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Russian Federation: Executive Branch

By Michael Comstock

Putin's whipping boy

Russian Prime Minister Mikhail Kasyanov's two-year anniversary passed with the often "soon-to-be-fired" PM still in office; it has become apparent that Kasyanov possesses some staying power that eludes all but President Vladimir Putin himself. Kasyanov is a member of the Kremlin power faction known as the Yeltsin "Family," while Putin has created his own faction, known as the St. Petersburg group. Since Putin entered office, a political battle of appointments and prosecutions has been waged, centered on replacing the "Family" with members of the St. Petersburg group. One need look only at the notorious cases developed against the self-exiled Boris Berezovsky and ousted Railways Minister Nikolai Aksenyonko for two high-profile examples. However, Kasyanov seems to defy these political tremors, remaining in office despite almost continual predictions of his downfall.

These rumors increased in volume following Kasyanov's economic forecasts (preceding President Putin's address before parliament), which were not as optimistic as Putin desired. At his two-year anniversary speech, Kasyanov referred to an annual GDP growth rate in the realm of 3.5%, far below Putin's call for growth rates of 8-10%. (VERSTY, 18 May 02; via ISI Emerging Markets Database) In fact, some of the newspapers have gone so far as to predict who will replace Kasyanov. However, his seemingly inevitable dismissal may not come as quickly as some expect.

Kasyanov's low forecasts actually benefit Putin: If growth rates actually turn out to be low, then it is better for someone outside Putin's inner circle to have been
the messenger bearing bad news. It would allow the president to criticize Kasyanov rather than one of his own fellow St. Petersburgers. If the focus of criticism were to shift to Putin's own group, then the president would become increasingly unable to avoid accountability for his policies, or lack thereof. Thus, ironically, Kasyanov's staying power in the highly vulnerable position of prime minister well may be due to his own distance from Putin's inner circle. Only if the economic situation in Russia were to improve would he have to worry about his position; once it is credit rather than criticism that will have to be spread around, Putin may find Kasyanov no longer useful. Moreover, the role of prime minister (chairman of the Council of Ministers), which was an important position to groom Yel'tsin's successor, has declined since Putin took office, since most expect Putin to seek and win a second term as president.

Meanwhile, President Putin will seek economic advice from organizations such as the Russian Union of Industrialists and Entrepreneurs (RUIE). This quasi-governmental lobbying group allows Putin to consult with industrial leaders and influential business interests in a consolidated fashion, bringing together various oligarchs. (NEZAVISIMAYA GAZETA, 23 Apr 02; via ISI Emerging Markets Database) If, in coordination with this power group, Putin can create a viable alternative economic program to present to voters two years from now, he may be able to slap down Kasyanov and any other putative rivals.

**Russian Federation: Security Services**

By Fabian Adami

**FSB to head investigation into Dagestan blast**

In the immediate aftermath of the 9 May blast which rocked the Victory Day Parade in Kaspyisk, Dagestan, killing 41 persons and wounding over 100, President Vladimir Putin summoned senior security officials, including Interior
Minister Boris Gryzlov, Defense Minister Sergei Ivanov and FSB Director Nikolai Patrushev to an emergency meeting at the Kremlin.

In an unscheduled public broadcast following the meeting, the president outlined the proceedings he had set in motion. Putin stated that he had ordered a coordinated inquiry to be undertaken, but that, since there could be no doubt that the blast constituted an act of terrorism, the investigation would be led by the FSB and its director. (RUSSIA TV, 9 May 02; BBC MONITORING, via ISI Emerging Markets Database) Moreover, Putin revealed that he had ordered Patrushev to travel to Dagestan to supervise the case personally, and to ensure that the investigation be prosecuted as quickly as possible.

Both Patrushev and Dagestani Interior Minister Adilgirei Magomed-tagirov voiced strong suspicions of Wahhabi involvement in this latest terrorist incident. Magomed-tagirov blamed Rappani Khalilov, an ethnic Lak from Dagestan, adding that "as Interior Minister, I swear that he will be either seized or eliminated." (ST. PETERSBURG TIMES, 13 May 02) Patrushev preferred to err on the side of caution, stating only that the bomb "may be the result of events taking place on the territory of Chechnya." (INTERFAX, 13 May 02; via St. Petersburg Times)

Since the explosion, the investigation has proceeded with surprising speed. Prior to his return to Moscow, Patrushev released details about the explosive device. He revealed that the device had consisted of a standard Russian Army M-50 landmine, "reinforced by sticks of explosives" (ORT, 10 May 02; BBC Monitoring, via ISI Emerging Markets Database), and "filled with scraps of steel." (ST. PETERSBURG TIMES, 13 May 02) Patrushev added that a composite photo of the men suspected of planting the device had been disseminated to law enforcement agencies, and on 12 May, it emerged that three brothers, Artur, Shamil and Zaur Manaev had been arrested in St. Petersburg in connection with the blast. The three later were cleared of these charges, but remain in custody on
suspicion of involvement in other incidents. (BBC NEWS, 12 May 2002; via www.bbc.co.uk/news)

The rapidity with which the finger of blame is being pointed is disconcerting, especially since there are indications that the bomb may have been politically motivated, rather than directed against Russian involvement in the Caucasus (See Caucasus section of THE NIS OBSERVED by Miriam Lanskoy), and since Putin's spokesman and envoy to the Southern Federal District, Viktor Kazantsev, urged the Russian public not to jump to the conclusion that the Chechen campaign was the motivation behind the attack. (THE MOSCOW TIMES, 10 May 02; via ISI Emerging Markets Database)

More interesting still are statements made in Nezavisimaya gazeta by Khizri Shikhsaidov, chairman of the government of Dagestan, and Mukhu Aliev, chairman of parliament, that the bombing had been made possible by gross dereliction of duty on the part of security agencies, and because there are "traitors in the law enforcement agencies." (NEZAVISIMAYA GAZETA, 14 May 02; via ISI Emerging Markets Database) According to reporter Sergei Antonov, the result of such allegations could be wide-ranging staff changes among law enforcement and counterintelligence agencies.

President Putin's own statement, made from the Black Sea resort of Sochi on 17 May, hints that contentions of such a failure may already be coming to light among the St. Petersburgers. Putin stated that the nation's "defense and security structures should be on permanent high alert, as any negligence here can result in a lot of casualties." (INTERFAX, 17 May 02; via The Moscow Times) Whether these accusations are proven, and what action will be taken as a result by Putin and Patrushev, remains to be seen.
POLITICAL PARTIES

Two is the loneliest number

The recent rift between Communist Party Chairman Gennady Zyuganov and State Duma Speaker Gennady Seleznev has now extended into regional elections, and not just any elections, but the gubernatorial elections in the Smolensk Oblast' -- the self-proclaimed "buckle" on the "Red Belt" of the Russian Federation. Zyuganov and the local Communists supported incumbent Aleksandr Prokhorov, while Seleznev's Rossiya movement placed its weight behind General Viktor Maslov, the leader of the oblast's Federal Security Service (FSB) department.

Prokhorov also claimed to have Russian President Vladimir Putin's support, recalling that, on 22 April, the president personally congratulated him on his birthday and wished him luck in the election. He used a photograph of President Putin shaking his hand and the slogan "Putin - Prokhorov: Together - Ahead" as one his main campaign pictures. (KOMMERSANT, 20 May 02; via ISI Emerging Markets Database) Presidential Plenipotentiary to the Central Federal District Georgy Poltachenko refuted that connection: "Such rumors are absurd! Neither I, nor the presidential administration, nor the President himself support Prokhorov in the campaign. At the last meeting of the State Council Vladimir Putin simply congratulated the governors of the Vladimir and Smolensk Oblast', according to the tradition. He did not give them awards, but only the protocol gifts: a presidential watch and a bouquet of flowers."

It comes as no surprise that the Kremlin favorite is the FSB general and that Maslov's position guarantees him the backing of the regional security services;
Viktor Maslov also secured the support of the region's largest enterprises, including the Smolensk nuclear energy plant, the Smolenskenergo Heat and Power Plant, and the Kristall diamond polishing company, which have clashed several times with the incumbent. (KOMMERSANT, 14 May 02; via ISI Emerging Markets Database) Seleznev's endorsement, however, played a very important role: appealing to the largely left-wing population.

As a Communist, Prokhorov counted on the general political sentiments in the oblast' to keep the vote in his favor. After all, four years ago he won by a "confident" 41 percent running against former oblast' Governor Glushenkov, who was supported by the central authorities. (SOVETSKAYA ROSSIYA, 19 May 98; via Johnson's Russia List) Of course, nowadays, the Communists aren't what they used to be, and the center is stronger than it could have hoped to be under Boris Yel'tsin. This year it was Maslov who gathered 41 percent of the vote, while Prokhorov received only 35 percent. (NTVRU, 20 May 02; via www.ntvru.com)

This communist tradition in the region made the conflict between Zyuganov and Seleznev particularly painful and it is not unlikely that the conflict will affect the decision about Seleznev's party membership that is expected to be made at the Communist Party Moscow City Committee's plenary meeting later this month. (ITAR-TASS, 1219 GMT, 7 May 02; FBIS-SOV-2002-0507, via World News Connection)

REGIONS

Mixing business and pleasure . . .

The political rivalry in the elections, however, has been overshadowed by much louder clashes. The issue at the heart of the campaign is the fight against corruption. The governor holds the FSB, the interior ministry, and the prosecutor's office responsible for crime and corruption in the region, declaring that they are too busy playing politics to fight crime. The power organs accuse
the governor and oblast’ administration of sustaining the criminal groups.
(KOMMERSANT, 14 and 20 May 02; via ISI Emerging Markets Database)

The general prosecutor's office has been after Prokhorov for almost a year. On 16 August 2001, Prokhorov was summoned to testify about the disappearance of 274 million rubles earmarked for the reconstruction of the Old Smolensk Road. A few months later, the office opened criminal cases against several members of the administration under Chapter 1, Article 285, abuse of office, and pursuit of personal gain or other interests. And in February 2002, the prosecutor signed an order for the arrest of former Deputy Governor Yuri Balashkin, who fled, but was later reported to be in Moscow doing business and maintaining contact with Prokhorov. (NEZAVISIMAYA GAZETA, 16 May 02; via ISI Emerging Markets Database)

...and Molotov cocktails
Prokhorov and his men have allegations of their own: They hold Maslov responsible for the fires that burnt down the dachas of two employees of Prokhorov's election campaign, the mugging of another member of the election campaign, the assault against the son of the campaign's lawyer, and the explosion that rocked the former governor's campaign headquarters on 27 April. (KOMMERSANT, 14 May 02, and RIA, 0652 GMT, 27 Apr 02; BBC Monitoring, via ISI Emerging Markets Database)

A few days before the elections, things really heated up. On 16 May, an assassination attempt was made on Prokhorov's deputy, Anatoly Makarenko, as he was traveling to his office together with his five-year-old daughter. The deputy governor received only a slight hand wound, and his daughter was not hurt, but the driver was killed and the bodyguard seriously wounded. The oblast’ administration immediately accused Maslov of masterminding the assassination, but the FSB general insisted that Makarenko had nothing to do with the elections, or with politics in general, and suggested that it was Makarenko's economic...
machinations and commercial ventures (the incentive for Makarenko's entry to the political post) that invited retribution. Maslov also noted that it was possible that the assassination attempt was a pre-election stunt: "The team playing against me," the FSB general declared, "for them, the death of a man is nothing in comparison to the [prospect] of victory." Representatives from Maslov's headquarters even claimed to have an eyewitness -- a journalist from (Kremlin-controlled) RTR Television Channel -- who said that Makarenko and his daughter were in one car, while another car, carrying Makarenko's bodyguard and driver was targeted. (KOMMERSANT, 20 May 02; via ISI Emerging Markets Database) The latter version seems to have little credibility: Not only did all media sources reporting at the time of the incident mention just one car, but it was also stated that Makarenko himself received a slight wound to his hand. (NTVRU, 16 May 02; via www.ntvru.com)

Maslov's PR men also dismissed the other accusations of sabotage. There were rumors, for example, that expensive equipment like computers was removed from Prokhorov's campaign headquarters before the explosion and returned afterwards. (KOMMERSANT, 20 May 02; via ISI Emerging Markets Database)

Since the power organs that could conduct investigations into such events also have a personal stake in the findings of the investigations, it is unlikely that answers -- correct answers that is -- will be revealed. These answers, however, are not that important. What does count is that such campaigns can be carried out; that voter turnout was 55 percent and that less than 10 percent voted "against all candidates"; and that the electorate is unfazed by assassination attempts, explosions, robberies and assaults and continues to vote for the lesser of evils.
Arms negotiations, part II

Following agreements initiated at the Crawford Summit between Presidents Putin and Bush in November 2001, Russian and US negotiators recently completed the second round of talks on strategic arms reduction. At issue was the actual number of strategic weapons each country will maintain, as well as verification questions surrounding the future of strategic weapons. (ITAR-TASS, 1330 GMT, 24 Apr 02; via ISI Emerging Markets Database)

The Strategic Arms Reduction Talks (START-I) Treaty of 1991, still in effect, was envisaged only as the beginning of the reduction effort and was aimed primarily at reducing the number of nuclear warheads from a Cold War high of between 11,000 and 12,000 down to 6,000 to 7,000 for each side. (US DEPARTMENT OF STATE; via usinfo.state.gov) Now, the US and Russia have agreed in principle to lower the ceiling to between 1,700 and 2,200 each. However, other issues have moved into focus:

The defense ministry's ability to maintain its nuclear weapons in stable working order, as well as Moscow's ability to make a full accounting of its weapons, have long been doubted. (Public Broadcasting, FRONTLINE: RUSSIAN ROULETTE, Aug 99; via www.pbs.org/wgbh) There have been several failures within the command and control structure of the Russian strategic forces. The Russians have neither the resources nor the desire to solve these endemic problems within their strategic arsenal and US leaders have expressed concern over the state of Russia's forces. (US NEWS AND WORLD REPORT, 13 Aug 01; via usnews.com) Additionally, there have been several reported (and an undetermined number of unreported) thefts of nuclear materials from Russian locations. (SPACE DAILY, 23 Feb 02; via www.spacedaily.com/news) The insecurity of the Russian arsenal coupled with the expense of maintaining...
strategic weapons in both countries has created a desire for reductions on both sides.

During a recent call-in show on Russian TV, the Russian negotiator, Deputy Foreign Minister Georgy Mamedov, stressed that, "The main moments this agreement should reflect [concern] . . .the connection between strategic offensive and defensive weapons." [RUSSIAN PUBLIC TV (ORT), 1930 GMT, 24 Apr 02; via ISI Emerging Markets Database] Privately, the Russians acknowledge that, in the long run, they will have a difficult time opposing the US National Missile Defense (NMD) program. (SCIENTIFIC AMERICAN, 16 Feb 02; via www.sciam.com) Moscow's approach seems to be that, if it allows the NMD program to continue with minimal objections, the US will provide increased assistance for the maintenance of Moscow's arsenal and the destruction of superfluous warheads. (INSTITUTE OF INTERNATIONAL ECONOMY AND FOREIGN RELATIONS, RUSSIAN ACADEMY OF SCIENCES, Dec 01; via www.ieer.org/russian/pubs)

The issue of verification presents a major challenge, given concerns over the safety and security of the Russian arsenal and Moscow's paranoia regarding external inspection of areas in which problems might be detected. Historically, Russia (and, earlier, the Soviet Union) has sought to conceal weaknesses of the Russian military. The protection of strategic weapons, accountability and installation security constitute areas in which the Russian military does not excel. However, effective measures to ensure destruction and/or proper care for nuclear capabilities clearly are needed. Russian military leaders have expressed a willingness to allow inspectors into installations and, where possible, to observe destruction procedures. (Public Broadcasting, FRONTLINE: RUSSIAN ROULETTE, Aug 99; via www.pbs.org/wgbh) These processes will be part of the details to be finalized.
Russia and the US are struggling to chart a new course for arms control, including the focus of future agreements, whether additional cuts will be based on a specific single number or will continue to evolve, and whether strategic arms talks should provide a springboard for additional arms reduction and other strategic discussions. [RUSSIAN PUBLIC TV (ORT), 1930 GMT, 24 Apr 02; via ISI Emerging Markets Database]

**Caspian summit**

The heads of the Caspian Sea states (Iran, Azerbaijan, Turkmenistan, Kazakhstan and Russia) met on 23 and 24 April in Ashgabat, Turkmenistan to determine some guidelines for the shared use of the vast resources of the Caspian basin. Not surprisingly, there was little by way of concrete agreements and much by way of rhetoric and bluster. However, the first meeting revealed some of the dynamics of the issues surrounding the use of the Caspian, including access to its natural resources and transportation. (RUSSIA TV, 1300 GMT, 24 Apr 02; via ISI Emerging Markets Database) Significantly, for the first time, the head of state of each of the Caspian countries led his own delegation.

There appeared to be substantial conflict among the delegations. Turkmenistan and Azerbaijan are locked in a bitter dispute over the future of several exploratory wells in the center of the sea. (MOSCOW TIMES, 25 Apr 02; via www.moscowtimes.ru) Iran is claiming a share of all Caspian resources (as opposed to being limited to its own geographical sector) and Russia is trying to re-assert its hegemonial position. The five delegations issued a vague declaration calling for the "prevention of conflict and behind-the-scenes games." (RUSSIA TV, 1300 GMT, 24 Apr 02; via ISI Emerging Markets Database)

Three weeks later, however, Russia and Kazakhstan agreed on a line of demarcation between their sectors. This opens the way for more active exploitation by Russian companies and the construction of another pipeline to Russia.
Ivanov confirms policy objectives

Foreign Minister Igor Ivanov outlined the priorities for Russian foreign policy during a recent speech at the Moscow State Institute of Foreign Relations (MGIMO). (ITAR-TASS, 0813 GMT, 26 Apr 02; via ISI Emerging Markets Database)

First, he said, Russian foreign policy is that of a global partner rather than a Cold War enemy, with an aim "to ensure strategic stability in the world." This goal is reflected, Ivanov said, in the overt role Russia is playing in the "war on terrorism" and in being part of the solution in the Middle East. The Russian foreign policy team has made every effort to continue to play an active role in world crises.

A second goal is to "consolidate Russian security and that of its CIS partners in the face of global challenges and threats." The Russians still behave like regional hegemonial leaders and expect to be consulted in matters of regional security. The United States has appeared to collude in Russia's pretensions by going through the motions of consulting Moscow on Central Asia's role in the "war on terrorism," and by involving Putin and Ivanov in major policy decisions with regional implications.

A third aim, Ivanov said, is to "make further steps towards integration with Europe." Much of President Putin's efforts are focused on increasing the relationship with European powers. Russia has long sought (even before Putin) to be considered a European power. In pursuit of this goal, Moscow has appealed regularly to the European Union for membership and, since the events of 11 September, has been courted openly by European NATO officials.
New fighters for Russia

Russia rolled out the MiG-29M2 for the first time at the Berlin Airshow. The new variant of Russia's answer to the US F-16 fighter has shown some marketing promise in the developing countries. (ITAR-TASS, 0838 GMT, 25 Apr 02; via ISI Emerging Markets Database) The MiG-29 has proven to be Russia’s most attractive fighter aircraft export item, and currently is in use in more than 19 countries. Furthermore, it has proven successful in co-production ventures in China and India.

The new variant will possess an all-weather, day/night capability and the ability to employ precision-guided ordnance effectively. The M2 variant also will be able to fly safely at low altitudes (less than 100 ft) and to employ weapons while engaged on various high g-force maneuvers.

The M2 represents the next level for the venerable MiG-29 which, in head-to-head competition with the US F-16 and F/A-18 fighters, has always fallen short in poor weather and visibility. It appears that MiG engineers have addressed these problems. However, only time and performance tests can validate these claims. In any case, MiG seems to have made its premier fighter more competitive against Western offerings.

The timing of these improvements, if they prove to be genuine, could not be better. Russia has just been offered the opportunity to have its jets compete against US aircraft for sale in Argentina. In addition, other countries -- including Myanmar, Iran, North Korea and Indonesia -- are just beginning to compete for upgrades in their fighter inventories.
At the same time, Russian engineers at the Sukhoi design bureau are preparing to introduce a fifth-generation fighter suitable for competition against the US Joint Strike Fighter (JSF). The new Russian aircraft is supposed to have some of the same performance characteristics as the JSF, including stealth, vectored thrust and advanced weapons capabilities. (ITAR-TASS, 0909 GMT, 27 Apr 02; via ISI Emerging Markets Database) Though the new fighter is still in the design phase, Mikhail Pogosyan, managing director of Sukhoi, said that "the development should be conducted with a view of achieving a reasonable combat efficiency, and take into account market demand." (RIA NEWS AGENCY, 1006 GMT, 27 Apr 02; via ISI Emerging Markets Database) Pogosyan made it clear that this fighter was to be marketed for export and not just for the Russian Air Force.

It is unlikely that the new Russian fighter will be truly competitive against the JSF. However, it is doubtful that the JSF will be widely exported, at least initially. (JANE'S DEFENCE WEEKLY, 19 Oct 01; via www.janes.uk) For the Russians to be attempting the technology leap required even to be considered alongside the JSF would constitute an extraordinary achievement.

Though capable of turning out an adequate product, both Sukhoi and MiG would be hard-pressed to meet the technologies the US can field in its fighter force right now. As a result, it is more likely that both design bureaus will put the lion's share of money toward bread and butter programs, like the MiG-29 and Su-27. These proven airframes, which have stood the test of time, could prove to be long-term money earners. Nevertheless, the Russian government, apparently working in the belief that new airframes could bring in more capital, have committed additional funds to Sukhoi to develop the new fighter. (ITAR-TASS, 0909 GMT, 27 Apr 02; via ISI Emerging Markets Database)

Putin and the Caspian Fleet
President Vladimir Putin conducted an all-day inspection of the Russian Caspian Fleet on 25 April. His first order of business was to challenge the Caspian flotilla to conduct realistic exercises this summer. (RUSSIA TV, 1000 GMT, 27 Apr 02; via ISI Emerging Markets Database) "During the last 10 years we have not had a chance to check [the flotilla] in reality and in conditions close-to-combat...," Putin said. He identified the objective as a test to "defend Russia's national interests, combat drug trafficking, and to carry out a rescue operation." (RADIO MAYAK, 0900 GMT, 28 Apr 02; via ISI Emerging Markets Database) However, this exercise cannot but send a clear signal to other Caspian littoral countries. Last year, the Caspian flotilla conducted exercises off Azerbaijan's coast near Baku.

Even prior to the Ashgabat negotiations in April, it was clear to other Caspian leaders that Moscow's influence might be exerted through military force if necessary. (CENTRAL ASIA CAUCASUS ANALYST, 27 Mar 02; via www.cacianalyst.org/2002-03-27)

The exercise is to feature joint forces. Scheduled to participate are the Russian Air Force (in particular the 4th Army of the Russian Air Force), the Border Troops and the Air Defense Forces.

Newly Independent States: Western Region

By Tammy Lynch

UKRAINE

Post-election return to foreign policy status quo

For the past several years, Ukraine-watchers have puzzled over the often-schizophrenic quality of the country's foreign policy. One moment, the country's leaders have proclaimed their desire to be included in Western institutions; the next, they have suggested closer integration with their Eastern neighbor, Russia. One minute, these leaders have appeared to covet regional power status; the
next, they have shrunk from actions that would help them reach that goal. To explain these apparent contradictions, officials in Ukraine have talked of a "dual" and "bipolar" foreign policy, and suggested that the country's most important goal should be "creating a safe zone of peace and stability" around it. Unfortunately, this refusal to choose a clear direction for its foreign policy meant that the country remained in a type of limbo, hovering ineffectually between East and West, easily swayed and manipulated by both sides.

During the recent parliamentary elections, however, it seemed that President Leonid Kuchma was all but abandoning this policy and doing his best to shove his country in one direction -- toward Russia. Dogged by accusations of his complicity in the murder of journalist Georgiy Gongadze and battling the Communists for support in ethnically Russian areas of Eastern Ukraine, the president repeatedly lashed out at the "West," while seeming to embrace all things Russian. The policy shift (which actually began well before the election) was, of course, questioned by Western countries and organizations and welcomed in the East. Russian politicians were particularly pleased to hear Kuchma tell a gathering of ethnic Russians that he would reverse his country's earlier position and join the Russian-led Eurasian Economic Community (EURASEC). That organization, ostensibly meant to promote free trade among its members (Russia, Belarus, Tajikistan, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan), is often viewed by former Soviet republics as a Russian tool to maintain economic dominance over them. Kuchma's reservations, it seems, disappeared during the elections, at least publicly.

Meanwhile, all talk of joining the European Union (EU) -- once a staple of Ukrainian policy -- was also gone. It appeared that Ukraine finally had made a foreign policy choice. As is common in Ukraine, however, that was then and this is now. Soon after the elections, talk of the European Union began again, while Ukraine's leaders suddenly denied any intention to join the EURASEC. "We should not forget that joining the EURASEC entails a radical change of our laws,"
State Secretary for European Integration Oleksandr Chaly said, "This is quite another form of market economy." (INTERFAX UKRAINE BUSINESS REPORT, 19 Apr 02; via lexis-nexis) This backtracking set off a barrage of criticism from the Russian Ambassador to Ukraine, Viktor Chernomyrdin, who reportedly referred to Chaly as "ignorant" and claimed the secretary had no authorization to speak on the issue. On 25 April, however, Foreign Minister Anatoly Zlenko held a press conference in order to support Chaly's statement. "No country can be in several customs unions or in several unions," he said. "In our case, Ukraine chooses the union it prefers. This is the EU. Of course, I think that Viktor Stepanovich Chernomyrdin [responded] on the spur of the moment and probably did not completely understand the comments made by our state secretary, Oleksandr Chaly." (ONE PLUS ONE TV, 1630 GMT, 25 Apr 02; BBC Monitoring, via lexis-nexis)

But this being Ukraine, the issue was far from settled. Less than 10 days later, Russian President Vladimir Putin told reporters that Ukraine had requested observer status in the EURASEC. He also attempted to provide his neighbor with an incentive to become a full member. Should Ukraine join the organization, Putin said, oil shipped to the country would be exempt from VAT fees -- fees that soon will be raised from $9 per ton to over $20 per ton. Earlier, Russian Prime Minister Mikhail Kasyanov asserted that this increase would cost Ukraine an extra $170 million each year. (DEN, 11 May 02; BBC Monitoring, via lexis-nexis) Putin claimed the cost could be as high as $450 million. Either way, the VAT increase would further strain Ukraine's already taut energy budget. In response to Putin's suggestion, Kuchma promised that "more serious steps will soon be undertaken" regarding full membership in EURASEC. (INTERFAX, 1608 GMT, 17 May 02; BBC Monitoring, via lexis-nexis) The Russian president seems to have accepted that statement for the time being and reportedly has suspended the VAT increase on oil shipments to Ukraine.
This banter over VAT came, not coincidentally, around the same time as Kuchma's meeting with EU President Romano Prodi in Brussels. While this meeting was important for its symbolism (particularly given Kuchma's recent isolation), it was telling that, unlike his own previous statements and those of Zlenko's just days earlier, Kuchma denied his country would seek EU membership. Instead, he said, Ukraine would work to "achieve the standards of the European Union." (UKRAINIAN NEWS AGENCY, 19 May 02; via ISI Emerging Markets Database)

Meanwhile, Zlenko was meeting with US Secretary of State Colin Powell. That meeting appeared to be more successful, and ended with Powell dismissing suggestions that Ukraine had sold a radar system to Iraq in violation of UN sanctions. "We have no evidence that they actually have done it," he said. "They have assured us that it didn't happen, and so there was no need to mention it today." (AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE, 16 May 02; via lexis-nexis) The secretary also told reporters that Zlenko had implied a desire for his country to join NATO -- something the Ukrainian foreign minister has avoided discussing in public. Powell's response was apparently cautious but encouraging; clearly, during the meeting, the secretary's concerns for the geopolitical situation in the region outweighed any concerns about Ukraine's domestic politics.

Kuchma does not seem to suffer from that problem. So, Ukraine continues to dangle dangerously between East and West. It does appear, however, that there are significant efforts being made to integrate Ukraine more fully into Western structures. But this process can only go so far. As long as the country's president is weakened by scandal and dependent on Russian support, there can be no true West-oriented policy. Additionally, as long as the country remains dependent on Russian energy, it will need to remain dependent on Russian political will. Unfortunately, despite repeated attempts, Ukraine has been unable to wean itself away from the Russian energy trough. And in the last 10 years, Russia has been very willing to use its control over its neighbor's energy supply to "convince"
Ukraine to support Russia's policies. The VAT debate is just the latest case in point. For this reason, while the inclination of many leaders of Ukraine is to lean Westward, pragmatically, the country must stay engaged to the East.

The EU and Powell meetings are indeed a positive sign -- as are the recent military exercises in Ukraine involving current and future NATO members. Probably it will be necessary to wait several more years before the country's foreign policy can begin to move in one consistent direction. Only a country that is post-Kuchma with a more diversified energy supply will be able truly to choose its own independent path.

Newly Independent States: Caucasus
By Miriam Lanskoy

Reykjavik meeting unproductive
A trilateral meeting of the Turkish, Armenian and Azerbaijani foreign ministers was held in Reykjavik on 15 May. According to Azerbaijani Foreign Minister Vilayat Quliev, the question of relations between Armenia and Turkey did not come up at the meeting. Quliev said that Ankara has not altered its position that it will not resume relations with Yerevan while Armenia continues to occupy parts of Azerbaijan. The OSCE has not produced any new initiatives for the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, Quliev added. Likewise a recent three-day consultation between the personal representatives of the Azerbaijani and Armenian presidents in Prague produced no results. (EKHO, 16 May 02; BBC Monitoring, via lexis-nexis)

ARMENIA
US slaps sanctions on Armenian firm
The US has imposed sanctions on an Armenian company that is accused of selling dual use technology to Iran. An Armenian paper, Aravot, comments that
the sanctions "are not so terrible." Only the company in question will be punished by being denied US governments aid for two years and it will not be able to conclude a contract with the USA or buy defense equipment from the US. "If these Armenian companies are indeed private, as Foreign Minister Vardan Oskanian hastened to announce, the situation would not be so alarming," Aravot continued. The troubling part is that "there are no private companies in Armenia delivering equipment to Iran. Although they are called private, they operate under the auspices of the authorities, i.e., they are in fact state-run." (ARAVOT, 14 May 02; BBC Monitoring, via lexis-nexis)

The company, Lysine, sold equipment including fermentation tanks to Iran. The tanks can be used to produce dangerous microbes for use as biological weapons. When the sale was made two years ago, the company was owned by Armen Sarkisian, the brother of the late Armenian Prime Minister Vazgen Sarkisian. (ARMINFORM NEWS AGENCY, 17 and 18 May 02; BBC Monitoring, via lexis-nexis) Lysine manufactures a beet-based biochemical substance used as an additive to animal fodder. However, the product also can be used to produce proteins that raise resistance to nuclear radiation. (RFE/RL NEWSLINE, 17 May 02)

It is quite possible that Armenian companies are being used as fronts by Russia, since Russian companies have come under greater scrutiny in recent years for their sales of sensitive technology to Iran. Armenia, Russia and Iran have formed a strategic alliance to coordinate policies in the Caucasus region. Armenia finally has achieved its long-sought aim of securing Iran's participation in the negotiations concerning Nagorno-Karabakh. An Iranian representative was among the OSCE mediators at the most recent meeting of the Minsk group, which was held on 13 May. (IRNA, 13 May 02; BBC Monitoring, via lexis-nexis) From Russia's perspective, it can rely on Iran to block Azerbaijan's efforts to develop its oil reserves in the Caspian Sea. Azerbaijan's President Heyder Aliev
arrived for a long-awaited visit in Tehran on 18 May. He plans to discuss the status of the Caspian Sea, but few expect the talks to be fruitful.

GEORGIA

Train and equip mission stalls
Although 20 US trainers had arrived in Georgia and 75 more Rangers were on the way, the training stalled due to complications on the Georgian side. The US requires that the Georgian soldiers work on a contract basis, although Georgia has not switched to a professional military. However, the government says it has found the 5 million lari to switch the units in question to a contract basis. (GEORGIAN TELEVISION, 16 May 02; BBC Monitoring, via lexis-nexis) On a visit to Georgia, Otar Shalikashvili, who is serving as an adviser to the US Defense Department, reminded his hosts that, "The Georgian government is helping itself since it is assuming certain financial obligations. We expect your government to meet these obligations by entering into special agreements with the troops trained by us and paying them adequate salaries." (RUSTAVI-2 TV, 15 May 02; BBC Monitoring, via lexis-nexis)

INGUSHETIA

Refugees in Ingushetia in peril
General Murat Zyazikov won the run-off ballot in Ingushetia’s presidential elections on 28 April. The FSB general's most recent appointment was as the deputy to General Viktor Kazantsev, Putin's representative in the Southern Federal District. Kommersant and Ren-TV reported on 29 April that armed detachments of FSB and MVD special forces screened potential voters and barred the supporters of Zyazikov's rival, State Duma deputy Alikhan Amirkhanov, from voting. (BBC Monitoring, via ISI Emerging Markets Database) Zyazikov's supporters had special markings in their internal passports and were allowed to pass into the election hall; those lacking such markings were not allowed to enter.
Immediately after the voting, it became clear why the Kremlin had gone to such lengths to elect Zyazikov. The new Ingush president announced that his first priority will be to return refugees from Chechnya and North Ossetia who have been living in Ingushetia to their places of origin. Plans to repatriate the refugees to Chechnya were confirmed on 15 May by Stanislav Ilyasov, the prime minister in the pro-Russian government. Ilyasov said that he had discussed this prospect with UN representative Terence Burke and had reached agreement with foreign diplomats that humanitarian organizations would move from Ingushetia to Chechnya. (INTERFAX, 15 May 02; via Chechnya-sl@yahoo.groups.com)

DAGESTAN
Kapyisk blast: elections by other means
Officials of the Dagestani security services suspect that Rapani Khalilov, a Dagestani Lak, organized the blast in Kaspiysk on 9 May that killed 41 persons. (ITAR-TASS, 10 MAY 02; BBC Monitoring, via ISI Emerging Markets Database)
According to ITAR-TASS, Rapani is a Wahhabi who took part in the fighting in the fall of 1999, when Dagestani and Chechen militants launched an incursion from Chechnya. Police are investigating the possibility that the terrorists were aided by local Dagestani police, Ren-TV reported on 10 May. (BBC Monitoring, via ISI Emerging Markets Database) The other suspects arrested in connection with this case were also natives of Dagestan.

Experts on Dagestan regard the terrorist blast as the start of the new election cycle. In fact the pre-election marathon began with the assassination of Dagestani policemen in January 2002 and the brief detention of Nadirshah Khachilaev, a notorious Lak gangster and former Duma deputy who also took part in the 1999 incursions. (INTERFAX, 24 Jan 02; via lexis-nexis) Sanobar Shermatova, a leading expert on the Caucasus, suggested that the terrorist attack in Kaspyisk was carried out to undermine the chairman of the Dagestani State Council, Magomedali Magomedov, who will run for a third term in July. Writing in Moskovskiyie novosti on 13 May, Shermatova pointed out that
Magomedov, a Dargin, has ruled the republic for over a decade, embittering the Avars, the largest Dagestani nationality, whose candidates are blocked from advancing through normal channels.

Magomedov has been at the helm of Dagestani politics since 1987. He should have transferred power years ago to a member of one of Dagestan's other nationalities; instead he has managed to hold on to office -- first by extending the length of his term due to the first Chechen war, and then in 1998 by abolishing the ethnic rotation principle enshrined in the constitution. According to Shermatova, many Dagestani observers believe that the Avar politicians have teamed up with criminal structures and Wahhabi militias to prove to the Kremlin that Magomedov cannot control his turf. She also hints that the Avars may have the support of Kremlin insider Anatoly Chubais.

For its part, Chechen President Aslan Maskhadov's government sought to distance itself from the events in Dagestan. Chechenpress, the government's official news agency, expressed grief and indignation, calling the terrorists "scum" and "scoundrels." Chechenpress pointed out that theories about Chechen links to terrorist acts in Russian cities often were claimed but never documented. The news agency admitted that Maskhadov has not always been able to exercise control over other Chechens. However, the Russian political authorities have also failed to curb the excesses of some officers serving in Chechnya.

(CHECHENPRESS, 10 May 02; via Chechnya-sl@yahoo.groups.com)

CHECHNYA
Who killed Khattab?
The official version of Khattab's death, that he was killed in a special FSB operation involving a poisoned letter, has not convinced all the observers and other explanations of Khattab's demise continue to circulate. Sanobar Shermatova writes in Moskovskiy novosti on 10 May that Khattab was killed by a Jordanian agent who was sent at the behest of diaspora Chechens in the
Middle East. Chechens regard the presence of Khattab as among the worst calamities that had befallen them and purportedly had decided to eliminate him. According to this version, Khattab died in Chechnya in the way that was described by the Russian authorities -- but Chechens, not the FSB, ordered his assassination. Shermatova comments that Khattab's unit, comprised mostly of Arabs, was so estranged from the Chechen units and Chechen society that there is nothing surprising in the fact that his death was not widely known. Khattab was buried on 18 March, but news of his death became public on 25 April.

Another highly knowledgeable expert, Vyacheslav Izmailov, suggests in Novaya gazeta on 13 May that Khattab may not be dead at all. Other terrorists have obtained fake passports and moved to neighboring Russian regions. One such person is Rezlan El'biev who, among many other crimes, reportedly killed the US aid worker Fred Cuny in 1995. According to Izmailov, El'biev lives in Ingushetia under a new identity. Izmailov regards as improbable that Khattab's demise could have been concealed for a month because he had a Dagestani wife, hence the news would have spread through her family. Izmailov raises an important point by asking why Basaev did not appear at Khattab’s burial, which was captured on videotape.

Meanwhile, previously unknown details of Khattab's biography are coming out in the Arabic press. According to his brother Mansour, Khattab's real name was Samer Saleh Abdullah Al-Sewailem. He was from a very prominent Saudi family that originated in the central part of the Arab peninsula. Samer turned down offers to study in the US with the Aramco corporation. Instead he went to Afghanistan in 1987 equipped with two letters of introduction to the mujahadeen (one of them from the Saudi Red Crescent Society in Pakistan). (AL-SHARQ AL-ASWAT, 2 May 02) He remained in Afghanistan until 1991, then went to Tajikistan, Azerbaijan and finally Chechnya. He remained in regular contact with his family in Saudi Arabia via satellite phone but had not visited since 1993. Although his family did not approve of his activities, Khattab was always able to
persuade them to give him money. When he arrived in Chechnya he had no contacts and posed as a journalist to establish himself. Before his arrival in Chechnya Khattab already spoke fluent Russian, according to his brother.

According to the Arabic paper, Al-Sharq Al-aswat, Khattab was poisoned by a Dagastani messenger, Ibrahim Il-Uri, who was carrying a letter from Abu Valid. The fighters who buried Khattab made the tape and sent it by messenger to Abu Valid, who decided to keep Khattab's death secret. The Federals seized the video during a raid on 23 April, and took credit for Khattab's death on 25 April. The idea that the video was made on 18 March for the sake of Khattab's Saudi family does not stand up to scrutiny. It is clear from the Al-Sharq Al-aswat interview and another article in Al-Hayat on 29 April that the family did not hear the news until the end of April.

This version also leaves unanswered questions. Why did Abu Valid need the video? Why didn't he attend the burial? Why was Khattab's death kept a secret for a month even from his family? This suggests the possibility that Khattab may have been killed by his men on their own initiative.

**And does it matter?**

Khattab's death has had no particular impact on the war. The routine of fighting and "cleansing" continues unabated, and the most serious recent attack, the explosion of the bus carrying 18 members of the pro-Moscow Chechen police, occurred on 18 April, after Khattab's demise. Khattab has been replaced by Abu Valid, who is regarded as an equally unsavory character; Valid has inherited Khattab's Saudi financial sponsors. As Pavel Felgenhauer commented in the 10 May issue of Moskovskiy novosti, it does not profit the Russian side to eliminate the old guard of Chechen commanders, those who fought in the first war, because their replacements are likely to be far more cruel and irreconcilable.
Indeed, Abu Valid is busy making a name for himself befitting his mentor's mantle. On 16 May, he announced via the radical new service kavkaz-tsentr that Russian hostages would be executed in three days unless the Russian forces meet a list of his demands -- which is highly improbable. The prisoners in question are the crew of the helicopter that disappeared on 3 February. The Russian authorities are not engaging in negotiations with Valid, saying that the crew is "probably dead" already. (RIA NOVOSTI, 15 May 02; via Chechnya-sl)

The wreckage of the Mi-24 helicopter was found last month, with no trace of the crew.

**Newly Independent States: Central Asia**

By Michael Donahue and David Montgomery

**Uncivil societies**

Despite vast energy resources, economic potential and available labor forces, the countries of Central Asia could only be described as failed states, both before 11 September and since. The crippling socio-economic effects of Communism have been, in general, exacerbated in the post-Soviet era by incompetent, authoritarian regimes bent more on lining their own pockets than on developing their societies, raising the standard of living for their people, and lifting their states out of the Stone Age. Worse, however, is the likelihood that the influx of foreign capital, personnel and equipment resulting from the "war on terrorism" will not change substantively the political, and therefore socio-economic, landscape of the region.

Lacking most among the major institutions in the region normally associated with a civil society are a free press, free speech (or political opposition), and an independent central bank and judiciary. Despite the enormous increase of attention that Central Asia has enjoyed in recent months, little information has reached the mainstream Western media regarding the environmental and health
care disasters in the region, the political corruption of the existing regimes, or the imprisonment of human rights workers and political activists. Within the Central Asian republics, little news reaches citizens that is not screened or even written by the government.

So far, development aid and security guarantees have not been tied directly to improvements in human rights or substantive steps toward fair, multi-party democratic systems. Indeed, if anything, established regimes have cracked down on genuine political opposition under the rubric of "fighting terrorism." The plights of Ravshan Gapirov, Azimbek Beknazarov and Sherali Nazarkulov (jailed human rights activist, imprisoned member of parliament, and dead hunger striker, respectively) forcefully illustrate the political and social crises currently facing Kyrgyz President Askar Akaev, and are indicative of the state of affairs throughout the region. To emphasize the point, recently more than 90 peaceful political protesters were arrested in Bishkek, prompting Human Rights Watch both to condemn the Akaev regime as "going down the road of intolerance and brutality" and to question continued Western support for the government. (HUMAN RIGHTS WATCH; 17 May 02; via www.hrw.org)

In a similar attempt at self-preservation in the face of political opposition and criticism, Kazakh President Nursultan Nazarbaev recently proposed re-subordinating the financial police directly to the president (thereby eliminating any governmental or parliamentary oversight). He put forward plans to establish a special authority attached to the presidential office empowered with the prevention and supervision of cases of corruption. (THE GLOBE, 16 May 02; via www.globe.kz) Perhaps his intent becomes more obvious when one considers that recently large sums of Kazakh state monies have surfaced in Swiss bank accounts. Nazarbaev has been accused publicly of misappropriating public funds and taking bribes from the oil companies (although Prime Minister Imangali Tasmagambetov recently tried to defuse criticism by offering a possible explanation for the accounts). In the face of these accusations Nazarbaev may
be ill-advised to resort to such measures as rendering the government impotent by subjugating the investigators and censoring the investigations.

Whether allegations concerning Nazarbaev's or Akaev's actions, or accusations that Turkmen President Saparmurat Niyazov is trafficking heroin, are substantiated or not, a shadow darkens Central Asian regimes and societies.

KYRGYZSTAN

Fear of civil war

As protests against President Akaev's administration increased, the former Kyrgyz defense minister and chairman of the Defense Committee of the Legislative Assembly, Myrzakan Subanov, expressed concern that continued unrest in the country could result in a civil war following largely the north-south division within the country. (INTERFAX, 1034 GMT, 16 May 02; FBIS-SOV-2002-0516, via World News Connection) Kyrgyzstan, being 94 percent mountainous, is subject to a geographical political division that is reflected in the political tensions and subtle cultural differences between the north -- containing the administrative capital of Bishkek -- and the more Uzbek-influenced southern regions -- including the centers of Osh and Jalal-Abad. The roots of current protests and the deeper threat to the stability of the country stem from north-south tensions and a central government that has not addressed the concerns of the country with regional equity.

By 16 May, over 8,000 protesters from the south were migrating towards Bishkek to express their dissatisfaction with President Askar Akaev's administration. (IBID.) Emphasizing the north-south division, upwards of 3,500 protesters blockaded the Osh-Bishkek highway, disrupting transit and trade between the regions. (ITAR-TASS, 1553 GMT, 16 May 02; FBIS-SOV-2002-0516, via World News Connection) Approximately 90 persons in Bishkek were detained by police, purportedly for conducting an unauthorized rally (EURASIANET, 17 May 02; via www.eurasianet.org); on Monday, 13 May, approximately 100 individuals
attempted to break into the Kyrgyz parliament building to express their concerns to the deputies. (INTERFAX, 0836 GMT, 13 May 02; FBIS-SOV-2002-0513, via World News Connection)

The demands of the protesters reflect the four principal causes of the current unrest within the country:

(1) Demands for justice: On 17-18 March, 5 persons were killed and 90 injured in clashes between Kerben residents and police. (Kerben is the center of the Aksy district in Jalal-Abad Region.) The protesters are demanding that those guilty of causing these casualties be punished. (ITAR-TASS, 1841 GMT, 15 May 02; FBIS-SOV-2002-0515, World News Connection)

(2) Protests concerning criminal proceedings against Azimbek Beknazarov, chairman of the parliamentary committee for judicial and legal issues, who is accused of abuse of office while working as a law-enforcement investigator in the prosecutor's office of Jalal-Abad Region. His trial contributed to the initial March 2002 riots in Aksy; protesters are demanding that the case against him be thrown out. (ITAR-TASS and INTERFAX, 7 May 02; FBIS-SOV-2002-0507, via World News Connection)

(3) Demands for the revocation of the sentence passed on Felix Kulov: On 8 May, the former governor of Chuy Region (1994-96) and mayor of Bishkek (1998-99), Felix Kulov, was sentenced to 10 years in prison for "having damaged the state on a large scale." In addition, his property was confiscated and he was prohibited from holding government office for three years after his release from prison. (INTERFAX, 1530 GMT, 8 May 02; FBIS-SOV-2002-0508, via World News Connection) Kulov is the leader of the Ar-Namys opposition party and is considered to constitute one of the most serious political threats to Akaev. (ITAR-TASS, 1126 GMT, 14 May 02; FBIS-SOV-2002-0514, via World News Connection)
(4) Opposition to the surrender of land to China: In an attempt to resolve border disputes with China, Akaev proposed ceding 30 percent of the disputed border section (approximately 95,000 hectares) along the Uzgen-Kuush River (of the Osh Region) to China. On 10 May, parliament had ratified the 1999 border accord and protesters demanded the concessions be rescinded. (EURASIANET, 14 May 02; via eurasianet.org and INTERFAX, 0727 GMT, 13 May 02; FBIS-SOV-2002-0513, via World News Connection)

Other factors influencing the sense of dissatisfaction include a decreasing standard of living as well as a perceived absence of regional political representation. The north-south division is of long standing and was apparent in the 1990 Osh Conflicts and in political appointments made by Bishkek. The legitimacy of Akaev's presidency was questioned when he ran for a third term -- despite a two-term constitutional limit (it was argued that his first term did not count since he was acting as president when the constitution was ratified) -- and the exclusion of Kulov and other opposition leaders influenced unrest and dissatisfaction in the government. Combined with the overly forceful oppression of the Aksy protests, the threat to political stability in the country is increasing and the need for reform and more inclusive north-south representation is becoming ever more critical.

[EDITOR’S NOTE: At press time, as demonstrations continued, the government of Prime Minister Kurmanbek Bakiev resigned. President Akaev has promised to include opposition leaders in the new government.]

Newly Independent States: Baltic States
By Michael Varuolo

LATVIA
Vike-Freiberga triumphant in election law struggle with parliament

On 9 May the Latvian Saeima adopted two bills that change Latvian election law and remove one of the few issues subject to lingering international criticism. Bills 1258 and 1259 effectively abolished the language proficiency requirements for persons seeking election to national and municipal offices. (FINANCIAL TIMES, 9 May 02; via lexis-nexis). The new legislation was applauded by many within the international community, including the United States, which released a statement from the embassy in Riga shortly after parliament's decision: "We are encouraged by Latvia's continuing efforts to achieve a society that in unified, tolerant, generous and open to all who believe and share in the nation's future. We believe Latvia is on the right path," the statement said. (US EMBASSY PRESS RELEASE, 9 May 02; via www.usis.bkc.lv)

The new legislation represents a significant victory for President Vaira Vike-Freiberga, who has been engaged in a protracted political battle with the Saeima over this issue. At the urging of the international community, she pursued an aggressive policy seeking to amend the law in order to enhance Latvia's democratic image and to bolster its attempts to gain membership to the EU and NATO. Opportunity arose for the passage of new election legislation in the wake of a European Court of Human Rights award of 9,000 euros to former parliamentary candidate Ingrida Podkolzina, who was removed from the ballot due to an apparent lack of fluency in the Latvian language. (FINANCIAL TIMES, 18 Apr 02; via lexis-nexis) The decision influenced public opinion and convinced a sufficient number of MPs to guarantee the outcome of the new legislation.

Podkolzina's case was a breakthrough case because of the manner in which she was removed from the ballot. It is alleged that Podkolzina's valid language certificate was rendered void only after she had voiced support for the National Harmony Party, which supports the cause of ethnic Russians within Latvia. After she could not complete a make-up exam administered by an official from the state language center, she was removed from the ballot.
However, the debate concerning the election law had started long before the Podkolzina case. Last year, Vike-Freiberga began advocating the abolition of the language requirement. The president said that she did not consider an amendment to the election law a threat to Latvia's right to have one official state language, but felt that an amendment would bring Latvia into conformity with NATO and European standards of government. (FINANCIAL TIMES, 15 Feb 02; via lexis-nexis) Although Vike-Freiberga was able to persuade Prime Minister Andris Berzins of the need for a state language commission to investigate Latvian language protection policies and to open debate on the election laws, she was unable to convince the Saeima that a change was needed.

The Saeima sought a political solution which would allow MPs to maintain a strong stance on the role of the official state language while capitulating on the election laws. On 30 April, the parliament found a path towards this and passed a series of constitutional reforms aimed at strengthening the role of the Latvian language within the state. The amendments formulated an oath of office for elected officials, established Latvian as the working language for parliament and state institutions, and noted that municipal governments are elected by citizens rather than residents. (BNS, 1403 GMT, 30 Apr 02; FBIS-SOV-2002-0430, via World News Connection) This allowed parliament members to proceed with the abolition of the language requirement for elections without losing the support of their more nationalistic constituencies.

The vote was forced through rapidly as the Saeima recognized the urgency of the issue in view of the May NATO conference in Reykjavik. (MINISTRY OF FOREIGN AFFAIRS PRESS RELEASE, 9 May 02; via www.am.gov.lv) Given NATO Secretary-General George Robertson's repeated denunciation of the election laws, the Saeima wanted to demonstrate to NATO that Latvia took this situation seriously.
This gave Latvia a political boost as the NATO foreign ministers met for the last time before the Prague Summit that will decide on the accession of new members to NATO.