhail Prusak of the Federation Council's international affairs committee helpfully suggested that the Council of Europe and Russia should talk the situation through, apparently ignoring the fact that his own country has repeatedly proclaimed that there was nothing to discuss.

Irina Khakamada of the Union of Right Forces noted that "there were similar debates during Russia's joining this organization -- it was said that human rights were violated in Russia, but we were then admitted to the Council of Europe 'in advance.'" (ITAR-TASS, 0638 GMT, 7 Apr 00; FBIS-SOV-2000-0407, via World News Connection) Undeterred by reports of atrocities, the Council of Europe admitted Russia during the previous Chechen war.

Is Khakamada suggesting that the Council of Europe ignored Russian violations of human rights in the past and therefore should do so again? Maybe Russian leaders have either forgotten, or have not read, the constituent document of the Council of Europe, the European Convention on Human Rights, to which Russia is a signatory. In Recommendation 1444 of 27 January 2000, the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe asked the Committee of Ministers to expel Russia should the country refuse to declare a cease-fire, "engage in a political dialogue with a cross-section of the Chechen people immediately," and allow for an independent investigation of human rights violations. (Council of Europe website, stars.coe.fr/index_e.htm) The committee is to report back to the assembly by the end of May.

But why the delay in expelling Russia? Recommendation 1456 of 6 April, which considers Russia's implementation of PACE's Recommendation 1444, reads in paragraph eight that "[t]he [Parliamentary] Assembly reiterates that Russia has violated some of its most important obligations under both the European Convention on Human Rights, in particular Article 2 (Right to Life) and international humanitarian law, as well as the undertakings she gave on joining the Council of Europe." If Russia violated the letter and spirit of its treaty
commitments to the council, the committee of ministers must expel Russia if the committee is to retain any sense of integrity.

Russian authorities forget that two incidents spurred on the formation of the Council of Europe in the first place and both were examples of Soviet violations of human rights -- the Prague coup and the building of the Berlin Wall. Russia has no right by simple virtue of geography to sit in the Council of Europe. It cannot "rejoin" Europe, if it ever belonged, simply by pulling down hammers and sickles and replacing them with double-headed (imperial) eagles. Russia must behave as a modern, European state and respect the rights of all human beings to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness -- especially when it is inconvenient. The high degree of public support in Russia for its deplorable conduct in Chechnya suggests that it is not just the authorities who have a long way to go.

**REGIONS**

**The heads of local administration in Mariy El are no longer elected**

The Mariy El parliament recently amended the local constitution, making the heads of towns and rayons appointive positions by the region's president. Part of the reason for this may be that the mayors of four of the largest cities in the region have been feuding with the region's president, Vyacheslav Kislitsyn. The mayors sent a request to then acting President Vladimir Putin to institute direct presidential rule from Moscow because Kislitsyn had turned the region into his own personal fiefdom, making the lives of its inhabitants unbearable.

Small demonstrations in front of the Mariy El State Assembly building were mostly ignored. Supporters for Kislitsyn's position argued that the region had become unmanageable because the mayors and rayon heads were elected and could not be controlled. Old Soviet habits of centralization die hard.

However, critics such as Mikhail Zherebtsov, head of the Zvenigovsky Rayon Administration, stated, "[t]he heads that voted in favor of the decision just amaze
me. For three years, they have been kicked in the mud like puppies and trampled like a rag, and they still... The vote at the session was conducted with the help of a computer system. Some deputies tried to verify it and proposed voting by casting ballots -- to no avail. In my opinion, the voting outcome was clearly rigged up (the decision was passed by a margin of one vote only!). The administration heads were bought off with transfers from the republican budget: Money for wages came in right before the session. In other words, they were bought off with the money to which we, the rayons, are rightfully entitled!" (ROSSIYSKAYA GAZETA, 11 Apr 00; FBIS-SOV-2000-0411, via World News Connection)

More of this should be expected across the Federation in the coming months as governors attempt to reign in, or exact revenge on, political rivals whom they cannot touch because of the differences in their respective electoral constituencies. However, it is not readily apparent that this development is necessarily inconsistent with the principles of democratic government, though it does some damage to democracy-as-mechanism. Many democratic states in Western Europe similarly appoint regional, country, or municipal heads of administration.

**Move over Pinochet: Gorbachev and Yel'tsin may be senators for life too**

Yegor Stroev, the speaker of the Federation Council, has proposed naming ex-Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev and ex-Russian President Boris Yel'tsin as senators-for-life. (INTERFAX, 0812 GMT, 8 Apr 00; FBIS-SOV-2000-0408, via World News Connection)

The reason is to provide ex-leaders with a semblance of dignity and respect after their years of public service -- and post-office public neglect. Presumably they would also receive monetary compensation, an office, and some of the other perks they enjoyed while in office. Parliamentary immunity from prosecution may also play a role in Stroev’s calculations. Apparently the construction of
presidential libraries to occupy the time of ex-presidents is not as popular in Russia as it is in the United States.

Russian Federation: Armed Forces

An opening on missile defense?
An unexpected statement from Russian President-elect Vladimir Putin on 15 April led to speculation that Russia had cracked open the door to resolving the dispute over US plans to build a national missile defense system. The proposed system would be in violation of the 1972 Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty. Following discussions of the issue with British Prime Minister Tony Blair, Putin stated there is a difference between strategic and non-strategic missile defense systems, and "in this context we are ready for a dialogue." (INTERFAX, 1533 GMT, 18 Apr 00; FBIS-SOV-2000-0418, via World News Connection) British commentators immediately suggested that American plans for an ABM system directed at rogue states rather than Russia might pass muster with Moscow. (RFE/RL NEWSLINE, 18 Apr 00) Although this runs contrary to Russia's visceral rejections of US efforts to amend the ABM treaty, it is worth further analysis.

The United States and Russia have agreements on lines of demarcation between strategic and non-strategic anti-ballistic missile systems. Strategic systems could intercept inter-continental ballistic missiles (ICBM) which have the range, for example, to travel from Russia to the continental United States. Non-strategic systems could only intercept short- or medium-range ballistic missiles, which have less range and fly much slower than ICBMs. The performance differences between ICBMs and short-range ballistic missiles require entirely different approaches to ballistic missile defense. Therefore, a ballistic missile defense system could be classified as strategic or non-strategic. Following the 1991 Gulf War, the US initiated vigorous efforts to develop more capable, non-strategic
ballistic missile defenses. To prevent conflicts over interpretations of the 1972 ABM treaty, the US and Russia agreed in 1997 on missile defense system performance limits, such as interceptor speed, for non-strategic systems. (FACT SHEET, Second Agreed Statement of 26 Sep 97, Relating to the ABM Treaty) These lines of demarcation prevent non-strategic systems from being able to intercept Russian ICBMs.

Russia has bitterly opposed the US national missile defense system. The mission of the national missile defense system is to defend all 50 states from a rogue nation ICBM attack and an accidental launch from an established nuclear power such as Russia. (FACT SHEET JN-99-05, Ballistic Missile Defense Office, Mar 99) Russia fears the proposed architecture threatens to neutralize its nuclear-tipped ICBMs and would marginalize its only source of political clout in world affairs. (NIS OBSERVED, 1 Nov 99) Although the US has reassured Russia that the system would not marginalize its strategic deterrent, the NMD system will upgrade US land-based, early-warning radars, giving them an antimissile capability. These radars were constructed during the Cold War to detect a Russian attack, so from Russia's perspective the upgraded radars and associated missile interceptors based in Alaska become the basis of an antimissile system aimed at Russia's ICBMs. Russia has used its objections to raise suspicions of US intentions in Europe, potentially driving a wedge between the US and NATO. Blair indicated during Putin's visit that Britain, a consistent US supporter in foreign affairs, is unlikely to serve as an advocate for the US proposal. (Jamestown Foundation MONITOR, 19 Apr 00)

Perhaps Putin is referring to an alternative missile defense architecture which could defend against a rogue nation attack, but would be incapable of intercepting Russian ICBMs. The proposed US system would intercept ICBMs in their mid-course phase as they coast through outer space. Critics of the US proposal charge this is a very difficult intercept problem due to the high speed, altitude, and relative ease with which an adversary could employ decoys and
other countermeasures to fool an interceptor. An alternative approach would be to consummate an intercept in the boost phase. A ballistic missile is most vulnerable in this phase because it is easier to detect, it is flying much slower, and there are very few options for countermeasures to fool an interceptor. Land- or sea-based interceptors could be placed close enough to a rogue nation's ICBM launch locations to engage them very soon after launch. However, a boost phase intercept system would not threaten Russia's strategic nuclear forces, because the interceptors could not be positioned close enough to Russian launch locations. (International Institute of Strategic Studies, STRATEGIC COMMENTS, Dec 99) Therefore, one can argue, a boost phase intercept system may be more palatable to Moscow because it preserves the spirit of the ABM treaty.

A Russian agreement to modify the ABM treaty would constitute a complete reversal of previous rhetoric. Either Putin is offering an opening for the US, or this could be a tactic to drag the US into prolonged, fruitless negotiations. If the US and Russia cannot strike a deal on a US missile defense plan, the US would be forced to withdraw from the ABM treaty. Russia would exploit a US withdrawal for its own political gain, fanning fears throughout Europe and Asia of another nuclear arms race even though Russia's economy will be in no position to support one.

Nikitin chalks up another legal victory
Aleksandr Nikitin, the former Russian naval officer turned environmentalist, won another legal victory when the Russian Supreme Court acquitted him on charges of espionage and divulging state secrets. (Jamestown Foundation MONITOR, 18 Apr 00) The victory validated Nikitin's 29 December 99 acquittal in a St. Petersburg court. The acquittal is another chapter, but probably not the last, in Nikitin's four-year saga with the notorious Federal Security Service (FSB). He will likely receive administrative harassment when he attempts to travel outside Russia. (NIS OBSERVED, 8 Jan 00, 7 Oct 99, 17 Sep 99) Despite Nikitin's legal victories, the FSB continues its campaign of intimidating and arresting Russian
and foreign defense researchers, the latest accused being a US citizen and his Russian accomplice. Russian television showed investigators displaying seized technical drawings and a table covered with cash. The US citizen, identified as Edmond Pope, has been charged with espionage and could receive up to 20 years in prison. The severity of the espionage charge is particularly disturbing since Russian intelligence officials often assert that arrests for espionage are generally made less for reasons related purely to intelligence than for broader political and diplomatic ones. (The Jamestown Foundation MONITOR, 6 & 14 Apr 00) Based on the powers President-elect Putin has granted the FSB to protect "state secrets," this trend of deterring any belief of an open, liberal society will continue.

**Putin again goes after reservists**

President-elect Vladimir Putin signed a decree on 10 April announcing a plan to call up reserve officers for military service over the next five years, 2000 to 2005. This decree establishes an annual call-up for up to 15,000 reserve officers who originally received deferments for draft military service. According to the decree, individuals who were placed in reserve status with the rank of officer and who are no longer eligible for deferment or exemption and/or have completed deferments for secondary education will be called onto active duty. These numbers will include up to 5,000 reserve officers graduating from state, municipal, and vocational schools. High on the priority list are individuals with skills and training required to fill critical military occupations. The planned assignment of these officers will be as follows:

- up to 200 men to the border guards;
- up to 300 men to the railroad troops;
- up to 100 men to civil defense troops;
- up to 25 men to the president's Federal Government Communications and Information Agency (FAPSI);
- up to 50 men to the Federal Special Construction Service.
The remaining officers (over 14,000) are expected to be assigned to the defense ministry. (ROSSIYSKAYA GAZETA, 19 Apr 00; FBIS-SOV-2000-0419, via World News Connection)

This edict follows another decree issued by Putin last February announcing the call-up of reservists assigned to the defense ministry, border guards, interior troops and various other governmental agencies. The call-up in February was the largest in the past 10 years and was issued for the purpose of replacing servicemen performing combat duty in Chechnya. (SEGODNYA, 2 Feb 00; via Universal Database of Russian Newspapers)

Unlike the February decree, the April order does not appear to be directed solely at filling combat positions in Chechnya but rather to address a critical shortage of qualified, particularly junior, officers within the military services. Since the formation of the Russian Federation armed forces, there has been a steady drain of officers opting out of military service because of decreasing prestige and morale, substandard living conditions, low wages, and the real possibility of difficult combat duty in places like Chechnya. Periodic surveys beginning in 1995 indicate that officers serving in the military have become increasingly dissatisfied with their profession. Increasing numbers of cadets from military institutions are resigning their commissions prior to graduation because of their disillusionment with military service. During 1998 more than 70 percent of Russia's military officers experienced delays in pay (averaging $100 a month), with nearly 60 percent experiencing two- to four-month delays. (PARAMETERS, Winter 1999/2000) According to military spokesmen, in 1999 approximately 97,000 officers did not have authorized housing; many lived in dilapidated family dormitories, offices, old warehouses, tents, and even in decommissioned warships. (REUTERS, 29 Jul 99; via geocities.com) These factors, combined with several others, have created a disgruntled officer corps and have hampered recruitment programs.
These decrees recalling reservists to active duty will most likely continue across the board as long as Russia's conscription and recruitment programs fail to meet their quotas both in numbers and quality of recruits. Funding for the April reserve officer call-up is expected to come from the federal budget funds allocated to the "upkeep of federal executive authorities in which military service takes place." (ITAR-TASS, 0835 GMT, 18 Apr 00; FBIS-SOV-2000-0418, via World News Connection)

**Russian forces digging in**

Units of the Russian 42nd Motorized Division are being redeployed to the Shatoi District in southern Chechnya along with interior ministry troops. Approximately 1,000 motorized infantry soldiers and paratroopers, and 500 OMON and interior troops had arrived by 19 April. (INTERFAX, 0709 GMT, 19 Apr 00; FBIS-SOV-2000-0419, and 1556 GMT, 18 Apr 00; FBIS-SOV-2000-0418, via World News Connection)

According to Russian military spokesmen, these units represent the beginning of a permanent Russian military presence in Chechnya. The permanent basing of the 42nd Motorized Division in Chechnya was predicted as early as last fall, following the initial arrival of Russian troops in October. The permanent basing of the 42nd Motorized Division in southern Chechnya will give Russian forces a more stable launching point to continue combat and "mopping up" operations in Chechnya's most volatile area. It is clear that Chechen fighters will not be easily routed and, with more favorable weather arriving, the guerrilla war will continue. With permanent basing Russia can establish hardened, consistent logistic and communication lines, as well as billeting and facilities for troops --factors necessary for the long haul. It also answers, at least psychologically, a growing war-weariness among combat forces and increasing demands to go home. For most soldiers there is a difference between deploying for combat with the understanding you will go home when it is done, and the understanding you are being assigned to a base for a period of time and as a part of that assignment
you will be required to perform combat operations -- a subtle but distinct difference which may help to relieve some of the tension.

Newly Independent States: CIS

By Sarah Miller

Russia’s 'anti-terrorism' campaign hits a big rut
There won’t be a CIS Heads of State meeting this month. According to CIS Executive Secretary Yuri Yarov, the summit scheduled for late April has been postponed until an unspecified date due to the "strenuous working schedules of the presidents." (ITAR-TASS, 1047 GMT, 13 Apr 00; FBIS-SOV-2000-0413, via World News Connection) But even if they did meet, there’s a good chance that there wouldn’t be anything for them to discuss. Currently the only CIS-wide initiative getting any attention, "anti-terrorism" is stuck in the same mud that traps most CIS plans.

In a move exhibiting either great optimism or great fear, the heads of state not only voted Putin CIS chairman at their last meeting in January, but also endorsed a proposal to draft plans for a CIS Anti-Terrorism Center and Anti-Terrorism Program. But as Putin’s power designs on the CIS became clearer over the subsequent months, the plans appear to have fallen prey to CIS infighting and bureaucracy. (See THE NIS OBSERVED, 20 Mar 00)

As usual, the CIS has hurried to conduct numerous meetings on the anti-terrorism proposals, but has not released any concrete findings or agreements. In fact, the only substantive information on the status of the talks has revealed Russian plans to dominate the center and program. Predictably, Moscow has only repeated its anti-terrorism refrain while trying to put a positive spin on the meetings’ success.
In truth, the CIS member states have yet to reach a consensus on the matter. As the meetings have progressed, it has become increasingly apparent that the program is not receiving unanimous support. Although GUUAM member states have not publicly expressed disapproval of the Russian-dominated anti-terrorism plans, and Russian sources prefer to trumpet close cooperation between Russia and its "allies," the presence of the same old split between GUUAM -- minus Uzbekistan and Moldova -- and the Russian-6 on this issue is becoming indisputable. This same split also has doomed the other main CIS initiatives such as the Collective Security Treaty and the Free Trade Zone.

Once again, although the CIS is consumed by a flurry of activity, its member states are finding it hard to work through the inherent differences in their security concerns. Although none seems to discount the dangers of unchecked terrorist activities on the borders, many are rightfully proving reluctant to place their security in the hands of a Russian-dominated CIS. As for Russia, the cancellation of the CIS Heads of State summit buys time before the high-profile CIS foreign ministers' meeting scheduled for late May, at which the "GUAM"/Russia-6 split could make or break Russian aims to build a CIS-wide Anti-Terrorism Program and reassert itself as the leading power in the CIS.

Newly Independent States: Western Region
By Tammy Lynch

UKRAINE
That old familiar feeling
The recent meeting in Kyiv between President Leonid Kuchma and Russian President-elect Vladimir Putin ended amid great fanfare earlier this month; in reality, however, the talks were more interesting for their hackneyed rhetoric than for their substantive results.
Following the meeting, Kuchma and Putin eagerly notified the press of the progress made during the talks. "This was a landmark event," said Kuchma. The meeting "has laid the foundation for a strategic partnership between Ukraine and Russia," he gushed. (ITAR-TASS, 0927 GMT, 18 Apr 00; FBIS-SOV-2000-0418, via World News Connection) This, Putin said, "should help... bring our relations to a qualitatively better level." (REUTERS, 1744 GMT, 18 Apr 00; via lexis-nexis) "We agreed to hold regular consultations on the level of presidents, in order to speed up the solution of various problems," explained Kuchma. "Despite a number of existing problems, we still have found a possibility of their resolution in the future," he continued. (ITAR-TASS, 1204 and 1104 GMT, 18 Apr 00; FBIS-SOV-2000, via World News Connection) How or when any of this would be accomplished was left noticeably vague.

These statements, however, have a very familiar ring. Following Russian Prime Minister Sergei Stepashin's visit to Kyiv in July 1999, Kuchma said, "We untangled many problems," and suggested that the meeting "will give impetus to the resolution of problems in Ukrainian-Russian relations." (ITAR-TASS, 17 July 99; via lexis-nexis) After a meeting between Kuchma and then-Prime Minister Yevgeny Primakov in Moscow, Primakov's press secretary Tatyana Aristarkhova stated that "it is noted with satisfaction that Russia and Ukraine have now embarked on the course of strategic partnership..." (ITAR TASS, 1 Apr 99; via lexis-nexis) And finally, Kuchma discussed his meeting with then-President Boris Yel'tsin in September 1998. "[We] have reaffirmed the path of strategic partnership," he exclaimed. (ITAR-TASS, 0956 GMT, 19 Sep 98; FBIS-SOV-98-262, via World News Connection) Notice a pattern?

Kuchma and Putin apparently did discuss the most contentious issue between the two countries at this time -- Ukraine's illegal siphoning of gas from Gazprom's pipeline. While Kuchma claimed there had been some agreement over this issue, that statement, too, has been made many times before.
It is important to note that the two presidents actually accomplished an important symbolic gesture of unity when they jointly visited the Ukrainian Navy and the Russian Black Sea Fleet in Sevastopol. It would, however, have been much more symbolic had Putin used the opportunity to reaffirm the status of the Crimea as a part of Ukraine. He did not, even when confronted by protesters calling for the region to be returned to Russia. Instead, he stated that the status of the Black Sea Fleet -- as a Russian fleet in a Ukrainian city -- "has been defined and no changes are anticipated." (INTERFAX, 18 Apr 00; via lexis-nexis)

Instead, both presidents settled for overused, hollow rhetoric -- as both sides have done repeatedly in the past. Unfortunately, it seems that Ukrainian-Russian relations remain too difficult to go much deeper.

**MOLDOVA**

**The all-powerful Lucinschi**

For over six months, Moldova has been paralyzed by a continuous string of political power struggles. All of these tug-of-wars, however, have one thing in common -- President Petru Lucinschi's apparent desire to increase his power at the expense of all others. Moldova has endured battles between President Lucinschi and parliament speaker Dumitru Diacov, between President Lucinschi and former Prime Minister Ion Sturza, between President Lucinschi and the Communist Party, and finally, between President Lucinschi and the parliament as a whole. Through it all, Lucinschi has remained on top, slowly eliminating his political competition, but doing so at a tremendous cost to the country. This month, those costs began to become very clear.

On 19 April, the IMF officially announced that Moldova will not receive the next tranche of its Extended Fund Facility (EFF) loan -- a move that will likely lead to debt default by the country. At the same time, the country faced the worst demonstrations it has seen in years, as over 15,000 students took to the streets to protest the abolition of their public transportation subsidies.
The seeds for this latest crisis were sown early last year, when Lucinschi announced that he would hold a referendum to increase his powers. One of Lucinschi's chief complaints at the time was his inability to choose his own cabinet without taking into consideration party blocs, and without asking for parliament's approval. Lucinschi clearly did not appreciate having to work with a prime minister and a cabinet that was not hand-picked by him. He appeared particularly reluctant to work with Prime Minister Ion Sturza, who displayed admirable skill at his job and was enjoying increasing popularity.

Sturza had been receiving almost unanimous praise for his government's moves toward reform. The IMF had predicted a 2-3 percent rise in GDP for 2000 after years of steady decline (INTERFAX, 5 Nov 99; via lexis-nexis) and Sturza had negotiated new deals with Moldova’s neighbors for electricity delivery. He had also reached out, with increasing success, to the EU and NATO.

But when the Constitutional Court ruled that Lucinschi had no right to initiate a referendum to increase his power, Lucinschi responded by indirectly sabotaging the cabinet he didn’t want, and the prime minister he seemingly feared. As Communist Party opposition to Sturza's reforms grew, and parliament deputies called for a vote of no confidence in Sturza's government, Lucinschi said, "If I were an MP, I would vote for resignation," and sharply criticized Sturza's policies. (DEUTSCHE PRESSE-AGENTUR, 1304 CET, 9 Nov 99; via lexis-nexis) He also reportedly met privately with several members of both the pro-presidential ruling coalition and the Communist Party. (INFOTAG, 0600 GMT, 23 Oct 99; BBC Summary of World Broadcasts, via lexis-nexis) He assured voters and lenders, however, that "This domestic problem should not affect in any way our good relations with the International Monetary Fund."

Then, in rapid succession, the ruling coalition disintegrated, the Communists became the parliamentary majority, the parliament refused to pass IMF-required
wine and tobacco privatization legislation, and the Sturza government resigned following a vote of no confidence. The end of the Sturza government resulted in the end of negotiations with NATO about the Partnership for Peace program, the reduction of electricity supplies from Romania, and yes -- the suspension of all IMF and World Bank funding.

Through it all, President Lucinschi appeared calm and unconcerned. In fact, he told reporters that he had begun looking for a replacement for Sturza even before the government lost the no-confidence vote. (INTERFAX, 8 Nov 99; via lexis-nexis)

It took five months and the rejection of two candidates for the post of prime minister before the parliament finally approved a candidate benign enough to garner the support of both Lucinschi and the Communists. During that time, electricity and food shortages increased almost as much as the frustration of some segments of society.

In January 2000, parliament finally confirmed little-known Dimitru Braghis as prime minister and approved his cabinet. Despite some success at curbing privileges and wasteful spending, the new government has been unable to get results on legislation required to restart IMF lending. In fact, parliamentary support for this Lucinschi-sponsored cabinet is so precarious that recent votes to privatize the wine and tobacco industry garnered only 19 votes in favor out of 101 deputies. Center-right parties are refusing to support a government favored by the Communists, and the Communists are refusing to support legislation that they call "robbery." This logjam led to the recent IMF decision not to resume lending. It also indirectly led to the massive student protests in Chisinau that have so far resulted in over 1,000 arrests.

Despite Lucinschi's recent attempts to deflect all blame for the country's problems to the cabinet(s) and parliament, it appears that at least the protesting
students may have begun to tire of these power struggles. As their protests continued, many reportedly held signs saying "Down with Lucinschi."

(INTERFAX, 1350 GMT, 18 Apr 00; FBIS-SOV-2000-0418, via World News Connection) Curiously, there were few, if any, signs calling for Braghis' downfall. Perhaps the students simply have not learned his name yet.

**Newly Independent States: Caucasus**

By Miriam Lanskoy

**CHECHNYA**

**Echoes of Kosovo**

Even as EU ambassadors tour the North Caucasus and the UN Human Rights Commission votes on a resolution condemning Russian abuses in Chechnya, Russian spokesmen continue to set unrealistic preconditions for political dialogue in contravention of the November Istanbul Summit Declaration and the PACE resolution of 6 April.

The "troika" of EU ambassadors which visited Chechnya last week failed to comment on Russia's stubborn refusal to engage in talks without preconditions as required by OSCE and PACE resolutions. On their tour of the North Caucasus, the ambassadors met with Ruslan Aushev and Alexander Dzasokhov, the presidents of Ingushetia and North Ossetia, who have been mediating between the Kremlin and Maskhadov since January. (See THE NIS OBSERVED, 4 Apr 00)

The UN Commission on Human Rights in Geneva voted 25 April on an EU-sponsored resolution which voiced concern over abuses in Chechnya, called for an independent Russian investigation of human rights violations and urged Russia to allow access to Chechnya for UN envoys. Amnesty International called the proceedings in Geneva a "missed opportunity" since "[o]nly an international
investigation can bring perpetrators to account and ensure justice for the victims." (AFP, 26 Apr 00; via lexis-nexis)

Indicating the independent Russian commission's leanings, co-chair Ella Pamfilova announced that it will try to prevent "a temporary truce which will be used by the bandits for regrouping and the accumulation of forces," which would constitute "a political betrayal of the army." (RFE/RL CAUCASUS REPORT, 21 Apr 00)

How is it possible for the international community to endorse a human rights commission which opposes a cease-fire? How did the West go from calling for an international inquiry at the PACE vote on 6 April to sanctioning this charade?

In her testimony to a Senate panel on 13 April, Secretary of State Madeleine Albright justified her opposition to creating an International War Crimes Tribunal for Chechnya with an extraordinary statement: Kosovo and Chechnya "are not exactly similar situations," since "it is not the determined government policy (of Russia) to cleanse ethnic Chechens." (AFP, 15 Apr 00; via Chechnya List) That fantastic claim could be reconciled with reality only if it was followed immediately by the explanation that Russia was killing ethnic Chechens, not just forcing them to flee. That, alas, was not Albright's meaning. Instead of an international inquiry into the conduct of the war (which would determine if war crimes have been committed), Albright has already rendered her circular judgment -- since Russia is not carrying out ethnic cleansing, it can manage its own inquiry into the matter.

Ilyas Akhmadov, the Chechen foreign minister, responded to this statement with an open letter rehearsing the basic facts of Chechen history and the current war of which the secretary of state apparently remains ignorant: the razing of Grozny and hundreds of villages, the use of forbidden weapons, the institution of "filtration camps," appalling conditions in refugee camps, discrimination and harassment against Chechens throughout Russia. All of these outrages have
been applied to Chechen civilians on the basis of nationality. This means that "what is being committed in Chechnya is not simply 'ethnic cleansing' but genocide," according to the provisions of the Convention on the Crime of Genocide of 1948. (ChRI MINISTRY OF FOREIGN AFFAIRS, 21 Apr 00; via www.ichkeria.org)

Akhmadov concluded the letter with a plea for a revision of US policy which "is inadvertently helping to foster the criminalization and 'KGB-ization' of the Russian state, a humanitarian catastrophe in Chechnya and the appearance of Islamic extremism in the North Caucasus."

Moscow still unwilling to negotiate
On 22 April President Aslan Maskhadov distanced himself from a previously announced unilateral cease-fire after Kremlin spokesmen interpreted the offer as a sign of Maskhadov's weakness. In its preview of Maskhadov's Kommersant Daily interview published on 21 April, Reuters quoted him as saying: "I gave the order unilaterally to suspend military action... This was part of a plan for a peaceful settlement proposed by me to Moscow... Apart from that, I agreed without preliminary conditions to free all captive Russian servicemen." (REUTERS, 20 Apr 00; via Johnson's Russia List)

In response to those overtures, Moscow sent reinforcements to Chechnya and Kremlin spokesman Sergei Yastrzhembsky interpreted Maskhadov's statement as "an indication of strong demoralization among rebels who are ready to go to extremes to win a respite." (AFP, 21 Apr 00; via Johnson's Russia List) For his part, President-elect Vladimir Putin responded by calling Maskhadov a criminal and conditioning the start of talks on a list of patently unacceptable demands:

"[T]he unconditional release of all hostages in Chechen mountain areas, who, according to Russian special services information, number 200, foreigners included. Second, the extradition of the bandits guilty of blowing up apartment
buildings in Russia and attacking Dagestan. If Maskhadov wants to carry out negotiations but cannot extradite the bandits, we are ready to help him. Let him enter into negotiations and catch bandits along with us, they must either leave the territory of Chechnya or be put behind bars." (AFP, 21 Apr 00; via lexis-nexis)

On the following day, in his Radio Liberty interview, Maskhadov cast his Kommersant interview in a new light, explaining that he made no unilateral offers. However, he remains ready to fulfill the key PACE demands -- ordering a cease-fire, commencing negotiations, and freeing hostages -- if Russia does likewise. He also indicated that before Putin's trip to London there was a stronger possibility of negotiations. After Tony Blair's warm reception of Putin, the military operations in Chechnya intensified dramatically. (www.svoboda.org)

In a separate interview published on the same day, Chechen Foreign Minister Ilyas Akhmadov expressed his government's readiness to call a cease-fire and commence talks. He emphasized the provisions of the Istanbul Summit, which called for political negotiations with the assistance of the OSCE mission in Chechnya. (EXPRESS CHRONIKA, 22 Apr 00; via www.online.ru)

The Istanbul Summit in November 1999 had reaffirmed the mandate of the OSCE assistance mission in Chechnya which remained in effect from the last war. The mission had relocated to Moscow in 1997; however, during her visit to the North Caucasus, Austrian Foreign Minister and OSCE Chairman-in-Office Benita Ferrero-Walder indicated that it may soon return to Chechnya. The OSCE mission would relocate to the village of Znamenskoye to investigate human rights abuses and coordinate the work of humanitarian organizations. (INTERFAX, 15 Apr 00; FBIS-SOV-2000-0415, via World News Connection)

For a government charged with being ineffectual, the spokesmen of the Maskhadov government at least manage to promote a single, coherent program, whereas Russian representatives have sent very contradictory messages. During
the course of the last week the following assessments of the war were given by the top spokesmen:
· "The military operation is over. The time has come for a political solution to the Chechen crisis," said Foreign Minister Igor Ivanov.
· "It is too early to say the war is over," said Acting Commander-in-Chief Gen. Gennady Troshev, who proceeded to intensify the offensive in Chechnya's southern districts.
· "Maskhadov has no control over anything and there is no point in negotiating with him," said Nikolai Koshman, the presidential representative in Chechnya.
· "We cannot rule out initiating political processes in Chechnya provided the rebel leadership meets certain conditions," said Sergei Yastrzhembsky. (IWPR, 20 Apr 00)

Sergei Yastrzhembsky defined those conditions on 20 April: Armed formations must be disarmed, and "wanted" militants must be extradited to Russia before talks can begin. These demands differ substantially from Putin's wish list cited above. (ITAR-TASS, 20 Apr 00; via lexis-nexis)

In the Express Chronika interview, Akhmadov described the Russian statements as sweeping claims that do not further the possibility of dialogue. Addressing the competition between Maskhadov and Basaev, Akhmadov commented that, in a recent interview, Basaev had subordinated himself to Maskhadov. At the same time, Akhmadov saw no need to distance himself from Basaev, whom he characterized as simply a defender of the Chechen Republic.

Maneuvers concerning the "Moscow Chechens" were similarly confusing. Beslan Gantemirov, the ex-convict Moscow client who was appointed Koshman's deputy, resigned on 18 April. The previous day, Ruslan Khasbulatov, the former speaker of the Supreme Soviet, was chosen to lead a congress of Moscow Chechens who will offer a peace plan to Putin next week. (SEGODNYA, 17 Apr 00; via lexis-nexis) However, Col. Gen. Valeri Manilov said on 20 April that
Gantemirov's resignation was unexpected, suggesting that it might be reversible. (RFE/RL NEWSLINE, 21 Apr 00)

Sergei Kovalev distinguished himself yet again as a voice of conscience and reason. In a press briefing on 18 April he warned that a "guerrilla war cannot be won in principle. There is only one way to win it and this way has a terrible name: genocide." He called for negotiations without preconditions with Maskhadov, "as the only legitimate figure in Chechnya." (FEDERAL NEWS SERVICE, 18 Apr 00; via Johnson's Russia List)

Kovalev criticized the Western leaders for their continued refusal to take tough action with regard to Chechnya. He described the PACE vote as a "miracle" that is "the first time in history that the Council of Europe remembered it had statutory documents." "I think it was a sin not to use this miracle," he added.

Recalling the first Chechen war, Kovalev commented that to end the war "there was no need for threats to bomb Moscow. There was no need for economic sanctions as well. All that was necessary [was for Western leaders] to state their stand publicly, very definitely and in no uncertain terms." But even now such condemnations are not forthcoming and Kovalev's voice remains virtually alone as international censure of Russia becomes increasingly diluted.

Newly Independent States: Central Asia
By Monika Shepherd

US echoes Russian, Chinese concerns over terrorism in Central Asia
What do US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright, FBI Director Louis Freeh, Russian Defense Minister Igor Sergeev, Russian presidential aide Sergei Yastrzhembsky, and Chinese Defense Minister Chi Haotian have in common? They all appear to be very eager to help the Central Asian states battle
international terrorism and narcotics traffic. Russia and the US have even gone so far as to offer military aid in the form of training, funding, and equipment to all of the republics except Turkmenistan.

The Russian government has by now established a fairly consistent pattern of attempting to increase its influence in Central Asia by playing on regional security concerns. Therefore, Russia's current endeavors should come as no surprise. However, it is disappointing that both Albright and Freeh chose to focus almost solely on these topics during their recent visits to Central Asia. While terrorist attacks and mafia battles over control of the drug trade could certainly bring about serious political destabilization in any of the Central Asian countries, there are a host of other issues which should also merit grave international concern. The lack of real political and economic reforms combined with increasing political repression in all five Central Asian nations is just as likely to bring about instability and violent conflict as the narcotics trade and terrorism that have raised international alarm. In fact, to a certain degree, the drug smuggling and terrorist attacks have been brought about by the economic hardships and various types of political repression which most of Central Asia's population must endure.

The US Secretary of State did take a number of steps in order to draw attention to her government's dissatisfaction with the lack of democratic reforms in the three Central Asian states which she visited. She met privately with members of both the Kyrgyz and Kazakh political opposition and she publicly criticized the Kyrgyz, Kazakh, and Uzbek governments for their failure to ensure free and fair parliamentary and presidential elections. She also expressed disapproval at the arrest and detention of Kyrgyz opposition leader Feliks Kulov and recommended that he be released until his trial began. (KABAR NEWS AGENCY, 1241 GMT, 17 Apr 00; BBC Monitoring Central Asia Unit, via lexis-nexis, INTERFAX-KAZAKHSTAN NEWS AGENCY, 1143 GMT, 15 Apr 00; BBC Monitoring Central Asia Unit, via lexis-nexis, and UZBEK RADIO FIRST PROGRAMME, 1000 GMT, 18 Apr 00; BBC Monitoring Central Asia Unit, via lexis-nexis) During a speech at
one of Tashkent's most prestigious universities, Albright warned the Uzbek government against instituting "indiscriminate" repression and censorship, stating that such measures can lead even a moderate and peace-loving opposition to resort to violent retaliation. (RFE/RL NEWSLINE, 17 Apr 00)

However, all of her efforts notwithstanding, it is very unlikely that any of the three Central Asian regimes which received Albright will carry out significant changes in their domestic policies. After leveling her criticisms, the Secretary of State then promptly offered military and financial aid to all three countries' administrations in order to aid them in their battles against terrorism and the drug trade. This aid has not been made contingent upon the governments' willingness to begin observing the basic human and civil rights of their own citizens.

In fact, some of the funds and military training which the US government has pledged to provide ($10 million worth in Uzbekistan's case) in Central Asia may go to support the very phenomena which they are intended to thwart. Part of the funding will be used to help Uzbek border guard units secure their country's border with Afghanistan in an effort to impede narcotics traffic. Unfortunately, it is widely suspected that it is the border guards themselves who facilitate the drugs trade. Furthermore, many of the so-called terrorist attacks which have been carried out both in Uzbekistan and in other parts of Central Asia were most likely the work of the narcotics mafia, striking back either at law enforcement officers or rival gangs.

The US could learn much from Russia's experience in Central Asia, most notably from Russia's military involvement in Tajikistan. The Russian government has expended millions of dollars in Tajikistan ostensibly in order to seal the border with Afghanistan and thus bring an end to the destabilizing effects of the arms and narcotics trade not only in Tajikistan, but in all of Central Asia. However, Russian military aid to Tajikistan has diminished neither the arms nor the drug trade; on the contrary, both have continued to grow and the mafia groups which
control them are responsible for a great deal of the lawlessness which is now a normal part of Tajik society.

KYRGYZSTAN

Opposition, government still at loggerheads; protests continue

Kyrgyz opposition parties have thus far rejected the government's rather tentative attempts to begin negotiations over Feliks Kulov's arrest and the outcome of what are widely held to be unfair and fraudulent elections. Kulov is the chairman of the Arnamys or Dignity Party.

President Akaev's administration has thus far made two attempts to placate the opposition. At the beginning of April the presidential press secretary announced that a public commission was being set up to investigate the opposition's complaints and that the continuing protest rallies, as well as the protesters' unrealistic demands, would only serve to complicate the commission's work. (KABAR NEWS AGENCY, 1302 GMT, 4 Apr 00; BBC Monitoring Central Asia Unit, via lexis-nexis) Not surprisingly, the opposition supporters did not heed the press secretary's comments and refused to end their demonstrations in the capital.

Approximately one week later, opposition leaders announced that they would boycott a roundtable to discuss changes in the country's election laws. The roundtable is being sponsored by the OSCE and has the support of the Kyrgyz government: however, its members do not have the ability to carry out any type of legislation or even to propose new laws. Arnamys Party officials stated that they would not participate in the roundtable unless their chairman was released from prison and permitted to participate. (INTERFAX NEWS AGENCY, 13 Apr 00; via lexis-nexis) Zhipar Zheksheev, chairman of the Democratic Movement of Kyrgyzstan (a coalition of several opposition parties), informed journalists that his organization would likewise boycott the roundtable unless it was held only under the OSCE's auspices. He further stated that the members of the Democratic
Movement felt that the roundtable's primary goals should be to examine the government action toward the opposition in order to determine whether it was in keeping with international law. (INTERFAX NEWS AGENCY, 18 Apr 00; via lexis-nexis) Zheksheev helped organize another demonstration along the main streets of Bishkek on 18 April in order to keep protesting Feliks Kulov's arrest. (INTERFAX NEWS AGENCY, 18 Apr 00; via lexis-nexis)

Meanwhile, Kyrgyz Deputy National Security Minister Boris Poluektov may have provided Kulov's supporters with a glimmer of hope when he told reporters on 22 April that any rumors hinting that the Arnamys Party chairman would soon be released were completely without basis. The deputy minister further stated that, although the investigation into the abuse of office charges had been concluded, his ministry had yet to look into additional accusations that Kulov had played a role in an illegal alcohol transaction when he was governor of one of Kyrgyzstan's northern regions. Kulov has not yet been charged with this crime, however. (INTERFAX NEWS AGENCY, 20 Apr 00; via lexis-nexis)

If Kulov is released from prison unscathed, it may indeed put an end to the protest demonstrations and pacify the opposition leaders, but for how long? There is much more at stake than simply one man's unfair arrest and detention. The opposition's original demands were that the results of the parliamentary elections should be nullified in several regions, on the grounds that they were not conducted in a fair and democratic fashion. Popular dissatisfaction with the election process resulted in protests in several towns and cities and had to be forcibly dispersed in at least one case. (See previous THE NIS OBSERVED) President Akaev and his administration will have to do much more than just release one opposition leader in order to restore the population's faith in the government, they will have to enact true changes in Kyrgyzstan's election laws or the next elections (scheduled for December 2000) could result in a more drastic response from opposition supporters.
Newly Independent States: Baltic States

By Kate Martin

Waiting for the shoe to drop
Vladimir Putin's election as Russia's president may have had the support of Russian citizens in the Baltic states, but they are apparently the only persons in the region who can view the voting results with any glee. Most persons in Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania warily watched Putin's rise, as the Russian president -- who gave us the devastation of Chechnya -- seems to be trying to build a foundation for a possible move westward, based on allegations of human rights abuse, assistance to "terrorists," spying for the West, and anything else that comes his way. So far, fortunately, the West isn't buying Putin's pitch against those bad, bad, Baltic states, but that hasn't stopped the newly elected president from hurling accusations.

Less than one-third of eligible Baltic residents actually voted in the 26 March elections, but most of those who did opted for Putin. In Estonia, 30,750 of an estimated 99,000 Russian citizens participated in the elections, and overwhelmingly chose Putin (62.7 percent) over Gennady Zyuganov (28.9 percent) and Grigory Yavlinsky (2.6 percent). Similar reports were received from Latvia and Lithuania. In Latvia, over one-half of the 10,500 Russian citizens participating in the elections voted for Putin. About 50,000 persons were eligible to vote. Of the 17,000 registered Russian voters in Lithuania, 5,440 cast their ballots; over one-half, 2,800, supported Putin, while Zyuganov received 1,980 votes. (BALTIC NEWS SERVICE DAILY REPORT, 1000 GMT, 27 Mar 00)

While Putin has the support of a majority of active Russian voters in the three states, Baltic citizens are less enamored of him. Delegations from the parliamentary committees on foreign affairs from Lithuania and Estonia met earlier this month and said their level of concern over Russia's intentions has
increased since Putin replaced Boris Yel'tsin as president. "After Putin's rise to the Russian leadership fears have risen that the eastern neighbor is again looking at the Baltic countries like a part of the former Soviet empire," Liis Klaar of the Estonian parliament told BNS. (BALTIC NEWS SERVICE DAILY REPORT, 1300 GMT, 10 Apr 00) Not only members of parliament are worried. A poll taken in January indicates that four out of five Estonian-speaking residents see Russia as a threat to Estonia's independence, while nearly two-thirds of persons polled believe Russia to be a source of danger. (BALTIC NEWS SERVICE DAILY REPORT, 1100 GMT, 20 Mar 00)

Certainly, statements out of Russia have done little to assuage such concerns. In a series of interviews published on the Internet, for example, Putin claimed that Estonians betrayed his father, who was in the Red Army, to the Germans in 1941. His father reportedly managed to escape being taken prisoner and returned to Russia. (BALTIC NEWS SERVICE DAILY REPORT, 1700 GMT, 16 Mar 00)

The anti-Baltic rhetoric from Russia had been noticeable for some time, primarily with repeated charges that the Baltics serve as a launchpad for Western foreign intelligence. (THE NIS OBSERVED, 15 Feb 00) And the latest spy-related blow-up at first seemed to offer Russia some much-needed ammunition in the war of words. Thus, when the Russian Federal Security Service (FSB) started to circulate information about the arrest of a British intelligence agent who purportedly worked out of Tallinn, it looked to be an embarrassing moment for the British, but -- since Estonia wasn't complaining -- was unlikely to generate an international incident. In an interesting end note, however, ITAR-TASS reported that the agent "was a senior office of the Russian secret services in the recent past." (ITAR-TASS, 1152 GMT, 24 Mar 00; FBIS-SOV-2000-0324, via World News Connection) Apparently, Russia is only shocked when spies for other countries are found in the Baltics.
The issue of human rights violations continues to be Russia's favorite flag to wave over the Baltics, despite general international agreement that such claims are baseless. And yet, the trial of Vasily Kononov, convicted of war crimes, remains a rallying point, not only for the Russian government but for extremists as well. During the UN Human Rights Commission meeting in Geneva last month, Russia accused Latvia of rewriting history and the outcome of World War II by persecuting anti-fascists. (BALTIC NEWS SERVICE DAILY REPORT, 1600 GMT, 28 Mar 00) While Russian officials raised the issue of what they've termed Kononov's "harassment," the leader of the Russian radical movement Workers' Russia, Victor Anpilov, threatened criminal action if Kononov remained detained. "If Latvian authorities do not respond, we will have the right to call on our supporters to abduct the Latvian ambassador, for example, and hold him hostage," Anpilov announced. (BNS, 1557 GMT, 21 Mar 00; FBIS-SOV-2000-0321, via World News Connection) To put a new spin on the situation, Putin granted Kononov Russian citizenship, although Kononov learned of Russia's decision only from the radio. He told the Latvian Supreme Court during his appeal that he had no documents confirming his Russian citizenship and had not disclaimed his Latvian citizenship. (BALTIC NEWS SERVICE DAILY REPORT, 1800 GMT, 12 Apr 00, and 1000 GMT, 13 Apr 00) His appeal was successful: The Latvian Supreme Court released Kononov on 25 April and announced the beginning of an investigation into his detention. (ASSOCIATED PRESS, 25 Apr 00; via lexis-nexis)

More ominous were repeated attempts to link the Baltic states to the conflict in Chechnya. The Russian Ministry of the Interior (MVD) announced that it had exposed a money-laundering scheme between the Baltic states, Chechnya, and the US. (BALTIC NEWS SERVICE DAILY REPORT, 1900 GMT, 22 Mar 00) And, in reaction to the vote by the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe to oust Russia over its actions in Chechnya, Moscow pointed the finger at what the Russian ambassador to Estonia, Alexey Glukhov, terms Estonia's "unfriendliness to Russia." "Starting with the disintegration of the Soviet Union,
Estonia declared General Jokhar Dudayev as its best friend and supported it materially and politically," Glukhov added. He also noted that a Chechen representation in Tallinn is seen as a direct challenge against Russia's territorial integrity. (BALTIC NEWS SERVICE DAILY REPORT, 1300 GMT, 12 Apr 00)

And, in an interesting twist, the Russian foreign ministry has accused Toomas Hendrik Ilves, Estonia's foreign minister, of fomenting anti-Russian sentiments in Latvia. Ilves had recommended that the Baltic countries should simply ignore any unfounded Russian accusations. "When a really harsh and ungrounded accusation comes, then by responding to it you'll find yourself in trouble. So let them talk, we won't respond. In that way they saw that their provocations won't go down with Estonia," Ilves said. (BALTIC NEWS SERVICE DAILY REPORT, 1000 GMT, 30 Mar 00) The Russians clearly see the ignoring of provocations to be... provocative.

Of course, Russia seems to have devised a solution to the international brouhaha: The Russian president's human rights commission proposed a union of human rights commissions and non-governmental legal protection groups in the CIS and Baltic countries. Such an association could coordinate the protection of human rights in countries which belonged to the former Soviet Union. Indeed, commissioner Vladimir Kartashkin reported that the first meeting of the new association has been planned for September or October. (BALTIC NEWS SERVICE DAILY REPORT, 1600 GMT, 31 Mar 00) But gee, who would chair such a commission? Russia has its hands full overseeing every CIS body in existence and, knowing how much importance Moscow places on human rights, it certainly wouldn't want such an association to be rudderless.

**The end, and the beginning, of alliances**

Russian politics didn't monopolize all the media attention, however, as Baltic politics managed to add some twists as well.
Latvia's ruling coalition under Andris Skele began to disintegrate more than a month before the prime minister announced his resignation on 12 April. Cracks became public when the Fatherland and Freedom/LNNK party expressed its dissatisfaction with the politicization of government administration, courts and the media. (BALTIC NEWS SERVICE DAILY REPORT, 1700 GMT, 11 Mar 00) Although President Vaira Vike-Freiberga warned the coalition members that they appeared more interested in quarreling than governing, the caution was not heeded. The catalyst for the government breakup was the firing of Vladimirs Makarovs, the minister of economics, after Makarovs annulled the signatory right of Latvian Privatization Agency Director Janis Naglis. (BALTIC NEWS SERVICE DAILY REPORT, 1000 GMT, 6 Apr 00) While at first only 17 lawmakers -- chiefly from the Social Democratic Workers Party -- began to demand Skele's resignation (as well as that of two fellow People's Party ministers), Latvia's Way members joined in soon after, calling for the retention of the present coalition, without Skele. (BALTIC NEWS SERVICE DAILY REPORT, 1300 GMT, 6 Apr 00, and 1800 GMT, 8 Apr 00) By 11 April, the For Fatherland and Freedom/LNNK party called on other coalition partners to continue consultations that center on maintaining the coalition and replacing the prime minister. (INTERFA, 1806 GMT, 11 Apr 00; FBIS-SOV-2000-0411, via World News Connection) The next day, Skele resigned.

While the government in Lithuania remains standing, many of its pillars are eroding. Several political parties have splintered recently, altering the balance of power in parliament. Both the Christian Democrats and the Conservatives have split in two. The Modern Christian Democratic Union, led by MP Vytautas Bogusis, is believed to unite about one-third of the 12,000 members of the Christian Democratic Party. The break, which occurred last autumn, was manifested in the recent local elections, in which members of the new bloc obtained 40 mandates out of the 99 won by the Lithuanian Christian Democratic Party. (BNS, 1304 GMT, 27 Mar 00; FBIS-SOV-2000-0327, via World News Connection) Moreover, 13 Conservative MPs announced the formation of the
Moderate Conservative faction last month, thereby reducing the ruling parliamentary Conservative Party faction to 51 legislators. The ruling faction -- comprised of Conservatives, 12 Christian Democrats and the parliamentary speaker -- holds 64 votes in the 138-seat parliament. (BNS, 1008 GMT, 24 Mar 00; FBIS-SOV-2000-0324, via World News Connection)

The Conservatives and their political partners, the Christian Democrats, managed to retain some of their power in the country overall nonetheless, following the local elections at the end of March, but not as much as they held previously. Official results indicate that the New Union (Social Liberal) party garnered 270 mandates; Lithuanian Farmers Party, 209; Homeland Union-Lithuanian Conservatives, 199; Center Union, 173; Lithuanian Democratic Labor Party, 104; the Lithuanian Liberal Union, 166; Social Democratic Party, 104; and the Christian Democratic Party, 99. (BALTIC NEWS SERVICE DAILY REPORT, 1600 GMT, 28 Mar 00) In terms of leadership positions, the Democratic Labor Party, Farmers Party and New Union came out ahead, with each party gaining 11 city mayoral seats. The Center Union and Liberal Union each secured seven city mayor seats. (BALTIC NEWS SERVICE DAILY REPORT, 1800 local time, 13 Apr 00). The mayoral elections in the city of Kaunas earned international attention when, after the council failed to elect a mayor in the first round, an alliance of the Lithuanian Freedom Union, the New Union (Social Liberals) and the Young Lithuania party selected Vytautas Sustauskas, leader of the Lithuanian Freedom Union and, more notably, the candidate of choice of the Kaunas-based National Socialists. (BALTIC NEWS SERVICE DAILY REPORT, 1300 GMT, 5 Apr 00) Sustauskas told reporters that he "would not have anything to do" with the National Socialists until the group was registered with the justice ministry, an occurrence which is extremely unlikely in the short term at least; the Kaunas region administration repeatedly refuses to register the group as a public organization. Still, one shouldn't breathe a sigh of relief just yet. Sustauskas may not be officially affiliated with the National Socialists, but he is well-known for
populist and anti-Semitic remarks on his own. (BALTIC NEWS SERVICE DAILY REPORT, 1300 GMT, 13 Apr 00)