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Russian Federation: Executive Branch

By Susan Cavan

PRESIDENCY

Succession complex and apparat apprehension

President Putin's recent bombastic rhetoric, along with his decision to withdraw from the CFE treaty (announced just days after the photo-friendly Lobster Summit), perpetuates the illusion of a strong, resurgent Russia, buoyed by petrodollars and forging its own "pole" in world affairs. In truth however, there is a crack in Russia's foundation that threatens to destabilize the state and its system of governance.

Succession is the hobgoblin of many transitional states, which may have thrown off oppressive military rule or evicted a colonial power, but cannot seem to let go of the initial revolutionary or "democratic" leadership, in favor of establishing a lasting institutionalized succession. Russia, which has substantial historical baggage on the issue of succession, also has not managed to develop a "mechanism" that is telegraphed in advance to the population and allows for a natural growth of political parties, including opposition groups, which compete in the choice of presidential successor. (1)

Although Yel'tsin did not insist on clinging to power personally, his extended "Family," likely for fear of impoverishment or imprisonment by the next regime, devised a means of bringing Vladimir Putin to power in the hopes that he would prove loyal, compliant, and would prefer to look forward rather than to the sins of the past. (2) Clearly, not all members received what they bargained for.
At that point, Yel'tsin was extremely ill, and his weaknesses had become all too evident to the public. Following the devaluation of the ruble in 1998, his power ebbed to the point that the choice of prime minister was made almost by acclamation. And the prime minister, sensing frailty in the president, attacked his entourage, likely as a precursor to attacks on Yel'tsin himself.

Members of the Yel'tsin Family could do little but create a scenario that required a sure hand and put Putin to it, anointing him successor and working their magic for his eventual election as president. It seems likely that Putin has exceeded their every expectation, positively and negatively.

But what is Putin to do now that his term of office approaches an end? There is no clearly marked trail for succession. As we have seen from the Litvinenko debate over whether or not the Russian Constitution allows extradition of its citizens (it does), the text of the 1993 Constitution is remarkably malleable for state officials, especially when the state controls the main media outlets. Apparently, the current president believes that criticism from the west, when Russia refuses to observe accepted norms of international behavior, is less a reflection of Russia's own actions than the "colonial thinking" of its critics. (3) If Putin were to sidestep the constitutional term limits of his presidency, would western criticism have any impact on his decision? If a popular referendum produced overwhelming support for such a decision, would the results silence critics or would Russia press on as a "sovereign democracy"?

For the time being, Putin has stressed his intention to observe his constitutionally-mandated term limit and step aside for a successor. Within Russia, this possibility is fraught with tension. Absent an institutionalized process and viable, credible political parties to conduct an election campaign, the selection of a presidential successor seems to constitute the mandate of the present Kremlin occupant(s).
At this moment, there appear to be two clear "frontrunner candidates" for successor. Yet, it seems unlikely that even they believe that one of them will, in fact, become Russia's next president (at least in 2008). Putin and his top advisers hint at currently unknown or perhaps regional candidates, second-tier possibilities from within the government or apparat, and, of course the potential for a Putin third term.

This uncertainty leaves concerned citizens, domestic and foreign analysts, and investors all to resort to the techniques of Sovietology in close observation of detail in media coverage, pictures, personnel changes, and Kremlin comments.

Unfortunately, the difficulties in reading the portents coming from the Kremlin are nearly as onerous now as in the Soviet era, since seemingly minor shifts in policy or personnel can have significant repercussions. Within the current Russian elite, the issue is critical.

Does more prevalent press coverage of Dmitri Medvedev represent a surge for the economically-liberal wing of the president's clutch? Was Sergei Naryshkin's appointment to the Supervisory Council of Vnesheconombank or to head the Commission to Ensure Russia's Presence on Spitsbergen [Svalbard] Archipelago a sign that he is pulling ahead in the dark horse race? (4) Perhaps the most perplexing issue for foreign policymakers is the question of western opinion: Does a putative hard-line from the West increase the likelihood of a siloviki candidate emerging in Russia? (Hint: The siloviki will be at Putin's right hand no matter what are the comments from the West.)

In many ways the answers to these questions will be a relief from the tension and uncertainty that Russia's current transitional succession holds. It is this very uncertainty, produced by the need to have the broadest range of possible succession options available to Putin and his entourage that also undermines the image of a strong, resurgent Russia, which Putin works so diligently to project.
Speaking of succession signs...
What could Security Council (SC) Secretary Igor Ivanov possibly have done to get himself ousted from the so-called "dumping grounds" that has been the Security Council of late? Reports indicate that he resigned and intends to leave state service, in order to pursue a teaching career. (5)

The Security Council is an executive organ — its powers and functions are ill defined and highly dependent on the relative influence of the Secretary and the will of the president. Under the leadership of Yuri Skokov, its creation, early in Yeltsin's first presidency, focused on the formation and staffing of a Russian Armed Forces and Defense Ministry (as separate from the Soviet or proposed CIS Joint Forces), as well as on the management of potential emergency situations; its purview eventually branched out to the vetting of other Yeltsin appointees and to wider policy formulation authority, but Yeltsin's March 1993 declaration of "Special Rule" caused a rift with Skokov that resulted in a diminution of SC authority. Other Secretaries, including the charismatic, if gruff, General Aleksandr Lebed pushed to refashion the Security Council, with little lasting effect.

Still, the Security Council has remarkable potential and can be molded to create an extremely powerful and authoritative body, given the right leadership.

With Ivanov's departure, President Putin has tapped Col-Gen Valentin Sobolev to be Secretary of the Council on an "acting" basis. (6) Sobolev is a deputy of the Security Council, longtime KGB and FCS intelligence officer and close associate of Putin's, who recently led negotiations with Iran over Russia's offer to process its Uranium. He also is an expert on counter-terrorism.

Sobolev frequently is quoted in the media and his comments on anti-terrorism measures, particularly the need to control the media in order to prevent it being
used by the terrorists as an instrument to spread fear among the population (6) are controversial, as are his remarks on the power of ideas:

"World history shows that extremism begins with an idea. If it is not resisted at the level of ideas—if some extremist postulate or challenge passes unnoticed—then forces will gradually emerge to put those ideas into practice for their own purposes, arming themselves with these slogans to try to achieve their economic political, or criminal objective." (8)

Certainly, Sobolev's appointment would be controversial if he had not simply been named "acting" Secretary. President Putin, a former Secretary of the Security Council himself, likely will replace his SC "placeholder," but the questions and the uncertainty rise about the timing – Who will replace Sobolev, as well as when and why?

Perhaps most interestingly, will the Security Council itself have a role to play in the upcoming succession?

Source Notes:

(1) For more on the Russia's historical and current struggles with creating a succession "mechanism," please see Flawed Succession: Russia's Power Transfer Crises, Ed. by Uri Ra'anan, Rowman-Littlefield (Lexington Books), 2006.
(2) It is possible that certain members of the Yel'tsin Family believed that they had sufficient kompromat on Putin to keep him in line. Whether or not his loyalty to many of them was a matter of honor or blackmail is a question for historians some time hence.
(4) "Government appoints members of Vnesheconombank Supervisory Council," SKRIN Market & Corporate News, 3 Jul 07; "Deputy Premier to Head Russian
Russian Federation: Domestic Issues and Legislative Branch

By Creela Henderson

Law on the run

When the Tverskoi District Court in Moscow issued a warrant for the arrest of a prominent defense lawyer on charges of disclosing state secrets, the accused, Boris Kuznetsov, was not present at the hearing. Citing illness as the cause of his absence from court that day, July 11, Kuznetsov resurfaced one week later at an undisclosed location in Europe and issued a statement calling the charges against him “revenge” for his dogged determination in challenging the power of Russia’s elite law enforcement agencies: the Procurator General, Ministry of Internal Affairs and particularly the FSB. (1) Law enforcement agencies face a determined adversary in Kuznetsov, who avowed that “if the evidence of innocence is located in a pile of crap and my hands are tied, I will obtain the evidence with my teeth.” (2)

The charges leading up to the warrant for Kuznetsov’s arrest arose out of his defense of former Federation Council Senator Levon Chakhmakhchyan, who
stands accused of soliciting bribes in June 2006. At that time, Chakhmakhchyan’s immunity as a parliamentarian did not prevent the FSB from setting up a sting operation in which agents wiretapped the senator’s phone and marked a bundle of dollar bills that subsequently were discovered in his briefcase. In building a defense, Kuznetsov submitted a copy of the wiretap recordings made by the FSB to the Constitutional Court, alleging that his client’s rights as a citizen and member of parliament had been violated. When the office of the Procurator General accused Kuznetsov of divulging state secrets by turning over the covert recordings, the defense lawyer countered that according to Article 7 of the law regarding state secrets: “Information regarding the violation of a citizen’s rights and freedom shall not be regarded as classified.” (3) Undeterred, prosecutors demanded that Kuznetsov sign a statement that would prohibit him from disclosing the facts of Chakhmakhchyan’s case, thus attempting to classify by force that which is unclassifiable by law. Kuznetsov refused the dubious proposition, and found himself accused of a crime that carries a four year prison term.

**Inter alia**

Kuznetsov is not the only public defender to draw the wrath of Russian prosecutors. His own lawyer, Viktor Parshutkin, spent three years in a Moscow prison cell, awaiting trial on charges relating to his defense of a couple who ran afoul of Russian adoption authorities. Lawyers who have taken on the country’s most sensitive cases have become the likeliest targets for official repression. In 2003, Igor Trunov brought 24 suits against the city of Moscow, on behalf of victims of the Dubrovka Theater siege that ended in the death of 130 captives in October 2002. The suits were thrown perfunctorily out of court and Trunov was marked as a persona non grata by law enforcement authorities, who attempted to strip him of his legal credentials in January of this year, again, for disclosing state secrets. (4)
Likewise, the legal team representing Yukos’ chief Mikhail Khodorkovsky has suffered a barrage of harassment from law enforcement officials, including arrests, searches and seizures of defense materials. Non-Russian members of the team have been expelled from the country, while their Russian colleagues face disbarment proceedings at home. Events veered into the twilight zone last spring, when Khodorkovsky issued a statement from prison defending his lawyer, Karinna Moskalenko, against charges brought by the Procurator General, who sought to have Moskalenko disbarred for failing to represent her client adequately. (5) In a statement addressed to the Office of the Procurator General and the Moscow Bar Association, Khodorkovsky demands his right as a defendant to select his own council: "I believe that I’m totally entitled to fully and independently choose the issues and the lawyers and the amount they participate in the case." He added trenchantly, "I believe that by trying to order my lawyers around, the prosecutor’s office is not defending me, but is violating my rights." (6)

State vs. law
The rights upon which Khodorkovsky insists are enshrined in a legal code that has been under attack in recent years, as law enforcement organs move with impunity and without legal grounds against citizens who pose a challenge to state authority. “They see disclosure of state secrets in a lawyer sending documents to the Constitutional Court. This is nonsense,” Genry Reznik, chairman of the Russian Bar Association, said in an interview broadcast on Ekho Moskvy. “I can assess it as something absolutely idiotic, or have to realize that the special services are beyond the reach of law and can do anything they want.” (8)

Identifying the source of the campaign against defense lawyers is a dangerous proposition in Russia, where the pliant legal system remains in the hands of government prosecutors. Kuznetsov is quick to reject the idea that the Kremlin is responsible for the criminal charges being brought against him, pointing instead
to special service figures acting from within the shadows of the FSB. “There are some people from the special services, in the law enforcement agencies, who think that if the president is a former KGB officer then they can do whatever they want,” he said. (9) And what do “they” want? Simply, to ply their clandestine trade without fear of exposure. But, that is exactly what a defense lawyer does: in order to defend a client, each of the smallest details of a case must be exposed to the light of law and examined. Mikhail Barshevsky, the government’s representative to the Constitutional Court, understands that “a lawyer is obliged to protect his defendants and to file appeals.” Commenting on the case of Kuznetsov, he added, “the Tverskoi District Court ruled incorrectly, and this shows that judges simply don’t understand the lawyer’s function.” (10) Remarkable as it may seem that a court of law lacks comprehension of the role of lawyers, such is the case in many Russian courtrooms, where the conviction rate in cases heard by judges still held at around 99 percent in 2005, following a decade of reforms aimed at creating an independent judiciary. (11) “Lawyers are the last bastion before Russian lawlessness, which is flourishing in the absence of a normally functioning and independent judicial system,” said Kuznetsov from his place of hiding. (12)

**Justice elsewhere**
The recent high-profile campaigns against defense attorneys have galvanized the Russian Bar Association to unite in defense of its members. On June 21, the Moscow Bar Association refused to bow to pressure from the Procurator General’s office, voting instead to reaffirm Moskalenko’s legal credentials. Bar Association Chairman Genry Reznik vowed to mobilize support among Russian lawyers for Kuznetsov, and expressed confidence that the criminal proceedings will fade away under the glare of international opprobrium. (13) Meanwhile, Kuznetsov remains on the lam, unable to take refuge in the laws of his own country.

Source Notes:
(2) “No lawyers, no problem,” Vedomosti, 16 Jul 07 via (http://www.vedomosti.ru/).
(3) Ibid.
(6) Statement by Mikhail Khodorkovsky addressed to the Moscow Bar Association and to the Office of the Procurator General, 5 May 07 via (http://www.khodorkovsky.info/after_cassation/violations_against_defence_team/135273.html).
(7) “Russian prosecutors open investigation against prominent lawyer who fled country,” Associated Press Worldstream, 18 Jul 07 via Lexis-Nexis.
(9) “Lawyer Flees Russia Over ‘Political’ Case,” The Moscow Times, 16 Jul 07 via (http://www.themoscowtimes.com/).
(12) Ibid.
President of the Moscow Bar Association Genry Reznik estimates that in two to three weeks the case against Boris Kuznetsov will end,” Ekho Moskvy, 20 Jul 07, via (http://echo.msk.ru/news/386334.html).

Russian Federation: Security Services

By Fabian Adami

FSB extends its “foreign tentacles”

In the aftermath of the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia’s KGB was broken up and different agencies were assigned different bailiwicks. The FSB was to handle domestic counter-terrorism and counter-intelligence, while the SVR and the GRU exclusively were to be responsible for foreign intelligence gathering operations.

Since the ascendancy of President Vladimir Putin, the FSB has been steadily encroaching on the territory of its rival agencies. It has re-absorbed FAPSI and the Border Guard Service, and apparently taken control of the MVD. In July 2006, Russia’s Duma passed legislation allowing the FSB to operate abroad, in order to hunt down extremists or those who “libelously criticize the regime.” (1) It is entirely possible that the FSB’s major action abroad under this legislation was the assassination in November 2006 of Aleksandr Litvinenko. In recent weeks, it has become clear that the FSB is making a move to solidify its new “foreign jurisdiction.”

Speaking to the Federation Council late in June, FSB Director Nikolai Patrushev addressed the “terrorist and other criminal activities targeted against Russian facilities, institutions and citizens outside Russian Federation Territory.” (2) Due to the “increasing number” of these incidents, a Crisis Situation Center is to be set up within the Foreign Ministry. The Center’s role will be to “organize situational responses” to terrorist incidents. (3) Significantly, such Centers also are to be set up within Russian embassies abroad. (4) Both the domestic and
foreign centers are to be staffed by “special service personnel,” although the local ambassador will be in charge (probably in name only). (5)

That a territorial battle exists between GRU, SVR and FSB has been clear for some time. However, the creation of foreign Crisis Situation Centers indicates a renewed offensive: If it is true that these offices are to be staffed exclusively by “special service” (read FSB?) officers, then that agency is actively taking steps to diminish (at least) the roles of GRU and SVR officers posted in parts foreign.

Update: Trepashkin: Pyrrhic victory amid abuse allegations

Mikhail Trepashkin, a former FSB officer and lawyer was sentenced to a four-year prison term after being convicted of espionage in May 2004. At the time of his arrest, Trepashkin was representing individuals accused of the 1999 apartment bombings. As part of his defense arguments, Trepashkin had planned to introduce evidence of FSB complicity in the atrocity. As such, his arrest likely was designed purely to silence an inconvenient voice.

In the aftermath of Aleksandr Litvinenko’s assassination last fall, Trepashkin revealed to the BBC from his jail cell that he allegedly had been part of an FSB team ordered to monitor Litvinenko, in preparation for his removal. Russian authorities were quick to respond to Trepashkin’s statements. On March 9 2007, the courts ruled that he should be moved to a higher security prison with stricter conditions. (6)

Allegations of abuse against Trepashkin have been in the public realm since his arrest. Amnesty International has claimed that he is being denied vital asthma medication, (7) while Lev Ponomarev (Executive Director of the Movement for Human Rights) has received “numerous reports” of “violations in custody.” (8) The full extent of the abuse allegations is not clear—but according to a letter written in December 2006 by Trepashkin, the abuse included placing him in a cell “contaminated with poisonous chemicals.” (9) Early in July, Russia’s Federal
Penal Service (FPS) released a statement arguing that human rights allegations vis à vis Trepashkin did “not correspond to reality” and claiming that “no offences have been committed against the convict Trepashkin.” The “evidence” cited for this claim was the statement by the “chief of IZ-66/1 of the FPS Directorate for Sverdlovsk Region.” (10) This denial—given its origin—can hardly be taken at face value.

Ten days after the FPS issued its statement, the European Court of Human Rights announced a ruling in the first of three complaints filed by Trepashkin’s representatives, since 2003. According to the court, the treatment meted out to the defendant in the aftermath of his arrest “amounted to degrading treatment,” while his detention was “unlawful.” (11) At the time of writing, the Kremlin has not reacted to the Court’s decision, but it is safe to say it will be ignored—or, as in the past—painted as politically motivated Russophobia. (12) Trepashkin’s apparent insider knowledge is a danger to President Putin and the siloviki at large. As such, it is safe to assume that either he will never leave prison—or that he will be silenced permanently upon his release. The European Court of Human Rights’ decision is little more than a pyrrhic victory.

**Litvinenko update: tit-for-tat expulsions**

On 22 May, after 6 months of investigation, Britain’s Crown Prosecution Service (CPS) officially announced that it would seek the extradition of former KGB officer Andrei Lugovoi, on suspicion of murder. British officials were at pains to stress that the case was being viewed purely as a criminal, rather than an intelligence matter. Moscow’s response to extradition requests was to state—albeit apparently informally—that the Russian constitution precluded any citizen’s extradition to a foreign power – without exception. (13) Russia’s stance was confirmed officially on July 5 with a letter from Prosecutor General Yuri Chaika’s office to the British Home Office, stating that it was “not possible to satisfy the request of the British side to extradite Andrei Lugovoi.” (14)
Britain’s response to Moscow’s decision was not slow in arriving. Prime Minister Gordon Brown’s spokesman stated that the extradition veto was “extremely disappointing,” adding that the Prime Minister “deeply” regretted that “Russia has failed to show the necessary level of cooperation on in this matter.” (15) Westminster’s response was not limited to this statement. On 16 July, Foreign Secretary David Miliband informed the House of Commons that Britain had no choice but to send a “clear and proportionate signal” to Moscow: as such, the Government had decided to expel “four particular diplomats” from the Russian embassy. (16) Miliband added that talks aimed at speeding up the visa application procedure both for diplomats and Russian citizens would be suspended. (17)

Moscow’s initial response to the expulsions was to brand Britain’s actions as “immoral” and “Russophobic.” (18) Then, on 19 July, Moscow, in what amounted to a tit-for-tat response, announced that four British diplomats had been declared Persona non grata, and had ten days to leave the country. Foreign Ministry spokesman Mikhail Kamynin stated that British officials would no longer receive visas, and that Russia would cease its cooperation with Britain in the Global War on Terrorism. (19)

In conjunction with its diplomatic actions, Russia has focused on alleged Secret Intelligence Service (MI-6) activities on its soil, specifically linked to Andrei Lugovoi’s allegations that Litvinenko was an MI6 agent, who tried to recruit him. (20) These investigations have intensified in recent weeks, as a result of a personal “coming out.”

Several days after Lugovoi’s May 31 press conference, Vyacheslav Zharko, a former Special Services Officer, contacted the FSB. According to the FSB’s public relations office, Zharko admitted that he had been a long-time MI6 double agent and gave his inquisitors details of “when, by whom and in what circumstances he had been recruited.” (21) Zharko apparently voluntarily turned
himself in because he “feared for his life,” partly due to the fact that his handlers had “insisted” he meet them “in a European city” outside Russia. (22)

Zharko was employed by Boris Berezovsky during the 1990s and traveled to London in 2002 to meet him and Litvinenko. (23) In an interview with Moskovskii komsomolets, Zharko alleged that the tycoon had recruited him for MI6 during his stay in London. Much of the interview was devoted to tarring Berezovsky, while painting Litvinenko as “a typical con-man,” and “worthless” double agent.

Litvinenko, according to Zharko, had begun claiming that “it’s all over for Putin,” adding that “there would be some event that would shake Russia and the whole world.” (24) The insinuation was that Litvinenko was removed because it is against Britain’s interests to see Putin’s regime end.

Zharko’s curriculum vitae—and his allegations against Berezovsky—automatically render his story and his “confession” suspicious. It has been clear since Litvinenko’s death, that the Kremlin remains focused on extraditing Berezovsky. Russia evidently is building a (somewhat convoluted) case against the oligarch that contends he is a British agent who ordered or instigated Litvinenko’s murder. The end result of this “case” will likely be a further extradition attempt against Berezovsky, on charges of being a traitor to the Rodina.

Source Notes:
(1) See The ISCIP Analyst, Volume XIII, Number 5 (7 Dec 06).
(2) “‘Good At Diplomacy’ FSB Director Patrushev is Setting Up A Crisis Center to Negotiate With Foreign Terrorists Who Take Russian Citizens Hostage,” Novaya gazeta, 28 Jun 07; What The Papers Say via Lexis-Nexis.
(3) Ibid.
(4) “Russia To Set Up Emergency Centers At Embassies Abroad,” ITAR-TASS, Moscow, in Russian, 3 Jul 07; BBC Monitoring via Lexis-Nexis.
(5) “‘Good At Diplomacy’ FSB Director Patrushev is Setting Up A Crisis Center to Negotiate With Foreign Terrorists Who Take Russian Citizens Hostage,” Novaya gazeta, 28 Jun 07; What The Papers Say via Lexis-Nexis.
(6) See The ISICP Analyst, Volume XIII, Number 10 (29 Mar 07).
(8) “Russian Authorities Deny Abuse Against Ex-FSB Officer,” ITAR-TASS, Moscow, in Russian, 10 Jul 07; BBC Monitoring via Lexis-Nexis.
(10) “Russian Authorities Deny Abuse Against Ex-FSB Officer,” ITAR-TASS, Moscow, in Russian, 10 Jul 07; BBC Monitoring via Lexis-Nexis.
(12) Ibid.
(16) “Putin Vows Revenge As Britain Expels Four Diplomats,” The Daily Telegraph, 17 Jul 07.
(22) “Russian FSB Names Man Said Recruited by MI6,” Interfax News Agency, Moscow, in Russian, 29 Jun 07; BBC Monitoring via Lexis-Nexis.
(24) “I Was Recruited via Litvinenko, Guided By Berezovsky; Exclusive Interview With Former MI6 Agent Vyacheslav Zharko,” Moskovskii komsomolets, 3 Jul 07; What The Papers Say via Lexis-Nexis.

Russian Federation: Foreign Relations

By Alexey Dynkin

The Lobster Summit and the current state of US-Russian relations

The somewhat leisurely and informal meeting between United States President George W. Bush and Russian President Vladimir Putin on July 2 at the Bush family home in Kennebunkport, Maine, comes at a rather low point in US-Russian relations. The first half of 2007 was marked by Putin’s Munich speech, which some compared to Winston Churchill’s “Iron Curtain” speech in Fulton; (1) by angry Russian denunciation of a proposed American anti-ballistic missile system based in Poland and the Czech Republic; by American unease and frustration at Russia’s dealings with Iran; and, most recently, by the diametrically opposite stances taken by Russia on the one hand and the US and the EU on the other regarding the question of the future status of Kosovo. In light of these
developments, the summit was probably intended to be an opportunity, if not actually to improve relations, at least to make the dialogue more civil; to take a step back from the rhetoric of Munich. With that limited goal in mind, the summit was a success: both presidents described it as very positive and productive. (2) However, instead of trying to predict the effects of this particular summit on US-Russian relations, it may instead be more worthwhile to use it as an occasion to reflect on this relationship more generally, and only then to place the summit into context.

Whether or not US-Russian relations really were that bad in the first part of 2007, and whether or not the so-called Lobster Summit helped to improve them, the striking feature about the current bilateral US-Russian relationship is how relatively peripheral it seems – both for Russia and for the United States. This is in contrast not only to the days of the Cold War, when relations between Moscow and Washington were a matter of utmost importance to the entire world, but even to the 1990s, when issues such as NATO expansion, the war in former Yugoslavia, and major events in Russia itself such as the 1993 coup attempt and the 1996 elections made Russia at least a frequent item in the international section of major news agencies.

For better or for worse, this simply does not seem to be the case just now. These days, the war in Iraq is by far the leading item on the American foreign policy agenda, and, based on the way things are going, this can be expected to last for quite some time, unless, that is, there is another even more serious armed conflict. Russia’s attention, meanwhile, is turned first and foremost to the countries of the former Soviet Union, especially ones with which Russia is involved in long-standing territorial disputes, such as Georgia and Moldova. Thus, due to this preoccupation with smaller neighboring countries, the current superpower and the former superpower essentially have little time for each other. Bush may or may not have a personal rapport with Putin – the New York Times Moscow correspondent and author David Satter calls it a myth (3) – but even if
he does, it is nothing like the actual friendship that former US President Bill Clinton had with the late former Russian President Boris Yel'tsin.

The fact that, on the whole, the current state of US-Russian relations is more bad than good is not the result of Putin’s harsh rhetoric at Munich or of US missile defense plans in Eastern Europe, but rather a product of conflicting geopolitical interests that, it must be admitted, had taken shape well before Putin or Bush came to power. Thus, in the Middle East, Russia has chosen to back the “Tehran-Damascus Axis:” the countries most directly opposed to US interests in the region (and also ones in direct support of terrorist organizations such as Hezbollah and Hamas). In southeastern Europe, Russia has consistently sided with Serbia—the country opposed by nearly everyone else—since the outbreak of civil war in former Yugoslavia. These policies have been more or less consistent from Yel’tsin to Putin; thus, the reason that they have led to increased friction with the US during the period of the Bush Jr. administration is the increased US physical presence in the Middle East. By the same token, a noticeable decrease in US interest in the Balkans has led to a relative reduction in US-Russian tensions in that region; recent diplomatic wrangling over the future of Kosovo is a far cry from the shouting matches and threats of war during the days of the 1998 NATO bombing campaign of Serbia. Another long-term source of Moscow’s discontent has been NATO expansion further into former “Soviet Territory”—first into the former countries of the Warsaw Pact, and later into former Soviet republics (Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania), with perhaps more to join in the future. This expansion has represented, from Moscow’s point of view, a continued post-Soviet shrinking of Russia’s power and influence in the world—a perception that, in part, explains the choice of aligning with countries opposed to the US, as a way of gaining leverage in a position of weakness.

The latest downturn in relations, then, is for the most part a continuation of trends already in existence, with a few changes. One is the increase in US-Iranian tensions, which by extension reflects greater tension between the US and Iran’s
sponsor state. The other has to do with the fact that, at least for a time, Putin has rather obviously been using the anti-American card for domestic consumption. As Council for Foreign Relations analyst Stephen Sestanovich notes, there has been a definite tendency in the Russian political elite to create an external enemy sometime prior to an election campaign – the Chechens in 1999 are a prime example. (4) If that is the case, the US missile shield has served as a convenient red flag. But then the question arises: why the “reconciliation” in Maine? Here, one particular aspect of the summit should be addressed.

Of the supposedly substantive results of the Lobster Summit was a proposal by Putin for a joint, bilateral US-Russian missile defense system in place of the one being planned for Poland and the Czech Republic, offering the use of the radar station in Gabala, Azerbaijan (currently leased to Russia). Though Bush described the proposal as “interesting,” (5) it seems unlikely that the US would simply agree to it and abandon the plans it has made for systems in Poland and in the Czech Republic. Since Putin was almost certainly aware of this, one can conclude that the proposal was a convenient way of ensuring he could claim that, at least, he tried.

There appears to be a general disconnect between the tone of the dialogue during the summit and the actual state of US-Russian relations, because if the language became a bit more polite, the meeting accomplished nothing (at least in the short run) in terms of reducing tensions. On the contrary, less than two weeks after the summit Russia declared that it would no longer abide by the terms of the Conventional Forces in Europe (CFE) treaty, albeit with the postscript that this “does not imply that we are shutting the doors to further dialogue." (6) To be sure, this should not come entirely as a surprise, as warnings of such a step came as early as April. (7) It is certainly a disappointment, however, to those who expected that the Kennebunkport summit would lead to significant positive developments in US-Russian relations.
The Russian CFE moratorium is a good indicator of the fact that the Lobster Summit did not significantly alter the trend in US-Russian relations, which can be said with reasonable confidence to be negative. Perhaps a bigger question is whether it shed any more light onto the importance of US-Russian relations – which, after all, remain vital in the long term even if they do not receive much contemporary attention. That, however, cannot be answered immediately; one will have to see whether more such lobster (or perhaps red herring) dinners will follow, and what will come of them.

Source Notes:

(2) “President Bush Meets with President Putin of Russian Federation,” 02 Jul 07 via WhiteHouse.Gov, via Johnson’s Russia List (JRL).
(4) “U.S.-Russian Relations: Thinking Beyond Kennebunkport,” interview with Stephen Sestanovich, senior fellow for Russian and Eurasian studies at the Council for Foreign Relations. 18 Jul 07 via Johnson’s Russia List (JRL).
(5) Ibid, “President Bush Meets with President Putin.”

Newly Independent States: Caucasus

By Robyn Angley
UNOMIG on Russian involvement in Kodori

The Joint Fact-Finding Group (JFFG) of the United Nations Observer Mission in Georgia (UNOMIG) has released a report regarding what it terms “the rocket firing incident” that took place in the upper Kodori valley on the night of 11 March 2007. The upper Kodori Gorge is the only part of the separatist region of Abkhazia that remains under Georgian control and home to the pro-Tbilisi Abkhaz government-in-exile. From around 9:30 p.m. to 11 p.m. on 11 March, the towns of Adjara, Zima and, subsequently, Chkhalta came under rocket fire.

The JFFG’s reliance on consensus precluded definitive statements on most of the major points under debate, including whether the Regional Administration building in Chkhalta, home of the Tbilisi-supported Abkhaz government-in-exile and the only building to be damaged in the incident, was targeted intentionally or simply was hit in the course of the attack. The JFFG is composed of representatives from the Abkhaz side, the Georgian side, the all-Russian Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) Peacekeeping Force, and UNOMIG. The JFFG’s account of the investigation was hindered by the difficult task of issuing a report with which each contingent could agree. Despite the diplomatic inconclusiveness of the document, many of the findings point to possible Russian involvement in the attack, specifically through air support.

There are several conclusions that may be drawn from the report. First, helicopters were used in the attack. The time of the attack and the high mountain terrain of the Kodori Gorge require that these helicopters be equipped with night vision equipment and flown by pilots with relevant experience. Both the Georgian and Abkhaz authorities have stated that they have no night vision capable helicopters, (1) but the Russian Air Force does possess such equipment.

Second, the helicopters could not have come from west of the Kodori Gorge, due to the weather on the night of the attack. Conditions were very poor for flights to
the upper Kodori Gorge from the west, although flights from the north, east and southeast were “not unflyable but very difficult” (2) and “doable with considerable risks” for combat missions by experienced pilots. (3)

Third, the report exempts Georgian, Abkhaz and CIS Peacekeeping Force aircraft from involvement in the incident. According to the Georgian radar authorities, no Abkhaz or CIS Peacekeeping Force helicopters took off from south of the Kodori Valley toward the valley anytime during the attack. The Georgian helicopters in the area were all accounted for, as well. Upon a request by the JFFG that Russian authorities provide records of flights in the north and south Caucasus around the Kodori Gorge during the time of the attack, Russian officials replied that there were no records because no flights had taken place during that time in the area in question. (4) Although never stated directly in the report, given the demands of flying in the upper Kodori valley and the absence of other helicopters taking off from the areas occupied by the Abkhaz forces, a reasonable conclusion would be that the helicopters were Russian.

The only building struck during the incident was the one that housed the Abkhaz government-in exile. This Regional Administration building was hit by either an AT-6 “SHTURM” or AT-9 “Ataka” anti-tank guided missile. According to the JFFG’s findings, this appears to have been the only missile launched via helicopter during the attack. (It is presumed that the helicopters also functioned as “artillery observers” and coordinated with the ground attack to direct the aim of the rocket fire.) (5) Anti-tank missiles allow a degree of precision not possible with the rockets used in the attack (9M22 rockets launched using the 112mm BM21 system), leading to the conclusion that the building was targeted on purpose. (6)

Although generally interpreted as a favorable outcome for Tbilisi, the report does question the lack of a Georgian response by ground forces to a presumably hostile attack. (7)
The report recommended the reactivation of a UN post in the upper Kodori valley, a proposal seconded by Georgia and agreed to by the Abkhaz, provided that UNOMIG troops continue to conduct patrols in company with the CIS Peacekeeping Force. (8)

Following the release of the report, the Russian Foreign Ministry issued a press release accusing Georgia of using the skirmish “to further harden its position” and of “taking deliberate steps to ratchet up the tension in the upper part of the Kodori Gorge.” (9) Abkhaz authorities, in the person of de facto Foreign Minister Sergei Shamba, accused Georgian authorities of conducting provocations. Shamba stated that these supposed provocations “enjoy support from the outside,” a reference to a US statement welcoming UNOMIG’s report and affirming Georgia’s territorial integrity. (10) Georgian officials reacted with mild optimism to the report and have used the opportunity to push for the reopening of a UNOMIG post in the upper Kodori Gorge. According to the UN Secretary General’s most recent report on the situation in Abkhazia, the process of reestablishing the base has already begun; the post is scheduled to be reactivated officially sometime in July. (11)

**Meskhetian Turk legislation passed**

The Georgian parliament has adopted a draft law on the repatriation of the Meskhetian Turks, a Muslim group deported from southern Georgia to Uzbekistan by Stalin in 1944 under charges of treason through collaboration with Germany and Turkey. The Meskhetians were part of the same wave of deportations that swept the Chechens, Tatars, Karachai and others to Central Asia.

One of the conditions for Georgia’s admittance to the Council of Europe in 1999 was that the Meskhetian Turks be repatriated by 2011. This issue has been debated hotly in Georgia for several reasons. The first is that Georgia still has a
large internally displaced population, due to the conflicts in Abkhazia and South Ossetia. The Internal Displacement Monitoring Center estimated the number of internally displaced persons to be between 222,000 and 240,000, as of September 2006. Some opposition groups argue that Georgia must deal with this population before bringing in more individuals, who likely will require a great deal of resources.

A second point of contention is the question of where the Meskhetians would live after repatriation. Traditionally, the Meskhetians are from Samtskhe-Javakhetia, an area in southern Georgia. The area is now home to the Adjarians, whom Stalin relocated there, as well as a sizable Armenian population. The majority (83.1%) of the Armenian population in this region does not speak Georgian and is somewhat isolated from mainstream Georgian culture, leading to fears about ethnic unrest. Some fear that reintroducing the Meskhetian population into a region already dominated by a large ethnic minority might only exacerbate existing tensions.

A third area of concern for some opposition groups is that Meskhetian Turks might be loyal to Turkey, rather than Georgia, or that they might import a brand of radical Islam to Georgia.

The legislation passed by parliament requires the Meskhetians to apply for repatriation between 1 January and 31 December 2008. They must submit documentation demonstrating that they or their forebears were victims of the 1944 deportation. In addition, they must renounce citizenship from countries other than Georgia and pass tests in the Georgian language on Georgian history and the Georgian constitution, in order to obtain citizenship. The legislation allots no money for the Georgian government to aid the Meskhetians with resettlement costs. It also does not stipulate where the returnees will be allowed to live.
The total Meskhetian Turk population numbers around 300,000, with about 100,000 living in southern Russia and about 1,000 having returned to Georgia. (14) Of the total, former State Minister for Conflict Settlement Georgy Khaindrava places the estimate of likely returnees at between 25,000 and 30,000 persons. That number is “more than Georgia can hope to cope with,” he adds. (15)

Implementation of the law will be difficult and likely will result in increased tensions as the government decides whether to place restrictions on where the Meskhetians may resettle. The lack of sufficient financial support for returnees also may lead to friction.

Source Notes:

(2) Ibid., p. 16.
(3) Ibid., p. 23.
(4) Ibid., p. 18.
(5) Ibid., p. 17.
(8) Ibid., p. 21.
(9) “Russia slams Georgian, Western interpretations of UN’s Abkhazia shelling report,” 17 Jul 07, RIA Novosti; BBC Monitoring International Reports via Lexis-Nexis.

(12) “IDPs’ living conditions remain miserable, as national strategy is being developed,” 1 Sep 06, Internal Displacement Monitoring Center via http://www.internal-displacement.org/8025708F004CE90B/(httpCountries)/F62BE07C33DE4D19802570A7004C84A3?OpenDocument.


(14) Anatoly Gordiyenko, Yuri Simonjan, “Delayed-action mine; Tbilisi has four years left to organize Meskhetian Turks’ return in,” 26 Jun 07, Nezavisimaya gazeta; Defense and Security (Russia) via Lexis-Nexis.

(15) Ibid.

Newly Independent States: Central Asia

By Monika Shepherd

TURKMENISTAN

Turkmenistan progress report

President Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedov’s first six months in office have been a virtual whirlwind of activity, as he has undertaken a myriad of tasks intended to consolidate his own power, raise Turkmenistan’s international profile and reestablish ties with other countries in the region, roll back a few of the late President Saparmurat Niyazov’s more draconian social cuts, and begin seeking new investment and outlets for his country’s fossil fuel industry. Berdimuhamedov has made liberal use of both the carrot and the stick in achieving his aims, although thus far, he has applied the latter mainly in the pursuit of his domestic policy objectives.
His efforts to consolidate his own power have cut a wide swath through the ranks of government personnel, resulting in dozens of replacements and even a number of arrests, including that of presidential security service chief Lt.-Gen. Akmyrat Rejepov and his son, Nurmyrat Rejepov, a colonel in the national security services. (1) Both men were arrested, businesses to which they are connected were searched and documents seized. (2) First Deputy Minister of National Security Agajan Passyev and Interior Minister Akmammet Rakhmanov lost their positions, as well, although they were spared arrest. (3) The purge has not been limited to the security services: Railroad Transport Minister Orazberdi Khudoiberdiev and Ashgabat Mayor Orazmyrat Esenov have been replaced, (4) Enebay Atayewa has been removed both as head of the Women's Association (5) and Minister of Culture, Television and Radio Broadcasting, (6) Deputy Rector of Ashgabat State University Orazdurdy Saparov was fired, while Minister of Education Muhammetgeldi Annaamanov and Deputy Chairman of the Cabinet of Ministers Gurbannazar Amanmyradowic Asyrow were publicly reprimanded, (7) and Supreme Court Chairman Yagsygeldi Esenov also has been sacked, as well as many others. (8) A number of the firings were conducted in a fairly humiliating and heavy-handed manner, with the miscreant receiving a public tongue-lashing from President Berdimuhamedov in front of an audience of his/her peers and underlings. Although such tactics may succeed in intimidating his enemies, they also could result in the creation of new hostilities and harden the attitudes of his current opponents.

The arrest of Lt.-Gen. Rejepov is the most significant and perhaps also the most surprising of all the personnel changes. Rejepov was thought to be the force behind Berdimuhamedov’s rapid rise to power in the days immediately following Niyazov’s death, without whose help he would have been unable to sideline Avezgeldy Atayev, former Chairman of the Mejlis (Turkmenistan’s parliament) and heir apparent, quite so easily. Mr. Atayev was arrested and charged with “abuse of power and violation of citizens’ rights,” shortly after Niyazov’s passing,
thus making him ineligible to assume the role of acting president. (9) Rejepov, as head of the presidential security service, had 2,000 men under his command and is believed to have exercised a great deal of influence in the upper echelons of power, due to his 21 years of service for the late President Niyazov. (10) His removal from power, along with that of the three other security service officials only a few months after Berdimuhamedov’s election to office is tantamount to a purge of the security services and implies that they played a major role in orchestrating what turned out to be a remarkably smooth transition of power. As stalwart Niyazovites, however, they may not have supported the new president’s policy changes and surely would have challenged his claim to be a firm believer in and follower of the Turkmenbashy doctrine, once his initiatives on education and social reform were put into effect.

Although, for the most part, Berdimuhamedov has retained the trappings of Niyazov’s cult of personality, has refrained from launching a full-scale dismantling of the hundreds of Niyazov monuments, portraits, statues, etc. (at least one monument in the town of Turkmenabat has been removed), (11) has continued to praise his predecessor and claims to be carrying his vision forward, in fact, his first actions as president have been to reverse a number of the late ruler’s decisions. He has reinstated pensions for agricultural workers, increased the minimum pension amount, and included retirees who are unable to work the 20-25 years required for pension eligibility due to sickness or the demands of child care in the pension benefits system. He also has established a system somewhat akin to the “kindergeld” benefits provided in Germany: monthly payments to Turkmen mothers for each of their children until they reach 1.5 years of age. (12) Only one day after his inauguration, President Berdimuhamedov began tackling education reform, reinstating the mandatory ten-year school curriculum (that Niyazov had reduced to nine years) (13) and a few weeks later abolishing the requirement that all Turkmen high school graduates must work for two years before enrolling in university, as well as reintroducing university entrance examinations. (14) The president decreed that
school teachers’ salaries also are to be increased by 40%, as of September 2007 (15) and that one kindergarten and school are to be built in every regional capital, using revenue from natural gas sales. (16)

These reforms may seem insignificant to many international observers, however, considering the fact that Niyazov spent his last years as president eliminating Turkmen citizens’ access to even the most basic state and social services (such as secondary education, health care, and retirement benefits), the fact that the Turkmen government once again is committing itself to support its own citizens is a huge step forward. Berdimuhamedov’s plans seem to extend far beyond simply rebuilding what his predecessor demolished – in his publicly broadcast address to the 20th session of the Halk Maslahaty (People’s Council), he told the assembled delegates: “It is necessary to build in districts and villages kindergartens, schools, hospitals, cultural centres, parks, houses and other cultural and entertainment facilities as well as telephone and Internet communications network. We should start all this as soon as possible.” (17) The following day he signed a decree establishing a government commission to submit proposals for developing and modernizing the country’s rural areas. (18)

Bringing all of Turkmenistan’s regions into the 21st century will require enormous government investments, to which end Berdimuhamedov has deviated from Niyazov’s isolationist policies by engaging in a whirlwind of meetings with the presidents of all of the Central Asian states, as well as with presidents Putin, Karzai, Hu Jintao, Ahmadinejad, Saakashvili and Saudi Arabia’s King Abdullah bin Abdul Aziz Al Sa’ud. Prominent on the agenda of nearly every one of these meetings have been the twin issues of oil and gas development and pipeline routes. The Turkmen president seems intent on attracting new investment in his country’s fossil fuel industry, whether it be funds for something as small as building a new refinery or the sizeable finances required for exploring and developing new gas fields, as well as soliciting interest and backing for new pipeline routes. To date, he has promised to supply Russia, China and Iran with
natural gas and on 17 July signed what may be his country’s biggest gas contract yet: a commitment to supply China with 30 billion cubic meters of natural gas for the next 30 years. Turkmenistan’s State Agency for the Supervision and Use of Oil and Gas Resources also signed a production-sharing agreement with China’s National Petroleum Corporation (CNPC) for the exploration and development of gas fields in the Bagtyyarlyk section of the Amu-Darya River’s right bank (located on the Uzbek border). Along with these two contracts, Berdimuhamedov signed an agreement to accelerate the progress of a Turkmen-Chinese pipeline project, which is to be financed by the Chinese side and extend from the town of Olot (located on the Turkmen-Uzbek border) to the already existing Buxoro-Ural pipeline and from there to Kazakhstan, where it can be connected to the Kazakh-Chinese pipeline. (19) Berdimuhamedov claims that the new gas field in Bagtyyarlyk will enable his government to meet all of its existing gas supply commitments, but until an outside agency is able to verify Turkmen projections regarding the size of the new field, his claims will continue to appear somewhat dubious.

A new pipeline route to the west, circumventing Russia, is also on the table – the Turkish government has proposed constructing a supply route for Turkmen and Iranian natural gas to Europe via Turkey, although without US approval, this plan is unlikely to bear any fruit. Based on Berdimuhamedov’s recent meeting with President Karzai, even the proposed Trans-Afghan Pipeline (1,700-kilometre gas pipeline traveling from Turkmenistan across Afghanistan’s Herat, Farah, Helmand and Kandahar provinces to Pakistan) project still is considered to be very much alive, at least conceptually. (20)

In any case, his zeal to bring new foreign investment to his country’s energy sector is raising Turkmenistan’s international profile as never before, which, while it may prove lucrative for the economy, also will focus more outside attention on domestic affairs and such issues as human rights and civil freedoms. These are two areas that Berdimuhamedov thus far has neglected – no political prisoners
have been amnestied, the Turkmen opposition remains in exile and excluded from any political dialogue, and freedom of expression still seems to be, at best, an abstract concept. Perhaps, once the new president has finished conducting all of his desired personnel replacements he will feel more secure in his authority and will start to remedy not only the country’s social and material shortcomings, but its political deficiencies, as well.

Source Notes:

(2) “Former Turkmen Security Chief Taken into Custody - Pro-Opposition Website,” 17 May 07, Gundogar website; BBC Monitoring International Reports via Lexis-Nexis Academic Universe.
(4) “2nd LD Turkmen president sacks two senior officials,” 22 May 07, Xinhua via Lexis-Nexis Academic Universe.
(5) “Turkmen Culture Minister Sacked As Head of Women's Association,” 7 Jun 07, Altyn Asyr channel; BBC Monitoring International Reports via Lexis-Nexis Academic Universe.

(9) “Turkmen acting president sacks parliament speaker,” 23 Dec 06, Xinhua News Agency via Lexis-Nexis Academic Universe.


(11) “Analyst Sees Positive Changes In First 100 Days Of Turkmen Leader's Presidency,” 8 Jun 07, Centrasia.ru; BBC Monitoring International Reports via Lexis-Nexis Academic Universe.


(15) “School teachers' wages to rise by 40%,” 2 Apr 07, The Times of Central Asia via Lexis-Nexis Academic Universe.


UKRAINE

Ukraine’s long learning curve

Without a doubt, Ukraine has come far since its independence just 16 years ago. The national language is slowly rebounding, the economy is shifting to market principles, the press is largely free, a nascent middle class has appeared, and the country’s “orange revolution” ushered in a level of political competition that is unrivaled anywhere else in the region.

But even 16 years since independence and 17 years after declaring sovereignty, many of Ukraine’s political leaders reflexively fall back into a Soviet mindset when dealing with immediate, urgent problems facing their own citizens. Nothing has demonstrated this more clearly in recent years than the response of political leaders to a major phosphorus spill on 16 July.

The spill occurred after 15 train tanker cars containing yellow (also known as white) phosphorus derailed in the Lviv region. The derailment caused a leak in one of the cars that led to explosions in six of the derailed carriages. It is unclear what led to the derailment, or whether conditions for safely maintaining the
phosphorus had been met. The substance, which was being transported through
Ukraine from Kazakhstan to Poland, is unstable and highly combustible if allowed
to come into contact with oxygen. It must be kept submerged in water at cool
temperatures (below 38-40 degrees Celsius). The abnormally high temperature
in Lviv on 16 July was at least 36 degrees Celsius.

The explosion released large, but unknown, quantities of phosphorus into the air,
at first igniting what was described as a “rolling fire cloud” and then settling into a
large, gray toxic cloud covering 50 square miles of the region. (1)

Very quickly it became apparent that the region did not have all the necessary
equipment on hand to fight the blaze. Although the emergency workers had an
adequate supply of foam to smother the chemical, the firefighters themselves
had little protective equipment. In the first hours, Reuters video and other
photos showed firefighters battling the fire with bare hands and standard water
shields over their faces.

Not long after the fire began, a number of firefighters and the first local
government workers on the scene were rushed to the hospital with respiratory
problems. One worker remained in critical condition for at least two days.

However, in general, officials from Lviv’s Health and Emergency departments
responded quickly following the accident. Within hours, 200 people from the
immediate area were assisted in evacuating, although the evacuation was not
mandatory.

When completed, over 800 people decided to leave their homes. Over 18,000
residents in 14 towns and villages were quickly warned to stay inside with the
doors and windows shut. (2) Local officials also began alerting citizens to
symptoms of phosphorus poisoning, which can be fatal, and include severe
respiratory distress, anemia, “disturbances of vision, speech and movement,”
tremors, fatigue and nausea. (3)

However, once the national government took over, residents stopped receiving
clear information. The Emergencies Ministry and Health Ministry officials arrived,
led by Deputy Prime Minister Oleksandr Kuzmuk. The choice of Kuzmuk to
represent the government’s interests at the accident site was curious, but sent a
significant signal.

As Defense Minister in President Leonid Kuchma’s government from 1996-2001
and 2004, Kuzmuk presided over a series of mishaps that cost dozens of lives.
Those mishaps included the errant launch of a surface-to-surface missile during
a military exercise in 2000. The missile hit an apartment building in a town
outside Kyiv, killing three persons. Less than one year later, a stray missile
destroyed a Russian Sibir Passenger Airliner, killing all 78 passengers on board.
Kuzmuk initially covered up the government’s culpability in both of these
incidents.

In fact, Kuzmuk has resorted repeatedly to the Soviet technique of information
manipulation, instead of dealing with a problem in response to a crisis. His latest
work in Lviv won’t change that fact.

Not long after arriving on the scene of the phosphorus spill on 16 July, Kuzmuk
implied a comparison to Chornobyl, causing widespread panic. Then, in an
attempt to undo this damage, certain emergency officials apparently instructed
clean-up workers not to wear gas masks. “The management forbids the people
to wear gas masks, so as not to create panic,” said one female emergency
worker to journalists from Korrespondent Ukraine. “No one thinks about our
health. I have a small daughter, for example. What will happen if I fall ill?” (6)
The order to keep gas masks off appears to have been rescinded after only a few
hours.
The day after the accident, the Ministry of Health announced that doctors had examined 5,000 residents and “found no symptoms of poisoning.” (7) By then, however, the number of people checking into the hospital with symptoms related to phosphorus poisoning had begun to rise – from 14, after the fire, to 60 one day later. The final number of those who were hospitalized would end up around 180.

On 18 July, the Emergencies Ministry lashed out at the mass media for spreading “unchecked rumors that do not correspond to reality” after numerous outlets questioned the condition of the soil and air, and also the veracity of statements about testing done on residents. (8) Kuzmuk then urged residents to come out of their homes and enjoy the air. “People can breathe safely and confidently in the area, drink water from their wells, harvest their crops, graze their livestock and swim in ponds.” (9)

The response from residents was disbelief. “They tell us not to be upset,” Oleksandr Shakh, the head of the Ozhidov village council, told Korrespondent Ukraine. “But we do not believe them. We see that the toxic smoke continues to poison the entire region. I will honestly tell you: if I weren't the head of the village council, I would have left long ago.” (10)

The disbelief was understandable. Throughout Soviet times, information was manipulated to such an extent that it simply was safer not to believe anything the authorities said. This mindset still prevails among a significant portion of society – for good reason.

In April of 2000, following the destruction of the apartment complex by a stray missile, the authorities (including Kuzmuk) suggested that the incident may have been caused by the storage of illegal ammunition. Finally, after pressure from opposition politicians and the media, they announced the truth.
Similarly, after another stray missile downed the Russian passenger airliner in 2001, Ukraine denied all responsibility. “Ukraine’s missiles which were used in a military training exercise on the Crimean peninsula could not hit the Russian TU-154 plane,” a Defense Ministry spokesman said. (11) Only ten days later did President Kuchma admit his country’s culpability.

And of course, the most famous (or perhaps infamous) case of information manipulation in Ukraine came following the Chornobyl reactor meltdown. Soviet authorities made no comment for three full days, choosing not to inform their citizens. Finally, when the authorities did issue a statement, it was terse. "An accident has taken place at the Chernobyl power station, and one of the reactors was damaged,” the statement read. “Measures are being taken to eliminate the consequences of the accident. Those affected by it are being given assistance. A government commission has been set up.” (12)

It is clear, then, why the residents in villages surrounding the accident, having witnessed a fire ball and the resulting cloud of gas and smoke, would be hesitant to believe that all was well. Their disbelief becomes even more understandable in the light of a statement by Deputy Prime Minister Mykola Azarov, who seemed to echo part of the Chornobyl statement, suggesting, “We have already started to fund the work to fully eliminate the consequences. … “Within an hour [of the accident] a governmental commission was working on the spot.” (13)

Residents also were bombarded with assurances that seemed illogical or contradictory. The Health Ministry reported phosphorus levels 30 times above normal in the soil surrounding the accident, while the Emergencies Ministry said levels were normal. The media showed firefighters battling the fire for at least six hours. Deputy Prime Minister Azarov suggested it was extinguished in 15 minutes. And residents were told that testing had found no phosphorus poisoning, even though 180 persons had been hospitalized.
In response, three days after the accident, President Yushchenko lashed out at Prime Minister Viktor Yanukovych and his cabinet. “The Soviet practice of placating reports instead of professional actions and concealment instead of honest information must not be a norm in Ukraine,” he said. This was the first comment by the president on the issue. He then traveled on 20 July to Lviv to “inspect the accident scene” and visit patients in the hospital. (14)

In fact, the responses of the country’s political leaders were slow in coming and far from the responses to similar incidents in most Western states. The President’s visit occurred four days after the incident, while Prime Minister Yanukovych never visited the site at all. The Emergencies Minister also did not arrive near the site for three days.

At the same time, basic needs like water were not met immediately, even though local officials were telling residents not to drink the water from their wells. The opposition Bloc of Yulia Tymoshenko eventually delivered over 260 tons of water to area residents, following television appeals for assistance from local leaders. (15) Tymoshenko and Yushchenko have both called for the resignations of the Transportation and Emergency Ministers.

Although it seems the health threat was limited and has dissipated, this accident has spotlighted real problems in the ability of some of Ukraine’s politicians to inform their citizens of danger and explain what may have happened in a crisis. For the first time, this fact has been acknowledged by Ukraine’s leading politicians, including Prime Minister Yanukovych. On his party’s website, Yanukovych acknowledges “during the liquidation of the phosphorus accident…, the citizens were misinformed by officials.” (16) The statement is significant. It remains to be seen, however, whether this comment is similar to earlier mea culpa statements made by President Kuchma following the missile incidents, or whether it signals a possible real change.
Regardless, it does seem that the decision of Yushchenko to visit Lviv—even late—and the mobilization of volunteers and political party representatives from the Yulia Tymoshenko Bloc to deliver water may be signs that the country has begun to shake off the edges of its Soviet history.

Source Notes:

(2) Ibid, Ukrainian News Agency and Agence France Presse.
(7) UNIAN News Agency, 17 Jul 07 via Lexis-Nexis.
(8) ITAR-TASS, 0542 EST, 18 Jul 07 via Lexis-Nexis.
(9) 5th Channel, Kyiv, 0900 GMT, 18 Jul 07 via Lexis-Nexis.
(11) Xinhua News Agency, 4 Oct 01 via Lexis-Nexis.
(14) Official Website of the President of Ukraine, 19 Jul 07 and 20 Jul 07 via www.president.gov.ua.

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